To Pass Or Not to Pass: Critical Features of Performance of GEPT Writing Tasks—Expository Writing at the Intermediate Level

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Abstract

Expository is a distinct type of text genre with its own particular textual dimensions which are culturally shaped. The present study investigated critical features of expository writings by Taiwanese EFL learners. It analyzed these features through a contrastive rhetoric perspective to identify the influence from L1. Three hundred and sixty expository writing samples of four different topics from the GEPT writing corpus provided by LTTC at the intermediate level were gathered and analyzed, 115 of them scoring five, 125 with a score of four, and the other 120 scoring three. Passing grades are four or above. Text analysis was applied as the research method. Analysis of the writing samples yielded a code list of 40 codes. Among these, 14 are error types related to within-sentence grammaticality, ten are error types related to word choice, seven of them are error types related to text coherence, cohesion and unity category, and the other five are features of rhetorical structure of expository writing. All the errors and features were counted, with 2734 error counts related to within-sentence grammaticality, 1837 error counts related to word choice, 354 error counts related to text coherence, cohesion and unity, and 468 feature counts related to rhetorical structure. The higher the writing score was, the fewer errors were identified. A comparison of error counts across score groups revealed that there is a subsumable relation between error types of the three score groups, which suggests that some types of errors are more persistent in the process of learning EFL writing. Errors related typos, collocations, verb forms, singular/plural, and correct word choice tend to persist into advanced EFL learners' writings with a score of five. In addition to these types of errors, the four-point writings also demonstrate errors related to the use of prepositions, determiners, run-on sentences, and dangling clauses. Writings that fail (with a score of three), beside the aforesaid error types, also contain errors related to ambiguity, semantic anomaly, incorrect format and breach of subject-verb agreement. As for features of rhetorical structure, the higher score the group has, the more features are exhibited. The three-point writings did not handle topic sentences and concluding sentences well, the latter in particular. The study also proposes three pedagogical implications. First, the teaching of grammar in EFL writing class can be made stage-wise. Second, in teaching English expository paragraph, it is important to instill in students knowledge of the rhetorical structure with a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, supporting details coming next and concluding sentences to end the writing. Third, as length is not an indicator of writing performance, instead of asking students to develop composition of a certain number of words, it is advisable to ask students to check if there are three parts in their writing—introduction, body and conclusion, so as to produce an expository conforming to the structure of English expository, which may help readers better understand the writing.