

An Analysis of Contextual Configuration and Text Structure of Nonnative English Speakers' Written Texts

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The current study aims to investigate how EFL successful and unsuccessful students develop their argumentative written texts. Hasan's (1989) analytical framework of contextual configuration and text structure was used to explore how students develop their texts globally. This analysis was based on Halliday's (1985/1989) three elements of social situation: field, tenor and mode. The findings indicated that successful texts were better structured at the global level than unsuccessful ones. Most of the successful texts were developed using the structure: (i) initiation, which is an optional element; (ii) thesis statement or topic sentence, in which the writer declares his/her position; (iii) elaboration and support, in which the writer develops the thesis statement/topic sentence and supports his/her position; and (iv) conclusion, in which the writer evaluates his/her position. Elements (ii), (iii) and (iv) are obligatory. Only a small proportion of the unsuccessful texts showed this structure of text. Most of the unsuccessful texts lacked good organization. The analytical framework used in this study was of great help in understanding and revealing how nonnative student writers express themselves and make meanings, the poor ones as on the way and the good ones as getting there.

Introduction

Halliday (1985/89: 10) defines a text as "language that is functional". He adds that "by functional, we simply mean language that is doing some job in some context... of situation" (p. 10). This leads us to Halliday's (1985/89) statement that there is "a very close partnership between language and living the life" (p. 54). In what follows, we shall see how language is related to culturally-construed social situations.

As noted above, we cannot separate language from "culturally construed" social situations (context). According to Halliday (1985/89), there are three elements of social situation: field, tenor



and mode. The three elements are closely related, interrelated and interdependent. They are all represented in any given text. The field refers to the social action, or to what is taking place or happening among participants of the discourse. The tenor refers to the participants, or who is/are taking part in the discourse, their statuses and roles. The mode refers to "what part the language is playing" (Halliday, 1985/89: 12). In addition, there are other sub-elements involved in the social context. For example, under tenor there is the "social distance", which is related to the status and roles of participants. This can be minimal or maximal, depending on the degree of familiarity among participants. There is also the sub-element "process sharing". A second sub-element under mode is the language role, whether it is "constitutive" or "ancillary".

There are also the channel (phonic/aural or graphic/visual), and the medium (spoken or written). What is the difference between these two elements? The term channel in this context "refers to the modality through which the addressee comes in contact with the speaker's [or addressee's] messages" (Hasan, 1985/89: 58). In other words, does the addressee get a message from his/her addresser phonically, through a telephone call or a talk for a professional group for instance which may take the form of a dialogue, or graphically, through a formal letter or a memo etc. which may take the form of a monologue? While process sharing is most active in the phonic channel where the addressee listens to (and sometimes communicates with) his/her addresser, it is almost passive in the graphic channel, unless there is collaborative writing and peer conferencing.

On the other hand, the term medium "refers to the patterning [of] the wordings themselves: for example, is there a degree of grammatical complexity or of lexical density?" (Hasan, 1985/89: 58). According to Hasan, "variation in medium - spoken versus written - is a product of variation in channel - phonic versus graphic" (P. 58). This indicates that a kind of relation between channel and medium may exist. In this way, using the phonic channel, for example, we may expect that the medium is a spoken one. Similarly, using the graphic channel, we may expect that the medium is a written one.

Method

The elements of social situation, mentioned above, form the basis of Hasan & Halliday's (1985/89) notion of *contextual configuration* (CC). Hasan defines the CC as "a set of values that realize field, tenor, and mode" (p. 55). Examples of such contextual configuration are: parent (tenor) - praising (field) - child (tenor) - in speech (mode), and employer (tenor) - blaming (field) - employee (tenor) - in writing (mode). Hasan postulates a strong relationship between the CC and *text structure* (TS). She proposes that the analysis of the systems of field, mode and tenor should form the basis for the prediction of structure of any text. She demonstrates this with an analysis of a minimal



selling/buying spoken text. Interestingly, Hasan recommends that the CC, or the social situation, of the text is analyzed before elements of structure are identified. In practice, her analysis appears to proceed from the text itself to the social situation, or the CC.

The CC analysis is attempted for four argumentative essays taken from two mini-corpora (successful and unsuccessful) written by university EFL students. The reason for undertaking this analysis is to investigate whether there are differences between EFL successful and unsuccessful texts in terms of contextual configuration and text structure. Figure 1 below summarizes the background of these texts in terms of the three elements and sub-elements of social context, i.e. the Contextual Configuration.

Figure 1: The Contextual Configuration of the Writing Task Assigned for EFL Students

Field (what): essay writing task: women's place (should women stay at home or go to work?)

Tenor (who): students as writers in a second language, and tutors as an audience

Social distance: minimal-maximal (although familiarity is available, the relationship is still formal).

Process sharing: audience comes to the product when it is finished.

Mode (how):

Language role: constitutive (argumentation)

Channel: graphic/visual

Medium: written/spoken

Analysis

In this section, the researcher will analyze the four selected texts, using the Contextual Configuration and text Structure analytical framework.

Successful Texts

The following two texts were selected randomly from the mini-corpus of successful texts:

Successful Text (A)

Women are an important element in any community because they have major tasks to perform and without which the community is destined to ruin. It is over these tasks that many people argue nowadays. Does the woman have to work in her home ? Or, does she have the choice to work



outside it? On my part, I support the former viewpoint. The woman should only work at home for several reasons- for her own benefit, for her husband, for her children and for the family's happiness and stability.

Physiologically speaking, the woman has not been created to take over big tasks. Her delicacy and weakness prevent her from performing hard work. Besides, as long as the man can support her and the family, she does not have to work.

Women are created to perform one great task and that is bringing up our children. What nobler task can one do more than this? This is the task that no man can perform alone. Actually, women are so lucky and so honored to have such a task.

Moreover, women have their husbands to take care of. The husband who has the responsibility of supporting and protecting the family. For him, the wife should bring about all sorts of restfulness and she should always be at hand to back him morally whenever he needs that.

Having these qualities, the wife can bring about happiness and stability for all the members of the family. And this is what all women should aim at, and this is what all women wish to have.

Successful Text (B)

Women are those humans whom any society rely on. They are considered to be the most efficient persons who play a great role in society. Since women have great roles in society, that is bringing up children and educate them, they are able to work effectively in any job outside their homes.

Women should work outside their homes to face many difficulties concerning their own life with their families. They should work in order to acquire the essential knowledge which helps them in teaching their children the right behavior they should follow. And the last reason is by working women will be able to build up a strong personality since they face different kinds of people with different culture.

Women should work to face different difficulties which arise during their upbringings in their family. For example, difficulties concerning their behavior they should do this or that because they are girls or women. So this kind of difficulty will arise another dangerous difficulty which is related to their personalities. So by work they are able to overcome this difficulty and be a different person.

Another reason for letting women work is to acquire the essential knowledge which helps them to teach their children. They will know the right way of teaching good morals since the children's age



or adults' is an important issue to decide the right way of teaching or learning. So work provides great knowledge and also experience to women.

The last reason is building up women's personalities. Since they work they will face different cultural people who will in a way or another, directly or indirectly affects women's personalities. They become courageous, strong brave, well-educated, well organized and self-confident.

Finally, I think women should have the chance to work outside their homes in order to let them face life difficulties easily and without problems.

Let us now see whether the elements of the Contextual Configuration are represented in the two texts above. With respect to field, both writers appear to succeed in presenting their topic clearly throughout the texts. In the first text, the writer is saying that women should stay at home, and s/he is stating the reasons why women should stay at home. In the second text, the writer is saying that women should leave their home and go to work, then s/he is stating the reasons why women should go to work.

As regards tenor, the participants are a student and a tutor, the student as a writer and the teacher as a reader or an audience. Although the relationship may be formal between the tutor and his/her student, the social distance is supposed to be minimal since there is some familiarity between a student and his/her teacher. However, when it comes to process sharing, it appears that the teacher as an addressee in this particular context is remote until the product is finished; there were not any discussions or peer conferences with the teacher during the process of writing.

As for mode, first, the language used in the two essays is constitutive, in the sense that the argument in the texts is developed properly and the ideas appear to flow smoothly. Second, the channel used by the writers of the texts is graphic and visual. Finally, the medium used in developing these successful texts is written, with good choice of grammar and lexical items.

The contextual configuration is identified first, then the second step is to predict text structure. First, we should take into our consideration the fact that EFL students are taught in their academic writing contexts that an essay should have the following text structure: an introduction or beginning, a middle and a conclusion or an end. In the introduction of their essay, students may initiate the topic, and state the thesis statement. In the middle, where there is usually more than one paragraph, students are required to support their thesis statement, using specific details, facts, and examples to persuade their audience. In the conclusion of their essay, students are expected to summarize and evaluate their topic.

The analysis yielded the following (tentative) elements of structure: (i) Initiation, (ii) Declaring position (thesis statement), (iii) Supporting position, and (iv) Conclusion/Evaluation. The criteria used for identifying these elements were as follows:

Initiation is identified by the use of one or more general statements introducing the main topic. The writer here uses general words or expressions relating to the topic, such as women, main tasks and community in Paragraph I of Successful Text (A).

Declaring position is identified by an explicit statement of position. Statements 5 and 6 in Figure 2 present the writer's position.

Supporting position is identified by specific statements and further details relating to the general idea(s) introduced in the thesis statement. This is represented by Paragraphs III, IV and V in Figure 2. For example, in Paragraph IV, the writer develops his/her idea of the importance of the woman staying at home for the sake of "her children", which was emphasized in the declaration of position (Statement 6).

The conclusion/evaluation is identified by a 'general' statement summarizing and evaluating the writer's position. 'Summary' words such as *finally* and *thus* are often used in this particular section.

Figure 2: Structure of Successful Text (A)

Paragraph I (sentences 1-4): Initiation

1. Women are an important element in any community because they have major tasks to perform and without which the community is destined to ruin.
2. It is over these tasks that many people argue nowadays.
3. Does the woman have to work in her home ?
4. Or, does she have the choice to work outside it?

Paragraph II (Sentences 5-6): Declaring position (Thesis statement or topic sentence)

5. On my part, I support the former viewpoint.
6. The woman should only work at home for several reasons- for her own benefit, for her husband, for her children and for the family's happiness and stability.

Paragraph III. (Sentences 7-9): Supporting position



7. Physiologically speaking, the woman has not been created to take over big tasks.
8. Her delicacy and weakness prevent her from performing hard work.
9. Besides, as long as the man can support her and the family, she does not have to work.

Paragraph IV. (Sentences 10-13): Supporting position

10. Women are created to perform one great task and that is bringing up our children.
11. What nobler task can one do more than this?
12. This is the task that no man can perform alone.
13. Actually, women are so lucky and so honored to have such a task.

Paragraph V. (Sentences 14-17): Supporting position

14. Moreover, women have their husbands to take care of.
15. The husband who has the responsibility of supporting and protecting the family.
16. For him, the wife should bring about all sorts of restfulness,
17. and she should always be at hand to back him morally whenever he needs that.

Paragraph VI. (Sentences 18-20): Conclusion and Evaluation

18. Having these qualities, the wife can bring about happiness and stability for all the members of the family.
19. And this is what all women should aim at,
20. and this is what all women wish to have.

As is seen in Figure 2 above, this successful text has six paragraphs. In the first paragraph, the student writer initiates the subject of the topic. In the second paragraph, s/he states his/her position in the form of a topic sentence or a thesis statement: *The woman should only work at home for several reasons- for her own benefit, for her husband, for her children and for the family's happiness and stability.* In the next four paragraphs, the student writer elaborates his/her topic sentence and supports his/her position. The final paragraph is a concluding paragraph in which the student summarizes and evaluates his/her argument.

Almost the same pattern may be observed if we apply the analysis of contextual configuration and text structure to the successful text (Text b) below. Since it is the same social situation, the same contextual configuration (Figure 1) applies to Text (b) here. With regard to text structure, we can see Paragraph I functioning as initiation. Paragraph II presents the writer's position in Sentence 4 which functions as a thesis statement or a topic sentence *Women should work outside their homes*

to face many difficulties concerning their own life with their families. Paragraphs III, IV and V support the topic sentence (the writer's position). The final paragraph (VI) is a concluding paragraph, in which the writer summarizes and evaluates his/her argument. Figure 3 below shows the text structure of Successful Text (B).

Figure 3: Structure of Successful Text (B)

Paragraph I (sentences 1-3): Initiation

1. Women are those humans whom any society rely on.
2. They are considered to be the most efficient persons who play a great role in society.
3. Since women have great roles in society, that is bringing up children and educate them, they are able to work effectively in any job outside their homes.

Paragraph II (Sentences 4-6): Declaring position (Thesis statement or topic sentence)

4. Women should work outside their homes to face many difficulties concerning their own life with their families.
5. They should work in order to acquire the essential knowledge which helps them in teaching their children the right behavior they should follow.
6. And the last reason is by working women will be able to build up a strong personality since they face different kinds of people with different culture.

Paragraph III. (Sentences 7-10): Supporting position

7. Women should work to face different difficulties which arise during their upbringings in their family.
8. For example, difficulties concerning their behavior they should do this or that because they are girls or women.
9. So, this kind of difficulty will [raise] another dangerous difficulty which is related to their personalities.
10. So by work they are able to overcome this difficulty, and be a different person.

Paragraph IV. (Sentences 11-13): Supporting position

11. Another reason for letting women work is to acquire the essential knowledge which helps them to teach their children.
12. They will know the right way of teaching good morals since the children's age or adults' is an important issue to decide the right way of teaching or learning.
13. So work provides great knowledge and also experience to women.

Paragraph V. (Sentences 14-16): Supporting position

14. The last reason is building up women's personalities.
15. Since they work they will face different cultural people who will in a way or another, directly or indirectly affects women's personalities.
16. They become courageous, strong brave, well-educated, well organized and self-confident.

Paragraph V. (Sentence 16): Summary and Evaluation

I6. Finally, I think women should have the chance to work outside their homes in order to let them face life difficulties easily and without problems.

Further, in the analysis of text structure, Hasan (1985/89) speaks about obligatory and optional elements contained in the text. In the above two texts, it appears that there is an optional element which is the initiation element (Paragraph I). It is possible for a student writer to begin his/her essay directly with a paragraph that states the topic sentence or the thesis statement. So, whether the first initiation paragraph was included or not in the above texts, the structure of the text would be achieved, since the topic sentence is stated in the second paragraph, supported in the following paragraphs, and summarized and evaluated in the final paragraph.

Unsuccessful Texts

Is the same contextual configuration and text structure used in the EFL mini-corpus of unsuccessful texts? In what follows, the researcher will analyze two texts selected randomly from the mini-corpus of the unsuccessful texts. First, here are the two texts:

Unsuccessful Text (A)

I think that a woman's place is only in the home. She has many responsibilities at home, that's why she is to stay in the home. She has to raise children and make out of them good ones. She has to look after her children when they are babies by feeding them, teaching them good morals as they grow older and older. By doing all of this, I believe, she is helping very much in having a good community. A woman teaches her boys to be brave men and teaches her daughters to be good wives and good mothers. On the other side, we have the man's role outside the home. His responsibility is to work outside the home, bring the money, and look after the whole family. In some communities people are asking for freedom to women to go outside the home and share the man his work and his responsibilities. In these communities, women, themselves, hate working



and they wish to have a family and stay with children at home because they are bored with such a dark life.

Unsuccessful Text (B)

Woman's place is in the home. I strongly believe in this because of capacity, society, and religion.

In my opinion woman is more capable to look after her family than man, she can bring up her children goodly because god give her this ability and the ability to be the organizer of the family. All these actions are suitable for woman and not for man because man is responsible for getting money and food for the family but when woman goes out of her home and work instead of man something wrong happens in the life system.

Secondly the society reject the going out of women from their homes to work. This action leads to bad results and leads men to be jobless because women occupy their jobs.

Thirdly our religion says that women should stay in their homes to look after their families and in order to protect herself from the bad persons because she is capable only for one job which is looking after her family.

In conclusion I say that women are challenging nature and religion in their going out of their homes to work. I see that homes are the suitable places of them.

What about the elements of the contextual configuration in the unsuccessful texts? Are they represented in the texts above? Let us see. With respect to field, the writers appear to present their topic throughout their texts, though not as clearly and successfully as the writers of the texts in Figures 2 and 3 above. For example, in the first text (Figure 4), the writer is saying that women should stay at home; however, s/he does not seem to develop the argument fully. S/he is only stating one reason why women should stay at home. S/he is saying that women should stay at home because they are needed to look after their children.

As for tenor, the participants are a student and an instructor, the student as a writer and the instructor as an audience. As noted above, since there is some familiarity between a student and his/her instructor, the social distance is supposed to be minimal. However, as we have noted above, when it comes to process sharing, it appears that the instructor in this particular writing task was remote until the product was finished. No discussions or peer conferences took place during the process of writing.

As regards mode, it appears that both writers failed to consider this respect. First, the language in the two essays should be constitutive, in the sense that the argument in the texts should be developed properly. Instead, the argument, especially in the text in Figure 4, is not sufficiently supportive to the writer's position. As for the second element of mode, the channel used by the writers of the two texts is graphic and visual. However, the medium used in developing these texts is not seen as typically and characteristically written; as noted in the texts, there are some spoken characteristics such as the frequent use of the modal adjuncts: *I believe*, *I think*; *I see*, and *In my opinion*.

However, with respect to text structure, the case seems to be somewhat different. First, as is seen above, Unsuccessful Text (A) does not seem to have paragraphing. The whole essay is written in one paragraph. However, examining the text carefully, we can identify boundaries which may indicate some kind of text structure. Sentence 1 appears to function as a thesis statement, in which the writer appears to state his/her position. Sentences 2-11 form the middle of the essay, where we can see the writer supporting his/her topic sentence and defending his/her position. Finally Sentences 12-14 seem to function as a conclusion for the essay, in which the writer tries to evaluate his/her argument above.

Figure 4: Text structure of Unsuccessful Text (A)

Sentence 1: Thesis statement and declaring position

1. I think that a woman's place is only in the home.

Sentences 2-11: Supporting position

2. She has many responsibilities at home,

3. that's why she is to stay in the home.

4. She has to raise children

5. and make out of them good ones.

6. She has to look after her children when they are babies by feeding them, teaching them good morals as they grow older and older.

7. By doing all of this, I believe, she is helping very much in having a good community.

8. A woman teaches her boys to be brave men

9. and teaches her daughters to be good wives and good mothers.

10. On the other side we have the man's role outside the home.

11. His responsibility is to work outside the home, bring the money, and look after the whole family.



Sentences 12-14: Conclusion and evaluation

12. In some communities people are asking for freedom to women to go outside the home and share the man his work and his responsibilities.

13. In these communities women, themselves, hate working

14. and they wish to have a family and stay with children at home because they are bored with such a dark life.

As regards the second unsuccessful text (Figure 7.5 below), Paragraph I appears to introduce the topic sentence and state the writer's position. In the second, third and fourth paragraphs, the writer supports his/her topic sentence and defends his/her position. In the concluding paragraph (Paragraph V), the writer summarizes and evaluates his/her argument.

Figure 5: Structure of Unsuccessful Text (B)

Paragraph I (Sentences 1-2): Introducing topic sentence and declaring position

1. Woman's place is in the home.

2.1 strongly believe in this because of capacity, society, and religion.

Paragraph II (Sentences 3-6): Supporting position

3. In my opinion woman is more capable to look after her family than man,

4. she can bring up her children goodly because god give her this ability and the ability to be the organizer of the family.

5. All these actions are suitable for woman and not for man because man is responsible for getting money and food for the family.

6. but when woman goes out of her home and work instead of man something wrong happens in the life system.

Paragraph III (Sentences 7-9): Supporting position

7. Secondly the society reject the going out of women from their homes to work.

8. This action leads to bad results

9. and leads men to be jobless because women occupy their jobs.

Paragraph IV (Sentence 10): Supporting position



10. Thirdly our religion says that women should stay in their homes to look after their families and in order to protect herself from the bad persons because she is capable only for one job which is looking after her family.

Paragraph V. (Sentences 11-12): Summary and Evaluation

11. In conclusion I say that women are challenging nature and religion in their going out of their homes to work.

12. I see that homes are the suitable places of them.

Conclusions

It would appear that Hasan's (1985/89) contextual configuration and text structure analysis has potential. It can to some extent be applied to indicate whether EFL writers consider the three elements of social context in their writing. It can also reveal how writers organize and structure their texts within the elements and sub-elements of contextual configuration: field, tenor, mode, language role, process sharing, channel and medium. This analysis can also reveal what optional or obligatory elements are used in text. For example, as we have noted above, the initiation element in argumentative essay writing is optional since a writer has the choice to start by introducing his/her topic sentence and stating his/her position. However, the other elements such as introducing the topic sentence, developing and evaluating the argument are obligatory.

Another characteristic feature of the CC analysis is its potential to expose linguistic aspects as well as rhetorical aspects of spoken and written discourse. For example, through the examination of the channel and medium used in the texts, we could see how EFL students chose certain lexical and grammatical items in constructing their texts. While good writers appear to succeed in developing their texts, using written-oriented linguistic choices, poor students fail to do so. As noted above, they develop their texts using some spoken-oriented linguistic choices. Further, the analysis of the four texts above indicates how, unlike the unsuccessful texts, the two successful texts have clear boundaries of structure.

However, the application of the CC analytical framework does not appear to reveal many specific linguistic characteristics of written discourse. Therefore, there is a need to look for other analytical frameworks, which may have the potential to reveal different linguistic and rhetorical aspects of



texts. Theme analysis, for instance, may be more comprehensive than the CC analysis, particularly in respect of revealing how texts are developed and constructed both locally and globally.

In conclusion, with respect to the global features which characterize EFL written texts, it was found through the use of Hasan's analysis of the CC and text structure that EFL students, especially the 'good' ones, appear to be aware of the elements of the CC, and organization and text structure. Examining the four essays selected randomly from the EFL written texts of the present study revealed the following elements of text structure: initiation, which is an optional element; thesis statement, in which the writer declares his/her position; developing the thesis statement and supporting the writer's position; and conclusion, in which the writer evaluates his/her position. Although the analysis of EFL written texts in the present study appears to provide a broad picture of the characteristic features of EFL Arab students' written essays and the nature of writing in EFL academic settings at tertiary levels, there may be a number of restrictions that might affect the generalizability of the findings reported above. For example, with regard to the sample of the study, it is clear that its size is relatively small. Therefore, further research taking into consideration larger-size samples and various text types and genres is recommended.

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