ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES IN THE WRITING OF ENTRY-LEVEL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: This small-scale exploratory study was motivated by the desire to find out more about the problems first-year Hungarian students at Eötvös Loránd University have with writing academic papers in English. The study aimed to examine first-year students' organizational competence in writing in English at the time of entering the university. A class set of 12 essays written at the beginning of the first semester were analysed from the point of view of their overall superstructure and also to see whether a recognisable academic text type could be identified. In the second phase of the analysis the paragraphing and conjunctive cohesion within each essay was examined. The results indicate an underlying insecurity in the ability to use paragraphs effectively and even in terms of basic superstructure only a quarter of the essays were judged to be satisfactory. The findings regarding text type were less clear but only six of the essays exhibited an organisational pattern similar to conventional academic text types. While firm conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of such a limited study, the apparent weaknesses in the students' writing are alarming and indicate the need for further more sophisticated research.

Keywords: academic writing, organizational competence, paragraph, superstructure, text types

1 Rationale and aim

All first-year students entering the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest attend a compulsory Academic Skills Course once a week during their first year. The course is intended primarily to familiarise them with the requirements of written academic discourse and to enable them to become proficient writers of academic English. A particular emphasis is put on how content is organised within academic texts. As a teacher of this course I have become well aware that many of the students experience great difficulty in adapting to the requirements of academic writing, especially regarding the effective organization of their work. The wish to know more about this problem was the motivation for the present study.

As a first step, it seemed logical to investigate the students' organizational competence in writing at the time of entering university. Since at this time (Autumn 2004) all the students were required to write an in-class essay at the beginning of the course, an obvious opportunity presented itself. It was presumed that because the essays were written before any teaching had taken place, they would give an indication of the students' pre-university ability in writing essays in English (indeed, the primary purpose of writing the essay was to give the students a starting point from which to develop their writing). A class set of 12 essays formed the basis of a small-scale exploratory study the aim of which was to discover what sort of organizational strategies were used in the essays, and whether these strategies, or lack of clear strategies, might indicate areas of potential difficulty for students entering university and being required to write high-level papers in English.

The essays were analysed first of all from the point of view of their basic superstructure (i.e., introduction, middle and conclusion), and secondly with regard to what recognisable text types, if any, could be found in them. Finally, the characteristics of each paragraph and the conjunctive links within the texts were examined.

The rest of the paper will first review some relevant research on second language writing at tertiary level and describe the most common text types which have been identified in higher-level writing in English and which are relevant to the present study. The methodology and the results of the study itself will then be presented and the paper will conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of the research.

2 Research background

2.1 Research into undergraduate second language writing in English

The importance of writing at tertiary level both as a means of determining performance in the form of assignments and exams, and also as a way of demonstrating an understanding and membership of a particular academic discourse, has been frequently stated (Hyland, 2000; Leki & Carson, 1994; Lillis, 2001; Zhu, 2004). Thanks to globalization, the ability to write in a foreign language, particularly English, is also increasingly required in the wider world of business and work, and so writing skills acquired at university, especially for EFL learners, are more and more valued for non-academic reasons. In a survey of Hungarian students majoring in English (or recently graduated), Kormos, Kontra and Csölle (2002) found that the majority of students use their qualifications as a 'springboard' into employment as translators or in business.

However, it is commonly found that the transition from secondary to tertiary level is a difficult one for students to make and this is clearly seen when it comes to their writing. Often student writing at this level is characterized as a problem, and this is true as much for English-speaking students as for second language learners, as is seen in the comments of university teachers in the recently published Nuffield Report in the U.K. (Wilde, Wright, Hayward, Johnson & Skerrett, 2006). For the second language learner the situation is obviously more difficult though, and the ability to write in a given second language is determined by a range of factors. Among these, one of the most important is the level of second language acquisition, and also the need to write in that language in the real world (Weigle, 2002).

A great deal of research has been done into second language writing in English at this level but only a few recent studies have a similar context and focus to the present investigation. Sasaki and Hirose (1996) investigated the influences on 70 EFL first-year university students' expository writing used questionnaires, a standardized English proficiency test and a writing task which asked students to take a position for or against women going to work after getting married. They found that "the good writers' writing processes were characterized by their concern with overall organization before and while writing in L1/L2" (p. 157) and that only the good writers had previously practiced writing beyond the level of a single paragraph.

Hirose (2003) compared the organizational patterns in the argumentative writing of 15 Japanese third- and fourth-year EFL students in both their L1 and English. The same argumentative prompt was used for both languages with a delay of one week. The compositions were then scored by three native-speaking experts in each language. The findings showed that there were more similarities than differences in the L1/L2 organizational patterns but that many of the students still needed "to learn to improve organization to write logically connected or well-organized sentences/paragraphs in both L1 and L2" (p. 201). According to Hirose, the results also implied that organizational patterns were not the only factor that contributed to overall text quality, and that "factors such as coherence and connection between/within paragraphs also contribute to the quality of organization" (p. 203).

Finally, Evans and Green's survey article (2007) describes a study undertaken in a very similar context to the present one in Hungary. Universities in Hong Kong have increasingly had to deal with Cantonese-speaking undergraduates who experience problems in studying academic subjects taught in English. As a response the universities have provided various kinds of EAP courses. The baseline survey involved 4,932 undergraduates in 26 academic departments of Hong Kong's largest English-medium university. The main findings were that inadequate vocabulary in English was the main problem that students experienced, but grammar was also "generally perceived as inadequate to meet the challenges placed on them in the production of academic assignments" (p. 14). Evans and Green suggest that, given the limited time available, EAP courses should be focused more directly on student needs, whilst still "within a task-based and content-driven framework" (p. 14).

2.2 A brief overview of common academic text types

The study of the organization of written and spoken discourse dates back at least to the time of Aristotle, who identified the four main genres of classical rhetoric – narrative, descriptive, procedural and suasive. In more recent times much research has been done on the structure of narratives and the notion of 'narrative grammars' or 'story grammars' has been used to account for the schemata found in stories (Tirkkonen-Condit, 1985; van Dijk, 1985). This in turn has stimulated comparisons with the organization of scientific texts and argumentative texts and has led to the suggestion that there could be "a rather general superstructure pattern which governs all prose texts, whether narrative, expository or argumentative" (Tirkkonen-Condit, 1985, p. 23). However, this hypothesis has been challenged on the grounds of cultural differences and as Tirkkonen-Condit points out, even if it is possible to reduce the outlines of prose structure to a general pattern, there is still room for differences to be accorded to specific text types. It is these differences as they relate to academic texts which are relevant to the present study.

At higher educational levels (that is, writing typical of college or university) there are a number of commonly occurring essay templates which closely follow the genres of classical rhetoric. Hatch (1992), in her account of rhetorical genre analysis, identifies the five most frequently met types of text at this level as the following: narrative, descriptive, procedural, comparison and contrast, and argumentative. Jordan (1997) gives a longer list of rhetorical-functional models which he says are "commonly found in academic writing" (p. 165):

- Description (including processes and sequencing)
- Narrative
- Instruction

- Explanation
- Definition
- Exemplification
- Classification
- Comparison and contrast
- Cause and effect
- Expressing: purpose, means, prediction, expectancy, reservation, result
- Generalisation and specificity
- Discussion and argumentation (problem and solution)
- Drawing conclusions. (Jordan, 1997, p. 165)

For the present purposes only the five types identified by Hatch will be considered, as this description is not meant to be exhaustive and the other types are unlikely to be of relevance to the essay which was used in the study. It should be pointed out, however, that these schemata are merely abstracts and, moreover, real writing often contains elements from more than one text genre. As van Dijk puts it:

> [...] a story may typically exhibit narrative structures, but obviously has many more properties than such a schematic organization, for example accounts and explanations of actions, character and situation descriptions, temporal organization and a variable style and perspective, all depending on context and narrative genre. (van Dijk, 1997, p. 13)

With nearly all accounts of these common text types, in addition to labelling the main elements of the superstructure and the order in which they occur, attempts are made to show how the organization may be flagged to the reader syntactically and lexically by looking at grammatical structures and linking devices which are frequently used to signal different parts of the structure[1]. In the case of narratives a more or less universal schema has been claimed to exist, and a number of characteristic syntactic and lexical features have been associated with it. Hatch (1992), drawing on the work of Labov and Mandler, gives the following template: the orientation, which includes the time, the spatial setting, and the characters and their roles; the storyline, which involves the hero overcoming some sort of problem to achieve her (or his, or even its) goal; the resolution, in which the goal is attained; and the coda, which contains the moral or an evaluation of the story. Referring to the orientation, Hatch mentions copula sentences, presentatives and identifying or descriptive relative clauses as being typical grammatical features in English. Hatch also notes that the development of a story usually involves action clauses arranged temporally, and that evaluative comments are often inserted at various points in the story to underline the meaning and involve the audience.

Description, which, along with narrative writing, forms the basis for numerous writing exercises in English language classrooms (as can be seen from even a cursory examination of most native English school writing books or TEFL course books), does not have a set template. However, there are some common patterns of arrangement. Hatch (1992) mentions that "descriptions of objects are usually in terms of their parts and the functions and appearance of these parts" (p. 175). She also notes that such physical descriptions tend to be organized according to a spatial logic. Kirszner and Mandell (1992), a standard college

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[1] Coulthard (1994), in discussing approaches to the analysis of text structure, refers to the writer's responsibility to use signalling to highlight for the reader how the text is arranged:

> it is not sufficient for him/her to organize the material into a textual form, the writer must also indicate or signal to the reader the status and/or discourse function of individual parts of the text. (p. 7)

handbook for US students, also includes spatial order as a method of organization and also lists general to particular, particular to general, order of importance, smallest to largest, least unusual to most unusual, or a combination of schemes at different points of an essay. According to Hatch (1992), typical syntactic structures found in descriptive writing include frequent copula sentences, relative clauses, prepositional and adverbial phrases, presentatives, and descriptive adjectives of shape, size, colour and number.

In procedure or process writing again there is no set template. However, a sequence of ordered steps are a typical generic trait. This is because such writing is intended to inform the reader how to do a task or achieve a goal in a clear and easy to follow manner. Hatch (1992) points out that in this genre the discourse is often written in terms of a 'neutral' agent and uses imperative and passive constructions, whilst the time of the action, because it is unimportant, is not specified. However, Hatch also notes that connections between discourse type and syntactic structures are not prescriptive:

> as with all genres, it is not that the genre uses certain grammar forms but rather that writers and speakers select certain forms more often than others to carry out the storytelling, the description or the procedure. (Hatch, 1992, p. 182)

This is an important point since it means that grammatical forms, while often helpful indicators, cannot be relied upon as a litmus test for any particular text type, whether it be procedural or any other form.

For comparison and contrast writing two basic patterns of organization for the body of the essay can be identified. Typically, standard writing handbooks for university students such as Kirszner and Mandell (1992) and Smalley, Ruetten and Kozyrev (2000) describe subject-by-subject and point-by-point comparisons. In the first type, each subject for comparison is dealt with separately, one after the other, using the same points of comparison. This may be done in one or more paragraphs. Using point-by-point organization, each paragraph deals with one point of comparison relating to which both subjects are discussed. This pattern is followed until all the points of comparison or contrast have been dealt with. Both the aforementioned sources highlight transitional markers as being of particular importance for this type of text. These may be in the form of noun phrases, coordinating conjunctions or transitional expressions between sentences.

When it comes to the organization of argumentation there are many variations discussed in the literature. Hatch (1992) refers to the classical structure as consisting of "introduction, explanation of the case under consideration, outline of the argument, proof, refutation, and conclusion" (p. 185) and versions of this can easily be found in college writing guides (both Smalley et al. (2000) and Kirszner and Mandell (1992) present very similar patterns to this). However, Hatch also cites Maccoun's (1983) seven patterns of organization based on a reading of articles and news reports: the "zig-zag" solution (pro, con, pro, con, pro or con, pro, con, pro, con, depending on whether the author is pro or con); problem and refutation of opposing argument, followed by solution; the "one-sided argument" (one point of view with no refutation); the "eclectic approach" (rejecting some points of view and accepting another); opposition arguments first, then author's argument; the "other side questioned" pattern (the opposing argument is questioned but not directly refuted); and disagreement from within the same camp (where two similar points of view are described but only one is favoured). Clearly, the structure of argumentative texts does not easily conform to a standard schema.

Another well known template for argumentation is the Problem-Solution (PS) structure developed by Hoey (1994). The structure was first recognised by linguists in the 1960s but only clearly described in terms of how it is signalled to the reader in a monograph by Hoey first published in 1979. It consists of four parts: Situation, Problem, Solution and Evaluation. The basic form can be complicated by further embedding a complete four-part structure within one of the parts of another structure or by reiterating the Problem-Solution-Evaluation pattern following a negative evaluation of a previous solution (Coulthard, 1994). This gives the structure great flexibility and it has been applied to many types of text other than academic papers but it is worth noting that the classical argumentative model is also capable of being complicated in very similar ways[2]. There are further similarities between the two schemata in regard to the importance of signalling, but there is also a major difference. In classical argumentation signalling is seen in terms of grammatical and lexical cohesion. Grabe and Kaplan (1996, p. 56) summarise cohesive devices as "principally including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and the lexical relationships of repetition, inclusion, synonymy/antonymy, and collocation." On the other hand, Hoey (1994), while not entirely ignoring cohesion, places the main emphasis on evaluative lexical signalling of the structural functions of sentences in a PS text.

Before moving on to describe the procedure for the study, a note of caution needs to be sounded. The fact that most of the organizational structures which have been described above are basic templates intended to serve as models for various academic purposes rather than descriptions of what writers actually do underlines the need for a cautious approach when analysing the structure of authentic texts. It is quite possible for writing to be clearly organized without necessarily reproducing a conventional template. Even where schemata have been developed from research into actual texts, such as in the case of the Problem-Solution structure, this has almost always involved pieces written by advanced writers, whether in the academic sphere or in other fields such as journalism or literature. Little research has been done into the organizational competence of beginning university students writing in a second language and so the present study is by necessity exploratory not only in terms of its aim but in its methodology. A full explanation of how the study was conducted will be given in the next section.

3 Methodology

3.1 Description of participants and the educational context

The first year class whose essays were used for the study were chosen for convenience (they were my own students). There were 9 females and 3 males, which more or less reflects the gender balance within the English department as a whole. All 12 students had graduated from Hungarian secondary schools from all over Hungary in 2004 and had gained admission to study in the English department through a written entrance exam and an interview procedure where candidates were awarded points for their performance in general English

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[2] Tirkkonnen-Condit (1985), in her analysis of two academic argumentative texts, distinguishes between two forms of the PS structure which she surmises "may be symptomatic of the existence of two opposite tendencies of text structure, which could be called blocklike and wavelike" (p. 36). The blocklike structure has a straightforward linear progression in which the superstructure components follow each other in their canonical order, whereas the wavelike text is constituted of "a series of fully developed minitexts which realise the full range of PS components" (p. 37). There is no reason why these two patterns may not equally apply to the classical argumentative template as well.

when talking about a picture and their demonstration of basic knowledge about English linguistics and literature. Their exact proficiency level can only be guessed at but in theory at this time the required entry level for the more prestigious universities (of which Eötvös Loránd is one) was around C1 (Proficiency) or C2 (Mastery) in the Common European Reference Levels (Lukács, 2002).

According to the descriptor for C1 for Overall Written Production, a student

> Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 61)

Furthermore, the European Framework points out that "at higher levels of proficiency, the development of discourse competence […] becomes of increasing importance" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 123), and also mentions that learners should know "how written texts (essays, formal letters, etc.) are laid out, signposted and sequenced." (p. 123). In terms of coherence and cohesion at C1, learners should be able to "produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices" (p. 125).

However, the written part of the university entrance exam at this time only required students to write an informal letter to a friend, and there seems good reason to question the validity and reliability of the oral part of the exam, which had a limited range of task types and was predominantly concerned with factual knowledge or opinion rather than assessing communicative competence (Halápi & Király, 1999). There was also no training for examiners and scoring had to be done impressionistically due to a lack of any scales for task performance (personal experience). Lukács (2002) also points out that, while universities may require (at least notionally) an advanced level of English proficiency, the Frame Curriculum for Hungarian schools at this time aimed only for B1-B2 levels for the first foreign language, thus creating a "mismatch between secondary exit and university entrance levels" (Lukács, 2002, p. 10).

The upshot of this situation is that in a typical first year class there will be a range of proficiency from B1 to C2, with most students somewhere between these two limits. At the time of this study, it was not the policy of the department to give students a proficiency test at the beginning of their studies, so no more accurate picture can be given of their level.

As for the writing experience of the students, it largely depends on their school and teacher. There is no set text book so each school or teacher can choose what they want to use. Typically, in the final year students are prepared for the school leaving exam but the written components for this if they want to enter higher education consist of either a guided composition or a formal letter so they may not get a wider experience of writing different text types. In addition, if they have managed to pass the official state language exam at intermediate or advanced level, or a similar officially recognised exam, students are exempted from the school leaving exam (Károlyné & Viktor, 1999) and usually do not attend English classes at all in their last years at school[3]. This often results in a decrease in knowledge and level before leaving school (Lukács, 2002). Some schools offer extra-curricular preparation

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[3] As of 2005 all students have to sit the new advanced level matura exam if they want to study English as a major subject.

courses in the last year to students intending to go to university which may give some practice in writing but these courses are not compulsory.

3.2 Description of texts used in the analysis

The study involved a set of 12 short essays which were written in the class in the third week of term before any substantive teaching had taken place (the first week consisted of a brief introduction and some ice-breakers and the second was spent on a library tour). This is important because it means that the essays can be considered to be representative of the students' pre-university writing competence – 'pre-treatment' in a manner of speaking. The time given to write the essays was around one and a quarter hours, although some students finished early.

The class was given the following question for the essay:

Is university life more difficult than high school life?
Write a 400-500 word essay which answers this question.
Give it your own title.

The intention in choosing this topic was to give the students a clear and simple task based on their own experience (after three weeks at university they could be expected to have some idea of what university life was like and obviously they were already familiar with school life[4]).

The key requirement in the task was to produce an essay, and it was up to the students to fulfil this requirement according to their own interpretation. How they completed the task would show their familiarity, or otherwise, with the basics of essay writing. The question was deliberately worded so that the type of essay was not specified, and thus it was left to each student to decide how best to respond to the question and how to structure their writing in an appropriate way. Several types or a combination of types could be appropriate for such a task, most obviously argumentative or comparison and contrast. An additional advantage of this open approach was that it avoided making the task impossible for students who had little or no knowledge of how a particular type of essay should be organized.

3.3 Data analysis procedure

The overall approach to the data analysis was to proceed from the simple to the more complex. First of all the texts were transcribed preserving all the idiosyncrasies of the original such as spelling, punctuation and paragraphing (this included reproducing indentation or extra spacing between sections). The only differences were that the line breaks were in different places and deletions (words or sections which were clearly crossed out) were omitted.

The first stage of actual analysis involved a thorough description of the basic statistical characteristics of the essays. This involved counting the number of words (excluding the title), sentences and paragraphs for each essay, and then calculating averages for the number of words per paragraph, number of sentences per paragraph and the number of words per

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[4] The explanation for the choice of an argumentative prompt concerning the wearing of school uniforms in Hirose's 2003 study follows the same logic.

sentence (see Table 3 in Section 4). Paragraph counts were done purely on the basis of whether there were visual cues in the form of indentation at the beginning of paragraphs or extra spacing between them. Sentences were counted according to punctuation or in one or two cases where a full stop had been missed but the new sentence was clearly indicated by initial capitalisation.

Following this, the basic superstructure of the essays, in terms of beginning, middle and end, was assessed. Both the presence and the quality of these components were taken into consideration. For the opening of the essay this meant that some sort of explanation of the topic or background to the main idea (what the PS structure refers to as the situation) was desirable as well as a clear positional statement for the whole essay (in other words, a thesis statement). These basic elements would be expected in the introduction of any type of high-level essay. The body should contain a number (more than one) of relevant supporting or developing points which are directly related to the thesis. If the thesis was not explicitly stated in the introduction, but the body of the essay as a whole was coherent and supported or was related to an implicit thesis, then this was considered to be satisfactory. The end of the essay, the conclusion, should at least involve some sort of summing up of what has been said and a restatement of the main idea.

The results of this evaluation are indicated in Table 4 using a binary system where a 1 indicates that this part of the superstructure was satisfactory and a 0 indicates that it was not satisfactory. In practice, a 0 for the introduction indicates a lack of an identifiable thesis, a 0 for the body indicates that there were no clear supporting or developing points, or that the body points did not form a coherent whole, and a 0 for the conclusion is because there was no sentence or sentences which either concluded or summarised the essay. The evaluation criteria were deliberately kept as simple and specific as possible to enable more precise analysis and also because perceptions of what makes a satisfactory conclusion and introduction can vary widely (see Leki, 1995, for an example of contradictory evaluations of these elements by writing teachers).

The next stage of the analysis involved a consideration of the text type of each essay. This was done by comparing each essay with the main elements and their order of occurrence of the five common text types described in section 2.2. Syntactic and lexical flagging of organization was also taken into account here. If the essay clearly fitted one of the common text schemata then this is indicated by the appropriate abbreviated form in Table 4. If the essay had elements of more than one form then both forms are given. If an essay only partially matched a particular text type or exhibited faulty organization in some way according to the conventional model, this is indicated by enclosing the abbreviation in brackets. Several of the essays did not clearly fit any of the common text types discussed but did share some of the characteristics of first-person narrative writing and so I tentatively assigned them to a 'personal narrative' (PN) category. This point will be discussed further in the results section.

The final part of the analysis was more in-depth. Using standard pedagogical conventions of paragraph form and function which can be found in virtually all writing manuals[5], the paragraphing of each essay was evaluated. There were three points of

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[5] Grabe and Kaplan (1996, p. 353) give a clear and concise description of modern paragraphing conventions:
    It is now expected that paragraphing, aside from matters of display and reading ease, reflects the psychological units of textual information. The paragraph, as currently used in informational writing, is intended to signal a coherent set of ideas, typically with a main theme and supporting information. Whether

evaluation as follows: whether each paragraph dealt with one main idea or theme (unity); whether the main idea was developed or supported in more than one sentence; and whether there was a recognisable topic sentence. Again, 1 or 0 was used to indicate satisfactory fulfilment of a particular criterion or lack of it. A 0 for unity indicates that there is more than one main theme or idea in the paragraph, a 0 for development or support indicates that there is only one sentence (or, in a multi-sentence paragraph, there is no development or support of the idea in any one sentence by any other sentence), and a 0 for topic sentence indicates that there is no clear statement of the topic for the whole paragraph. For the third criterion, opening paragraphs were dealt with slightly differently and were considered satisfactory if they had either a topic sentence for the paragraph or a thesis sentence for the whole essay (or both). Consequently, a 0 here indicates that there is neither thesis nor topic sentence. The results for this part of the analysis can be found in Table 5.

Finally, the conjunctive linkers in each essay were listed and the use of inter-paragraph and intra-paragraph links was analysed (see Table 6). For the definition of what constitutes cohesion, and more particularly conjunctive cohesion, Halliday and Hasan's 1976 account was used, along with Halliday's (1985) more detailed explanation of conjunction. Although Halliday and Hasan (1976) do not make it explicit (and nor does Halliday in 1985), I have gone along with Smith and Frawley (1983) in taking what they refer to as "a very narrow definition of conjunctive cohesion" (p. 355) to apply only to links between whole sentences and most often in sentence initial position, thus making the analysis easier.

The reason for choosing to analyse conjunctive cohesion as opposed to other types (e.g., referential or lexical) is that these linking devices work on a higher level, to link sentences and larger units of discourse and show the logical relationship between textual constituents, and are therefore important organizational tools. Smith and Frawley (1983) use the term 'textual prepositions' (p. 349) for them. Also, as Zamel (1983) points out, they are problematic for learners of English and require careful instruction.

At this point it should be acknowledged that some of the judgements involved in the data analysis are clearly somewhat subjective. However, by using simple and clear criteria it is hoped that personal bias has been kept to a minimum. Further research on a larger scale would require the use of several expert raters thus allowing more complex evaluation procedures to be used.

3.4 An example text analysis

To demonstrate more clearly how the texts were analysed and to promote replicability, a sample analysis of one of the essays will now be shown. The transcript of the essay can be found immediately below and the results of the analysis can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

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or not an explicit topic sentence is provided, readers expect the paragraph, as a unit, to convey a sense of information which can be summarized in a single sentence, and which contributes to the organization of the total text.

Transcript of Essay 6
Two questions – two answers

I had a whole year to find out if the high school or the university is more difficult. I think there's difference between the two questions: 'Is the university life more difficult than the high school life?' and 'Is the university more difficult than the high school?'

As regards my university life, it's quite different from my high school life. My hometown is Szolnok, my high school was there. **And** now I study in Budapest. I spend a lot of time far from my family. Many of my friends were happy when they started the university (they study in Budapest too), because they got out of the family control. I wasn't so happy. I could hardly get used to wake up in an other bed, and honestly, I didn't like people I lived with.

But now the situation has changed. I live with one of my best friends and I know the others before too. I like to go home to our rented flat and I like being with them.

Now, I answer the other question: 'Is the university more difficult than high school?' I don't know. Maybe, there's no difference between them. I studied in a quite hard secondary grammar school and we had to study a lot. Just like in the university. **But** I think it depends on the mature as well. My friend told me that they studied less than before, because they had exams just at the end of the term. They don't write tests (each week) and they don't have to read a lot of books during the year. **But** if you study two languages, it's necessary. **But** it was my choice.

Essay	Basic superstructure			Paragraphing			Text type
	Intro.	**Body**	**Concl.**	**Unity**	**Supp./ Devel.**	**Topic sentence**	
6	1	1	0	1	1	1	C/C

Table 1. Results for the analysis of Essay 6
(Key: C/C = comparison and contrast)

Essay	Par.	No. of words	No. of sentences	Unity	Support/ Develop.	Topic sentence	Cohesion	
							Inter-par.	**Intra-par.**
6	1	47	2	1	1	1	-	0
	2	87	7	1	1	1	1	1
	3	36	3	1	1	1	1	0
	4	107	10	1	1	1	1	3

Table 2. Paragraph analysis for Essay 6

The statistical details for Essay 6 can be found in Table 3 in the next section, but it can be clearly seen that it consists of four paragraphs and the 'Paragraphing' section of Table 1 indicates that there are no basic problems with any of these. The detailed breakdown in Table 2 confirms this. However, this is somewhat deceptive and highlights a weakness of the analytical approach. While all the paragraphs have one main idea (which is underlined in the

transcript) and are developed in more than one sentence, they are not all equally satisfactory with respect to their structure. For instance, although all the paragraphs deal with one main idea, the idea in paragraph 3 is not really a new idea but merely a continuation of the idea in the previous paragraph, and therefore it should be part of that paragraph. Because of the minimal criteria for evaluation of paragraph organization, this flaw is not reflected in the results.

The first paragraph also seems to be problematic: while it is developed in more than one sentence, the relationship of the second sentence to the first is not entirely satisfactory. Rather than expanding on the initial topic, the second sentence presents the reader with a distinction between two questions related to the topic. This is somewhat confusing because nothing has led up to this distinction. Nevertheless, according to the simple criteria used to evaluate development, this had to be regarded as adequate development or support of the main idea.

Regarding the basic superstructure of the essay, there is clearly a problem. While there is an introductory paragraph and a body with a logical two-part structure, there is no conclusion. The introduction was judged to be satisfactory because it does introduce the topic, and while there may not be a conventional statement of the controlling idea for the essay, the second sentence does introduce the main points of the essay. Again, using the simple guidelines for analysis, this is regarded as a satisfactory positional statement for the essay.

Finally, it can be seen that the text type is a simple point-by-point comparison between school and university. This is indicated in the topic sentences of the body paragraphs and by a few key phrases and transitions which are highlighted in boxes in the transcript. The conjunctive linkers (in bold) also fit this text type, particularly the contrastive '*But*' which is used four times.

Although it has been pointed out that the criteria used to evaluate the essays do not expose all the problems in them, this is not seen as a major flaw since the study is exploratory and is not intended to go into full depth. The criteria are felt to be sufficient to indicate major problems while at the same time being relatively simple to apply and therefore reducing the risk of extremely subjective judgements. This also means that the results are easier to interpret.

4 Results and discussion

The results of the initial analysis of text characteristics are shown in Table 3, below. These figures, other than showing the range of variation within the text corpus, do not reveal much about the organization of the texts. They do show that essays 1 and 12 seem to have a suspiciously low number of paragraphs and that essays 5, 7 and 9 have a higher number of paragraphs than might be expected for a short essay. In addition, some essays have a very low average number of sentences per paragraph (3, 5 and 7) which may signal a lack of adequate development in some paragraphs, especially if combined with a high number of paragraphs, as in the case of essay 5. The very high number of sentences per paragraph in essays 1 and 12 reinforces the impression already mentioned that there may be an insufficient use of paragraphing or perhaps an uncertainty about where to insert paragraph breaks in these two essays. More light will be shed on these points when we come to the analysis of individual paragraphs.

In a comparative study of English and Spanish academic writing, Simpson (2000) found that for 20 English paragraphs from a range of journals there was an average of 162 words per paragraph and an average of 6.75 sentences per paragraph. The words per sentence were 24. It might be tempting to compare the results in Table 3 to these figures but of course this would be a dangerous thing to do. These essays were written in a second language by writers whose familiarity with academic writing conventions was unknown and quite possibly minimal. Such comparisons would also be misleading for other reasons. For instance, essays 1 and 12 have the closest number of words per paragraph to Simpson's texts, but this is likely to be because of a lack of adequate paragraphing strategies. Disregarding 1 and 12, essays 4, 6, and 10 have the highest sentences to paragraph ratio, but we have already seen in the case of essay 6 that this may disguise an uneven or suspect structure. As for words per sentence, the high figures for essays 3, 7, and 9 tell us nothing about the sophistication or accuracy of these sentences.

Essay	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Mean
No. of paragraphs	2	6	5	5	9	4	9	6	8	5	5	3	5.6
Length (words)	362	467	248	546	468	277	448	314	417	492	453	475	413.9
Words per paragraph	181	77.8	49.6	109.2	52	69.3	49.7	52.3	52.1	98.4	90.6	158.3	74.1*
No. of sentences	25	23	10	25	27	22	18	22	17	24	23	36	22.7
Average sentences per paragraph	12.5	3.8	2	5	3	5.5	2	3.7	2.1	4.8	4.6	12	4.1*
Average words per sentence	14.5	20.3	24.8	21.8	17.3	12.6	24.9	14.3	24.5	20.5	19.7	13.2	18.3*

Table 3. Basic characteristics of the essays

*: These are the means for the entire corpus not the means of the added up individual averages.
Total no. of paragraphs: 67
Total no. of words: 4,967
Total no. of sentences: 272

The results of the main analysis of the essays do show some clear organizational differences (see Table 4). As regards the overall superstructure, only three essays were found to be satisfactory in their basic organization. The other essays were either missing an introduction or conclusion, or the introduction and conclusion did not perform their functions adequately. This finding is worrying because a basic superstructure is an essential requirement for formal prose writing, or indeed any extended piece of written communication, and without it coherence is seriously compromised. Interestingly, the same three essays that had a clear and effective superstructure were also the only ones (apart from 6) that had no basic paragraphing problems. (The 'Paragraphing' section of Table 4 shows which areas each essay had problems with.)

Essay	Basic superstructure			Paragraphing			Text type
	Intro.	Body	Concl.	Unity	Supp./ Devel.	Topic sentence	
1	0	0	1	0	1	0	PN (C/C)
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	D (A)
3	0	1	0	1	0	0	A
4	1	1	1	1	1	1	A; PS (C/C)
5	0	1	1	0	1	0	(C/C; A)
6	1	1	0	1	1	1	C/C
7	0	1	0	1	0	0	C/C
8	0	1	0	0	1	0	PN (C/C)
9	0	1	1	1	0	0	(A; PS)
10	1	1	1	1	1	1	C/C
11	0	1	1	1	1	0	PN (C/C)
12	1	0	1	0	1	0	PN (C/C)

Table 4. Results of the analysis of essay superstructure and text type

Key to text types: A =   argumentative
C/C = comparison and contrast
D =   descriptive
PN =   personal narrative
PS =   problem-solution
( ) =   the essay only partially fits this text type

From the point of view of text type, the results were mixed. Five of the essays (3, 4, 6, 7 and 10) showed either a comparison and contrast or an argumentative structure as their primary organizational pattern both of which were appropriate forms for the question set. Essay 4 and essay 10 were both very effectively organized throughout and seemed to show a familiarity with conventional essay text types of argumentation and comparison and contrast respectively. The other three had problems with their introductions or conclusions (and in the case of 7, with paragraphing) but also showed a recognisable text type. Essay 2, another very well organized essay, was basically organized in a descriptive way with all the points relating to the responsibilities of university life and supporting an implicit thesis which only became apparent at the end. With very little adjustment it would be a conventional argumentative essay.

Of the other essays, 5 and 9, while having no clear pattern, did have elements of comparison and contrast and argumentative writing. The remaining four essays (1, 8, 11 and 12) also had some comparison and contrast elements in them but without adequate signalling to clearly distinguish the main sections of the comparison or a clear subject-by-subject or point-by-point approach. There was a more striking feature which connected them though: they all seemed to be narrating personal experiences or thoughts but none of them seemed to have a clear organization although three of them did have a kind of narrative resolution, including a simple coda, in their concluding paragraph. Rather, they seemed to be written in a stream of consciousness manner to a greater or lesser extent, with little explicit linking between sections or thoughts.

I have used the term 'Personal Narrative' for these essays, but I could just as well have named them 'Stream of Consciousness' essays. They are basically freewheeling narratives or

mixtures of narrative and commentary, often addressed directly to the reader and written either in the first person or in one case (12) the second person. In the most extreme case (Essay 8) the reader is addressed directly and the essay consists of a kind of rambling monologue, as the following extract shows:

> It's an interesting thing to deal with the differences between university life and high school life. First of all let me admit I've never really thought about this before, even though it's certainly an important issue.
>
> Well, high school life (in some cases) was not my cup of tea. I was attending a strict catholic high school where we get punished every single morning when „morning mass" was missed. I kind of felt I had been forced to practice religion according to the taste of my school teachers and priests. Religion is very important to me, but in my way.
>
> On the other hand I'm the kind of stubborn person, that if some subjects do not grab my attention, then I just do not care. I was so during real subjects such as maths, chemistry, physics. (Essay 8, pars. 1-3)

This unconventional text type may well be a result of the student's previous writing experience (or lack of it) but without further research this must remain mere conjecture.

Moving on to the analysis of individual paragraphs in the essays, there are again clear differences between essays (see Table 5). Only essays 2, 4, 6 and 10 were found to be entirely satisfactory according to the simple criteria used to judge unity, development and topic sentences. Of the other eight essays, the most problematic were 1 and 12, both of which made insufficient use of paragraphs, and essay 7, which had four single sentence paragraphs. Two of these were overlong run-on sentences and the other two were sequential and should have formed one paragraph. These problems seem to reveal either a lack of awareness of this aspect of text structuring or an inability or insecurity in applying it.

There were two problem areas which affected most of the essays. Essay 5 was the most extreme example of paragraphs without clear topic sentences. Of course, not every paragraph need have its own topic sentence but six paragraphs out of nine without obvious topic sentences seems to demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of what a paragraph is supposed to do. Eight out of the 12 essays had at least one paragraph without a topic sentence and altogether 15 paragraphs out of 67 (22.4%) were lacking in this respect.

The other apparent problem for the majority of essays seemed to be adequate paragraph development. While there were only seven paragraphs (10.4%) in the corpus which consisted of a single sentence (four of which occurred in essay 7), there were 25 paragraphs (37.3%) of two or less sentences and these were distributed among nine of the 12 essays. For comparison, there were 29 paragraphs (43.3%) of four or more sentences distributed amongst 10 of the essays, but two of these were the 'giant' paragraphs in essays 1 and 12 which were not unified. Discounting these two outliers, only two essays consisted mainly of paragraphs of four or more sentences (essays 4 and 10 each had one paragraph of three sentences with all the rest longer).

What these two more general problems seem to indicate is that although these students were aware of the need for paragraphing, most of them were unable to fulfil that need effectively on a consistent basis. In particular, identifying and fully developing a clear idea for each paragraph was a challenge to them.

Essay	Par.	No. of words	No. of sentences	Unity	Support/ Develop.	Topic sentence	Conj. cohesion	
							Inter-par.	Intra-par.
1	1	340	23	0	1	0	-	6
	2	22	2	1	1	1	0	0
2	1	89	5	1	1	1	-	1
	2	122	3	1	1	1	0	2
	3	82	5	1	1	1	1	2
	4	64	4	1	1	1	1	0
	5	64	4	1	1	1	1	1
	6	46	2	1	1	1	1	1
3	1	13	1	1	0	1	-	0
	2	71	3	1	1	0	1	1
	3	81	3	1	1	1	1	0
	4	55	2	1	1	1	1	1
	5	28	1	1	0	1	1(1)	0
4	1	83	4	1	1	1	-	0
	2	128	5	1	1	1	1	1
	3	118	5	1	1	1	0	1
	4	133	8	1	1	1	1	2(1)
	5	84	3	1	1	1	0	1
5	1	77	5	1	1	0	-	1
	2	66	4	1	1	1	0	1
	3	60	3	0	1	0	0	0
	4	39	2	1	1	0	0	0
	5	39	2	0	1	0	1	0
	6	53	2	1	1	0	0	0
	7	43	4	1	1	0	0	1
	8	41	3	1	1	1	0	0
	9	50	2	1	1	1	0	1
6	1	47	2	1	1	1	-	0
	2	87	7	1	1	1	1	1
	3	36	3	1	1	1	1	0
	4	107	10	1	1	1	1	3
7	1	40	1	1	0	1	-	0
	2	46	2	1	1	1	0	0
	3	70	3	1	1	1	1	0
	4	42	1	1	0	1	1	0
	5	18	1	1	0	0	0	0
	6	105	4	1	1	1	0	1
	7	44	3	1	1	1	1	0
	8	32	2	1	1	0	0	1
	9	51	1	1	0	1	0	0

Table 5. Results of individual paragraph analysis for each essay [continued on next page]

Essay	Par.	No. of words	No. of sentences	Unity	Support/ Develop.	Topic sentence	Conj. cohesion Inter-par.	Intra-par.
8	1	36	2	1	1	1	-	1
	2	64	4	1	1	1	1	0
	3	36	2	1	1	1	1(1)	0
	4	37	3	1	1	1	0	1
	5	86	7	1	1	1	1	1
	6	55	4	0	1	0	0	0
9	1	42	2	1	1	1	-	0
	2	68	3	1	1	1	0	2
	3	84	2	1	1	0	0	0
	4	58	3	1	1	1	1	0
	5	16	1	1	0	1	0	0
	6	39	2	1	1	1	1	0
	7	57	2	1	1	1	0	0
	8	53	2	1	1	1	1	0
10	1	69	4	1	1	1	-	0
	2	96	5	1	1	1	0	0
	3	120	5	1	1	1	0	0
	4	133	7	1	1	1	0	3
	5	74	3	1	1	1	0	0
11	1	36	2	1	1	1	-	0
	2	102	7	1	1	0	0	3
	3	114	4	1	1	1	1	2(1)
	4	124	6	1	1	0	1	2(1)
	5	77	4	1	1	1	0	0
12	1	73	4	1	1	1	-	2
	2	288	22	0	1	0	0	9
	3	114	10	1	1	1	0	1

Table 5. continued

The last part of the analysis examined the use of conjunctive linking in the essays and here several points of interest emerged. The last two columns in Table 5 show the distribution of linkers in the essays both between and within paragraphs (numbers in brackets indicate incorrect use, either semantically or syntactically, of linkers). A more detailed description of the situation is given in Table 6 on the next page (here the starred items were the ones used incorrectly).

From this it can be seen that generally the more problematic essays tended to have lower levels of cohesion, particularly between paragraphs. Essays 1, 7, 9 and 12 all have less than half their paragraphs linked. On the other hand, the better organised essays (2, 4 and 6) all had at least half their paragraphs joined through conjunction. Obviously links between paragraphs can be helpful in signalling relationships to the reader (Zamel, 1983), but they should not be seen as essential since other types of cohesion can be used to ensure a text reads coherently. Essay 10 is a good example of this: even though there were no links between

paragraphs, the essay read very clearly thanks to the skilful use of referential and lexical cohesion. Conversely, if cohesive links are not used correctly, as in essay 11, this could detract from the coherence of the text:

> Everything feels so much out of order for me in the past two weeks. **Although***, I find university life is also all about standing up for yourself, since it's only up to you whether you get into your chosen course or not, wheather you find the teacher or not. (Essay 11, par. 4)

Finally, Table 6 also shows the range of linkers used in different essays, which may be an indicator of the sophistication of the writing. Essay 2 in particular demonstrates the correct use of a wide range of high-level linkers, while essays 5, 6, 7 and 12 show a much more restricted range. The difference between essays may also reflect the amount of direct teaching in this area that students have received, but again, only with further research could this point be clarified.

Essay	List of conjunctive linkers used	Inter-par. cohesion		Intra-par. cohesion	
		No.	%	No.	%
1	Before; At the same time; For example; Now; On the other hand; Foremost	0 of 1	0	6 of 23	26.1%
2	And; First of all; On the other hand; however; To begin with; also; Nevertheless; Furthermore; Consequently; To sum up; But	4 of 5	80%	7 of 17	41.2%
3	Firstly; Also; Secondly; Lastly; At that time; In closing*	4 of 4	100%	2 of 5	40%
4	of course; In addition; Therefore; Furthermore; This way; Although*; Though	2 of 4	50%	5 of 20	25%
5	Then; And (x2); Thus; But	1 of 8	12.5%	4 of 18	22.2%
6	As regards; And; But (x4); Now	3 of 3	100%	4 of 18	22.2%
7	Here; as well; And (x2); But	3 of 8	37.5%	2 of 9	22.2%
8	First of all; Well; On the other hand*; Moreover; Now; Anyway	3 of 5	60%	3 of 16	18.8%
9	To take an example; Also; here; However; But	3 of 7	42.9%	2 of 9	22.2%
10	Unlike here; Also; Actually	0 of 4	0	3 of 19	15.8%
11	However; Well; Anyway; The truth is; On the contrary*; All together; now; Although*; And	2 of 4	50%	7 of 18	38.9%
12	But (x3); And (x4); Now (x2); Well (x2); And after all	0 of 2	0	12 of 33	36.4%

Table 6. Analysis of conjunctive cohesion for each essay

> Mean inter-par. conjunctive cohesion: 45.5% (25 of 55). Mean intra-par. conjunctive cohesion: 27.8% (57 of 205).

5 Conclusion

This exploratory study has succeeded in discovering some interesting differences in the way Hungarian students entering university organize their writing in English. Firstly, problems with paragraphing are common, particularly missing topic sentences and inadequate development, as is a failure to provide a clear basic superstructure for an essay. Students seem to find it difficult to write effective introductions and conclusions. Both of these deficiencies will clearly cause considerable difficulties for the students when they are required to write more advanced papers. As regards common academic text types, while some students appear to be familiar with conventional comparison and contrast and argumentative structures, others were unable to organize their essays in an appropriate or effective way.

None of these findings is surprising since if the students did not have any problems there would be no need for them to attend an Academic Skills Course in the first place. However, the extent of the weaknesses is revealing and may be indicative not just of the future difficulties the students will experience, but also of a lack of basic knowledge of how to organize writing in a coherent way. The wide gap in organizational competence between the best essays and the weakest essays is also worrying and is probably an indicator of the variation in proficiency levels and writing experience within the class. This can also be seen in the use of conjunctive cohesion.

This was a limited study involving only one class and using basic evaluation criteria. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings a larger study would be needed and cross-checking of the results by expert raters would also be necessary. The research could also be extended to look at other aspects of student writing, such as other types of cohesion, topical structure and style. Another area for related research would be to investigate the teaching of writing in English at secondary schools, particularly in relation to text types and basic superstructure. Students could also be interviewed about their previous writing experience and their perception of their own problems.

A further important direction for future study would be to be look at the organizational practices in Hungarian writing and try to identify common text types in formal prose. The importance of cultural differences and their influence on writing in a second language should not be underestimated. As Malcolm puts it:

> The way we write, like the way we speak, is an expression of our enculturation, as well as being an expression of our individuality. The cultural knowledge which we display in writing is a product of historical and social formation, some of which we hold in common with other groups, yet some of which differentiates us from other groups. (1999, p. 122)

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