

Structure and cohesion of English narratives by Nordic and Chinese students

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1. Introduction

Many studies in discourse level of English as second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) have been carried out in the past two decades. One of the most notable studies is NORDWRITE project (1985) which concentrates on the discourse development of EFL writing in Nordic countries. The project succeeds in identifying important problems and suggesting solutions for students' writing in terms of discourse-level properties such as cohesion, and superstructure. The findings were reported in several papers, for example, Enkvist (1985, 1990), Evensen (1985, 1990), Lindeberg (1985, 1986), Lintermann-Rygh (1985), and Wikborg (1985, 1990).

In this study, a number of Chinese ESL texts were collected, and the findings were compared with those obtained from the NORDWRITE project. The objective of this study was to identify similarities and differences in discourse development of English writing between the two distinct groups – Chinese and Nordic. Certain pedagogic implications for ESL/EFL writing were drawn as well.

The study examined two main areas in discourse development, namely superstructure and cohesion. With regard to superstructure, a consistent pattern was found in English texts written by Chinese and Nordic students, though their first languages are distinctly different. On the other hand, analysis of bilingual texts written by Chinese in this study illustrates that Chinese first language (L1) and ESL writing share the same characteristics in superstructure. Chinese L1 does play a significant role in superstructure of ESL writing.

In term of cohesion, there seems no consistent conclusion that L1 plays a direct role in the density of connectors of Chinese ESL and Nordic EFL writing. In NORDWRITE study, connector density is not distinctly different between ES and Nordic EFL writing, and between Nordic L1 and their EFL writing. On the contrary, a remarkable difference in connector density was found between Chinese L1 and their ESL writing. Chinese L1 writing displays a significantly less density of connectors than their ESL writing. Chinese ESL texts do not pattern the same way as L1.

2. Relevant research

2.1 *The NORDWRITE Project*

The NORDTEXT project (1985) and its subgroup, NORDWRITE, focus on the explicit connections between text linguistics and the teaching of writing. They concentrate on the development of written EFL skills in the Nordic countries, by analysing the discourse level in writing.

Evensen (1990) reported the findings from an exploratory study within the NORDWRITE project. The data for the analyses consists of nine narratives written by Swedish learners of EFL. The learners were all in the 11th grade (upper secondary school) and were near the end of the 9th year of EFL study at the time of writing. The narrative texts were marked by evaluators and categorized into three quality groups – a high (HI) group, a mid (MID) group, and a low (LO) group.

The findings suggest that first, metatextual deixis may be an indicator of multilevel, global discourse strategies. Second, the connector ‘and’ is very common in the LO group and temporal adverbials are used less often in this group than in the other groups with higher levels.

Lintermann-Rygh (1985) proved that the connector density correlates positively with text quality in EFL, but negatively in L1. The findings show that connector density was a highly discriminatory factor of text quality in EFL texts. Connor (1984) suggested that general cohesive density was not found to be a discriminating factor between the native speakers and ESL writers. Instead, she found that the ESL writers lack the variety of connectors used by the native speakers. In order to examine the relationship between connector density and level of proficiency, the present study adopted an objective, quantifiable approach by considering the density of connectors among Chinese students (CS), students from Nordic countries (NS) and native English speakers (ES).

In the study of Wikborg (1985), 144 essays written by students at the University of Stockholm were analysed. In addition to six topic-structuring problems about coherence breaks in student writing, five cohesion problems were found from the samples of Swedish university student writing, as shown in Table 1 below:

- 1.1 Missing, or insufficient number of, references to the cohesive chains which have been established as central to the topic;
- 1.2 Insufficient number of cohesive chains.
2. The distance between the cohesive items in a chain is too great.
3. The inference ties are uncertain because:
 - 3.1 reference items (e.g. articles, pronouns) lack an unmistakable reference in the text;
 - 3.2 there is insufficient specification, with the result that
 - 3.2.1 the tie between two cohesive items is difficult to follow

- 3.2.2 there are too many possible interpretations of what such a tie might be.
- 4. The type of cohesive tie attempted does not actually hold.
- 5. Misleading information structure, because of
 - 5.1 the distribution of given and new information within the sentence
 - 5.2 missing or misleading sentence connection.

Table 1 Cohesion problems (Wikborg 1985)

The present study applied Wikborg's framework and compared those problems with CS' in Section 4.3 Cohesion below.

The NORDTEXT and NORDWRITE projects have identified many important problems in terms of discourse-level properties in student texts. It is definitely worthwhile to conduct research in ESL texts produced by writers of other L1s, like Chinese, and to compare the results with those from the NORDTEXT projects.

2.2 Chinese ESL writing

Much research has been conducted in cohesion of ESL texts written by Chinese students. Most of them focused on academic, argumentative, and expository writing (Johns 1984, Hinds 1990, Scollon 1991, Reid 1992).

Among these relevant studies, Reid (1992) examined the use of four cohesive devices – pronouns, coordinate conjunctions, subordinate conjunction openers, and prepositions – in English expository essays written by native English-speaking, Chinese-, and other language-speaking students. Some significant differences were found among the groups in the frequency with which cohesiveness was employed. For example, native English speakers used more pronouns than the other groups. Chinese writers relied more on subordinate conjunctions than the other students did.

Scollon (1991) supported Kaplan's (1966) hypothesis of indirectness in Chinese writing. Scollon attributed the indirectness in Chinese writing to a different view of self in Chinese culture from the Western image of selfness. For instance, in Chinese narrative, the writer always acts as a storyteller, while the writer in English may be one of the characters or an outsider.

Hinds (1990) claimed that Chinese favours a delayed introduction of purpose. In fact, the results of my study support Hinds' argument. L2 writers lack sensitivity to the different expectations of readers and writers. English readers expect and require landmarks of coherence and unity as they read. The writer needs to provide transitional statements or elaboration to fill the information gap. On the contrary, in Chinese writing, detailed and specific information is not required since more room is preferred to be left for readers to interpret the text. The difference in the introduction of

purpose may be due to different expectations of readers and writers across cultures.

The above studies identified the differences in certain areas between English L1 and Chinese ESL writing. However, detailed comparisons between English L1 writing and Chinese ESL writing of narrative are still limited. This research therefore attempted to fill the gap by comparing narrative writing among CS' ESL, NS' EFL and ES' L1 writing.

3. The study

3.1 Aim

The aim of this study was to compare discourse structure and patterns of cohesion between CS and NS in their English writing. The areas for analysis include metatextual deixis and connectors adopted by CS, NS and ES. The study identified the areas of difference between English L1 and ESL/EFL writing which may be attributed to the influence of L1. It also aimed to examine if there are consistent patterns found in CS' ESL and NS' EFL texts which differ from the pattern in ES'.

3.2 Methodology

Narrative was elicited by giving CS and ES subjects a series of pictures. Picture-based narrative tasks allow the researcher to control for content and to see how subjects express the same thing in different ways. A series of eight pictures, arranged in order of events that make up a story in a park¹, was used in this study. The story is about some children playing in a park, as outlined in Table 2.

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1. Two boys and two girls are playing in the park. The boys are chasing one another and the girls are looking at the flowers.
 2. A boy suddenly rides across the flowerbed on his bicycle. The two girls are scared.
 3. The children look at the mark on the grass showing the path of the bicycle.
 4. The boy is ripping the flowers out of the ground.
 5. He then climbs a tree. The other children are angry with him.
 6. The boy starts swinging on a small branch of the tree.
 7. The branch snaps and he falls on the ground with his head hurt.
 8. The other children are angry and push him out of the park.
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Table 2 Breakdown of 'park story'

¹ The selection of a park story is due to two main reasons. First, both subject groups are very familiarized with the setting of a park. Going to park is one of the typical activities in childhood for both groups. Second, the scenario is easy for subjects to understand and express in their own words.

A group of Hong Kong Chinese tertiary students (CS) was asked to write narrative texts in both English and Chinese. Meanwhile, a group of English speakers (ES) of similar age and education background wrote the story in English. The L1 texts of both CS and ES groups served as references for comparison. In this study, 120 texts were collected including 40 English texts from ES, 40 English from CS, and 40 Chinese from CS.

The pattern of narrative structure and the use of connectors between CS and NS groups, and between ES and the two ESL/EFL groups (CS and NS) were compared. In order to facilitate reliable comparison and to obtain accurate analysis, the data in this study was normalized by the number of T-units². Since ESL/EFL texts are always shorter than ES', counting the number of particular items fails to reflect the authentic use of cohesive items. The reference of T-units provides a reliable ground for comparison.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Narrative structure

A universal template of narrative consists of at least five constituents, namely orientation, initiating event, complicating event, highpoint, and coda (Labov 1972).

It is found from this study that both CS and ES have the five constituents in narrative. Their narrative structure is similar though they are of different L1s. However, their superstructure differs. This study gave a detailed account of one of the main areas of difference in superstructure, that is, metatextual deixis.

4.2 Metatextual deixis

The use of metatextual deixis (e.g. above and below, this story) was very rare in the narrative texts produced by the subjects in Evensen's (1990) study. Only four occurrences appeared in the texts. Appropriate use of metatextual deixis was found in the orientation in the HI group texts, for example:

- (1) *This is the story about* Mr. Frank Coopersmith and a girl with long, blond hair.

Evensen concluded that, at the upper secondary level of student development, metatextual deixis may be an indicator of multilevel, global discourse strategies.

² T-unit refers to an independent clause with all its dependent clauses. The average T-unit length is often used as a measure of syntactic complexity.

In this study, about one-fifth of CS' English texts have metatextual deixis. Most examples of metatextual deixis were found in the coda, though a few in the orientation, of CS' English texts:

- (2) *This is a story about Tom.*
- (3) *This story teaches us that there is always a causal relationship.*

Similar frequency of metatextual deixis was found in CS' Chinese L1 texts as well. For example:

- (4) *ting-wen zhe-ge gushi*³, ...
Listen-ed this piece story
'After listening to this story, ...'
- (5) *cung jishang gushi*, ...
From above story
'From the above story, ...'

The use of metatextual deixis in CS' English texts reflects the influence of Chinese L1. One of the characteristics of Chinese narrative is story telling. The writer always acts as a storyteller in Chinese narrative, and uses metatextual deixis in the orientation or coda. However, no record of metatextual deixis was found in ES' texts.

It seems that the writer in English plays less, or even no, explicit role in storytelling of narrative. The English writer acts as one of the characters or as an outsider narrating the story. ES gave comments from the point of view of the main character or the writer, like example (6):

- (6) *If you believe in yourself, anything and everything is possible.*

NS' writing shares the common characteristic of ES'. Example (7) is extracted from the data in Lindeberg's (1986) study:

- (7) *Suddenly her lovely hair didn't seem so lovely anymore.*

Metatextual deixis is often used to give direct evaluative or teaching elements in Chinese. Chinese narrative serves the purposes of teaching and evaluation. In order to achieve these purposes, the coda of narrative written by Chinese writers always consists of evaluative or teaching elements. About one-third of CS' English texts in this study incorporate evaluative or teaching elements in their coda. For example:

- (8) *This story tells us that being a good child should obey the regulation of parks.*

³ The first line is the pronunciation of standard Chinese (*hanyu pinjin*). The second is the transliteration of the first line while the last is the translation.

The role of the writer in example (8) becomes explicit when evaluative and teaching remarks were given to the readers from the point of view of the writer. On the contrary, direct evaluative elements were seldom incorporated in NS' and ES' English texts. Instead, indirect comments from the writer's or the character's point of view were given.

4.3 Cohesion

Much research has been conducted on the relationship between cohesion and writing, such as Connor (1984), Lintermann-Rygh (1985) and Wikborg (1985, 1990). However, the conclusions of these studies differ.

In order to conduct a more comprehensive study, the analysis of cohesion in this study covers the density and variety of connectors (Connor 1984, and Lintermann-Rygh 1985), as well as the cohesion problems addressed by Wikborg (1985, 1990), among CS' and NS' writing in their L1 and ESL/EFL.

4.3.1 Density of connectors

Connector density in this study is defined as number of connectors per T-unit. It was expected that ESL/EFL students would have low density of cohesion, since writing problems for them are often attributed to not being able to combine sentences for effective cohesion. However, there seems no consistent conclusion supporting that connector density is a discriminatory factor between ES and ESL/EFL writers.

Analysis of the bilingual corpus of CS reveals a remarkable difference in the density of connectors of the texts produced in English and Chinese. The connector density in CS' ESL texts is almost 4.5 times more than that in CS' L1 texts (Figure 1). It is expected that if L1 plays a direct role in L2 writing, Chinese ESL writing will have a minimal use of connectors like in their Chinese L1. Chinese writing favours simplicity and its cohesiveness is interpreted from the context. However, Chinese ESL writers do not adopt the pattern of L1 directly in their use of connectors in their ESL writing. Their ESL texts have a very high density of connectors, in contrast to the low density of connectors in their L1 texts.

The density of connectors in NS' ESL texts in this study is similar to that in Connor's (1984) study of the native English writers which is 0.35. Lintermann-Rygh's (1985) study also displays a consistent pattern in connector density of NS' L1 and their EFL (Figure 1). NS produced a connector density of the same level as ES, because their own use of connectors is basically comparable.

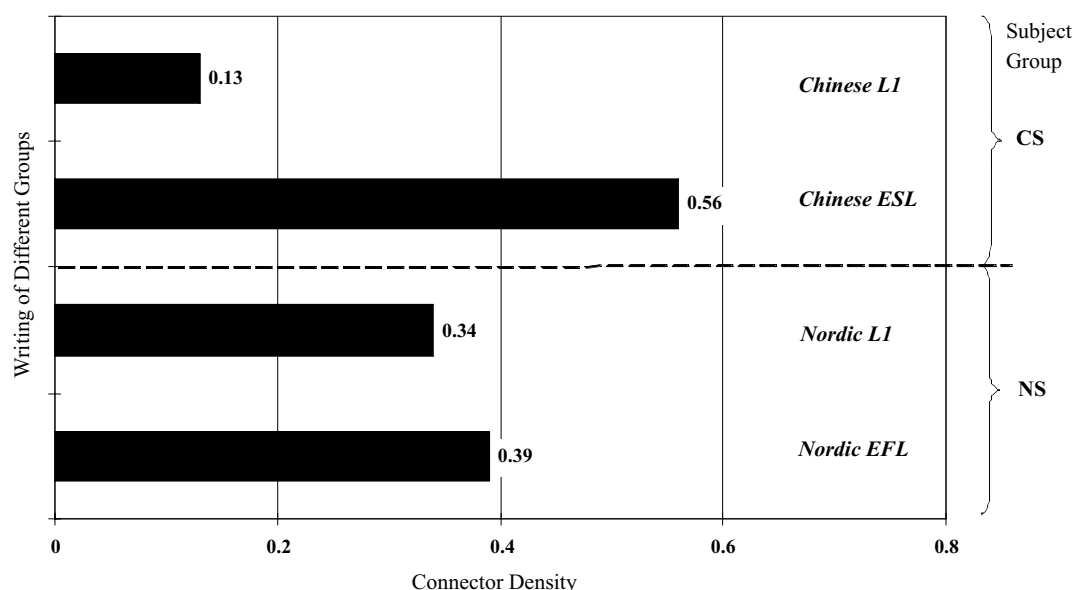


Figure 1 Density of connectors in writing of different language groups

The above findings illustrate that, first, density of connectors may not a discriminatory factor between ES and ESL/EFL writing. Second, the density of connectors is significantly higher in CS' ESL than their L1 texts. This may be due to an over-emphasis of use of connectors in ESL teaching.

4.3.2 Variety of connectors

The findings from this study support Connor's (1984) argument that ESL writers lack the variety of connectors used by native English speakers. The variety of connectors in ESL texts employed by CS is limited. For instance, CS employed the connector 'and' more frequently than ES for coordination. ES, on the other hand, used other alternatives for cohesion. Compare example (9) from a CS with (10) from an ES:

- (9) Two little girls were appreciating the various kinds of flowers, while two little boys were running *and* chasing each other.
- (10) He had ridden his bicycle straight through the beautiful 'purple jeepers' flower, leaving poor Katy brushed out of the way.

The variety of connectors of CS' ESL writing is limited though their density is much higher than ES'. Among different coordinative devices adopted in the narrative texts, 45% of them are the connector 'and' in CS' ESL texts, while 78% are cohesive devices other than the connector 'and' in ES texts. The limited variety of connectors may be due to CS' lack of sensitivity to connector variety and their insufficient understanding of the usage of connectors.

4.3.3 *(In-) appropriate use of connectors*

Evensen (1985) revealed that there was a problem of non-use or wrong use of connectors in EFL compositions of grade 8-11. Evensen found that no 'therefore' was used in the samples.

Similar to Evensen's finding, CS' texts in my study have the problem of inappropriate use of connectors. Exemplificatory connectors were found in CS' ESL narrative texts, as in example (11).

(11) *For example*, while other children are playing around the park, Joe likes riding his bicycle, pursuits them and will pretend to crash them,
...

Exemplificatory connectors are typical in academic or expository discourse but not in the narrative one. The result that some of CS (15%) use exemplificatory connectors reflects that CS are not very aware of the different usage of connectors in different discourse.

4.3.4 *Distance between cohesive items*

One of the cohesion problems of ESL/EFL writers mentioned by Wikborg (1985, 1990) is that the distance between the cohesive items in a chain is often too great. CS in this study had the same problem. 23% of CS' ESL writing had cases of too great a distance between the cohesive items in a chain. Example (12) is excerpted from a CS' ESL text:

(12) *Mary, Nancy, Peter and David* rush up and pick him up. They are all very angry. 'You, bad guy, what did you do.' Peter says. 'You've destroyed the beautiful flowers and grass, you also broke the branch, and finally you've hurt yourself. You got what punishment should give to you.' Mary points at him and says in angry tone.

They take Mike to see the doctor, on their way, they teach him a lesson.

The distance between the inference ties 'they' and 'Mary, Nancy, Peter and David' is too great. There are some interruptions, such as Peter's and Mary's comments, within the cohesion chain. It seems that CS lack sensitivity to the great distance between cohesive items.

4.3.5 *Uncertain inference ties*

Wikborg (1985) pointed out that many ESL texts had uncertain inference ties because they offered insufficient specification. 36% of texts in Wikborg's study had no identifiable reference. This problem is common in CS' ESL writing as well. 20% of CS' texts have uncertain or unidentifiable reference ties. Example (13) is from a CS' text:

(13) The naughty child did not have any regret and continued to pick the flowers on the ground. *We* were all very angry with him and stared at him but he did not notice this. After this, he climbed up the tree.

The reference 'we' is not certain in the above example. No identifiable reference was given.

5. Pedagogic implications

This study identified the differences in superstructure between ES and ESL/EFL writing. In order to enhance writing quality, ESL/EFL students need to be more sensitive to the differences in discourse strategies between their L1 and ESL/EFL. The findings of this study suggest that the superstructure of ESL/EFL may be influenced L1. Therefore, ESL/EFL writers need to be aware of the differences between English L1 and ESL/EFL texts. Being sensitive to the different reader/writer expectation can help minimize the differences of ESL/EFL writing from ES'.

In term of cohesion, the density of connectors in NS' L1 and their EFL texts is similar. It seems that L1 plays a direct role in their EFL writing. However, the density of connectors in CS' ESL texts is remarkably higher than that in their L1. This can be due to the influence of ESL teaching in CS' secondary education. ESL teachers in Hong Kong emphasize the use of cohesive devices, especially connectors. They advise students to adopt overt connectors for coordination and subordination. In addition, both CS and NS groups reveal a lack of variety of connectors in their ESL/EFL writing.

In order to cope with the over-use of connectors and lack of connector variety, ESL teachers need to show their students alternatives for connectors, such as adverbials. They can compare pairs of examples such as (14) and (15):

(14) He rode his bicycle straight through the beautiful flowers and left poor Katy brushed out of the way.

(15) He rode his bicycle straight through the beautiful flowers, leaving poor Katy brushed out of the way.

Example (15) is an alternative for using the connector 'and'. ESL teachers may illustrate different ways in expressing cohesion.

Concerning the problem of inappropriate use of connectors, ESL teachers are recommended to show students that the usage of certain types of connectors is more confined to a particular discourse. For instance, exemplificatory connectors are more extensively used in academic and expository writing, rather than in narrative writing. Advanced ESL learners should note this difference in order to improve their rhetoric in writing. To

enhance students' awareness of appropriate use of connectors is significant for teaching advanced ESL/EFL writing.

6. Conclusion

This study has compared ESL/EFL writing of two distinct language groups – Chinese and Nordic, and concludes with findings from two main aspects in discourse development -- superstructure and cohesion. By examining the similarities and differences in the texts written by Chinese ESL students and Nordic EFL students, we find that certain writing problems of ESL/EFL students originate from inadequate understanding of English discourse. The role of L1 plays directly in some, but not all, areas in discourse level for ESL/EFL writing. L1 influences directly in the macro perspective, such as constituents of narrative structure and metatextual deixis, of ESL writing; but not in the micro perspective, such as connectors.

The study has identified the areas of differences between ES' and ESL/EFL writing especially in superstructure. Chinese L1 does play a significant role in this area in ESL writing. One of the Chinese narrative conventions is that narrative serves the functions of teaching and evaluation. The Chinese writer tends to use metatextual deixis in their orientation or coda for giving evaluations. The evaluative elements are found to be incorporated in both L1 and ESL narrative texts written by CS.

In term of cohesion, though CS' and NS' L1s are distinctly different, both groups share the same problems of cohesion in their ESL/EFL writing. Their problems include lack of connector variety, inappropriate use of connectors, long distance between cohesive ties in a chain, and uncertain inference ties.

More importantly, the findings from this study suggest that the density of connectors may not be a discriminatory factor between English L1 and ESL writing. The density of connectors in CS' ESL texts is higher than ES' L1 texts and is significantly higher than L1 texts. CS' ESL texts do not pattern in the same way as their L1. The over-emphasis of use of connectors by ESL teachers may be one of the factors for this.

The application of this study is considered to be the prelude of an extensive study for ESL/EFL writing of Chinese and Nordic groups, with reference to their L1s. Further research in cohesion can be extended to other cohesive devices, such as references, demonstratives. The results from this study illustrate that ESL texts do not pattern in the same way as L1 in the use of connectors. Results from studies of other cohesive devices can help evaluate if there is a consistent pattern in different cohesive devices.

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