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October 13, 2014

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## Sequencing the Presentation of Grammar Items to Attract Student Interest

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### ABSTRACT

*The teaching of grammar is a challenging task as teachers need to present technical information about the language in such a way that would interest and attract the attention of students. In addition to the lesson itself, the presentation sequence of grammatical items as in the grammar syllabus can also influence how well students respond. Teachers often decide to present and focus on grammatical items to beginner, intermediate and advanced level students based on criteria such as level of difficulty and order of acquisition. Biber (1998), however, proposed that grammar should be presented according to narrative, informational and interactive text and argued that each of these three text types contains distinct grammatical features. He also emphasised that by using the text types, grammar could be presented in a more natural and meaningful way. This paper will report on a study in which students are asked to write the three text types based on the same stimulus. A major objective of the study is to examine whether the grammatical features Biber (1998) considers as distinct features of each text type is found in the students' writing. The findings of the study will have implications on how to effectively sequence the presentation of grammar items in Malaysian classrooms.*

**Keywords:** Grammar; Curriculum; TESL; Genre pedagogy

### 1.0 Introduction

The presentation of grammar in the classroom is challenging for many teachers. In order to make grammar more palatable to the students, many language educators suggest that grammar should be presented in context as this allows the students to make a quick and direct connection between grammar and language use. Context also provides greater emphasis on meaning instead of solely focusing on the rules of grammar. For many teachers, the texts used in a grammar lesson in the classroom provide a useful context for presenting grammar.

Biber (1988) describes three major text types – interactive, informational and narrative – and claims that certain grammatical forms are more prevalent in one text type than another. For example, in interactive texts, modal auxiliaries such as *can* as well as first and second person pronouns are used frequently. On the other hand, informational texts contain longer noun phrases as well as participial forms of the verb. Finally, third person pronouns and conjunctions tend to appear more frequently in narrative texts.

The tendency for specific grammatical structures to appear more frequently in a particular text type suggests that the presentation of grammatical structures can be organized according to clusters of structures based on text types as is proposed by Byrd (1998). This method of organization differs from the more traditional sequencing of grammatical structures which according to Byrd (1998) is based on

“(1) notions of linguistic interconnectedness – which things must be learned in preparation for the next higher level and (2) notions of easiness and difficulty – which structures are easier or harder for students to learn” (p.69). Linguistic interconnectedness, therefore, may imply that verbs need to be taught before adverbs. Similarly, the notion of easiness and difficulty may lead to teaching the present tense before the past as the former contains the base form of the verb while the latter includes an inflection.

The traditional method of sequencing grammar, however, contains inherent problems because of the notions that form its basis as well as the consequent need to divide up the grammar into beginner, intermediate and advanced levels. Byrd (1998) notes that “teachers find that they need to teach grammar that is supposed to be delayed to a higher level; they also find that students do not yet have ‘mastery’ of grammar that they were supposed to have learned at a lower proficiency level.” (p. 71). In dealing with any authentic material presented in the classroom, students will constantly face grammatical structures that they are not expected to learn at their level. For example, adverbs will often be found together with verbs but presented at a later level. The traditional curriculum also implies mastery of one form before moving on to the next but it will be impractical to expect students to master the fairly complicated English verb system before they are introduced to adverbs.

The use of text types as the organizing principle behind the presentation of grammar brings immediate benefits especially in terms of providing a natural and authentic context for teaching and learning grammar. Clusters of grammatical structures can be organized according to the text types which then expose the students to grammar that is required to interact with the text and to complete tasks related to the text. It is this potential benefit that drives this study as it investigates the suggestion that grammatical structures are strongly linked to text types. More specifically, this study examines whether this link is reflected in the essays written by Malaysian university students.

## 2.0 Methodology

Twenty-four second year students from the B.Ed Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme in a Malaysian public university were involved in the study and were asked to write three essays as an extra credit assignment for one of their courses. However, as only 20 of these students wrote all three essays, the analysis in this study was therefore conducted only on the three essays these 20 students wrote.

The students were asked to write three essays based on a picture stimulus taken from a study by Arshad Abd.Samad et al. (2002) which is included in Appendix 1. The students were asked to write a narrative, followed by a report, and then a conversation. Essays were assigned after a period of two weeks and were e-mailed to the researcher when completed. Essays were not graded, returned to the students nor discussed in class.

The essays were then analysed according to the use of selected vocabulary and grammatical structures considered representative of a particular text type or discourse as indicated by the literature (see Biber, 1988; Love, 2014). These vocabulary and grammatical structures were the third person objective pronoun *her* and the coordinating conjunction *and* which were considered common in narrative texts; the relative pronoun *who* and the auxiliary *has/have* in present participial forms of the verb which are indicative of informational texts; and the first person subjective pronoun *I* as well as the modal *can* to represent interactive or conversational texts.

The first step in the analysis of the essays was to ensure that the essays written by the students would be representative of the types of text studied. Therefore, since many of the assignments included information such as the names of the students, their student number and the course code, these information were deleted. Additionally, names of interlocutors as well as prose to describe setting and events as a prelude to the conversation were also deleted as they were not part actual

conversation. The essays were then loaded into a concordance software to analyse the difference in the frequency of use of the words selected according to the three different text types. A further detailed analysis of the use of some of these words was also conducted.

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of the six grammatical structures that were analysed according to their occurrence in the three text types. Percentages are calculated according to the total number of words that appear in a text type.

The analysis of the frequency of use of the six selected structures in the students' essays indicates that the structures are generally used more often in text types they were intended to represent. It must be noted that the analysis does not provide evidence that the differences are statistically significant and they may therefore only have occurred by chance. However, the consistent results support the claim that certain grammatical structures are inclined to appear in a particular text type more often than in others. Only in one example (*has/have* auxiliary) was there a mismatch between expected and actual results.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of occurrence of structures according to text type

Text	<u>Narrative structures</u>		<u>Informational structures</u>		<u>Interactive structures</u>	
	<i>her</i>	<i>and</i> (coord conj)	<i>who</i> (Rel. pron)	<i>Has/have</i> (auxiliary)	<i>I</i> (first pers. subj.pron)	<i>Can</i> (modal)
Narrative (7,895 words)	143 <u>1.533%</u>	285 <u>3.609%</u>	18 0.227%	9 0.114%	81 1.025%	11 0.139%
Informational (5,879 words)	78 1.204%	126 2.143%	37 <u>0.629%</u>	9 0.153%	28 0.476%	5 0.085%
Interactive (4,265 words)	46 1.078%	64 1.500%	5 0.117%	9 <u>0.211%</u>	146 <u>3.423%</u>	21 <u>0.492%</u>

N/B: The underlined percentages represent the highest occurrence for the three text types; the shaded areas are where occurrences are expected to be highest.

The results are even more interesting when we consider that they are based on language produced by the students rather than texts presented to the students. This indicates that the students themselves may associate use of certain structures more with one text type compared to another.

A second form of analysis in this study involves a more careful examination of the use of the selected structures in the three text types by a randomly selected student referred to here as S19. These essays are included in Appendix 2 and the frequency distribution of the six grammatical structures is presented in Table 2 below.

The frequency distribution indicates that S19 did not use any *has/have* auxiliary verbs and *can* modals in her three essays. It is also indicated that, as expected, the first person pronoun is used only in the interactive essay. Also as predicted, the relative pronoun *who* is used more often (twice) in the informational essay compared to the interactive essay (once) and the narrative essay (none). It is in the narrative structures *her* and *and*, however, that we find the most unexpected results. Both these structures are used more often in the interactive essay rather than in the narrative essay.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of occurrence of structures according to text type for S19.

Text	<u>Narrative structures</u>		<u>Informational structures</u>		<u>Interactive structures</u>	
	<i>her</i>	<i>and</i> (coord conj)	<i>who</i> (Rel. pron)	<i>Has/have</i> (auxiliary)	<i>I</i> (first pers. subj.pron)	<i>Can</i> (modal)

Narrative (342 words)	7 2.046%	5 1.461%	0	0	0	0
Informational (286 words)	4 1.398%	8 2.797%	2 <u>0.699%</u>	0	0	0
Interactive (275 words)	7 <u>2.545%</u>	7 <u>2.545%</u>	1 0.363%	0	3 <u>1.090%</u>	0

N/B: The underlined percentages represent the highest occurrence for the three text types; the shaded areas are where occurrences are expected to be highest.

In a more careful examination of the interactive essay in Appendix 2, however, it becomes clear that these structures are used in narrating an incident. The following excerpt is taken from the essay:

There were three boys who were happened to be at the scenes. Based on their story, while the girl was picking flower, a bee flew and stop on her back, her friend tried to chase the bee away, but her hand happened to pushed the girl, and caused her to fall into the lake. The friend then shouted for help. One of the three boys jumped into the lake and dragged her to the lake's side, and the other two helped to pull the girl up on the land, run to call for the ambulance, unfortunately, she was already unconscious, and she was said dead when the ambulance came.

Although the essay was meant to be conversational, the student has adopted a more narrative style in relating the incident. This narrative style uses a disproportional amount of the coordinating conjunction *and* as well as the third person objective pronoun *her*. In natural conversation, one might expect that this rather lengthy utterance would be interrupted and broken up into several exchanges. This would lead to the use of more simple sentences – and consequently the reduction of the number of coordinating conjunctions – as well as the need to refresh the references using the noun phrase *The girl* more often instead of the pronoun *her*.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

The results of this study show that the language produced by Malaysian university students in producing three text types supports a suggested link between grammatical structures and text types. This link can justify the use of text types as a basis of organization in presenting grammatical structures instead of the more traditional mode of sequencing based on notions of linguistic interconnectedness as well as ease and difficulty. From a learning perspective, students will also be expected to benefit from this alternative form of sequencing grammar structures as the structures will be presented in a more authentic and meaningful context where they are immediately needed either to produce or interpret texts.

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### Appendix 1: Picture Stimulus.



### Appendix 2: Sample Essay for Each Text Type

#### Narrative Essay Sample: Student 19

Swee Lin and Nadia are best friends. They always spend their time together. Despite of their friendship, Nadia was always jealous with Swee Lin. She hated Swee Lin because she is pretty, clever and the teacher's pet in school. On one sunny day, Swee Lin and Nadia went for a flower picking. Swee Lin wanted to pick flowers to bring it to her grandmother's grave. They decided to go to a lake near to the park which situated not too far away from their house. There is lot of pretty flowers at the park, especially at the lake's bank.

At the park, both of them picked the flowers happily. They enjoy picking the flowers so much. While picking the flowers around the park, Swee Lin told Nadia that she saw a very pretty yellow flower at the lake's bank, when Swee Lin saw the flower after Nadia pointed to the flower, Swee Lin immediately liked it. Both of them walked to the flower. Once they reached the lake's bank, Nadia said that her hand is full with flowers, so, she asked Swee Lin to pick the flower. The moment Swee Lin tried to pick the flower, Nadia pushed Swee Lin into the lake. Swee Lin did not know how to swim, she was drowning. Nadia pretend to shouted for help. Three boys that happened to be there for fishing rushed to Nadia when they she shouted for help. One of the boys jumped into the lake. He swam toward Swee Lin and pulled her to the lake's bank. The other two boys helped to pulled her out of the lake. The moment Swee Lin was on the land, she immediately stood up and slapped Nadia. She was so angry that Nadia pushed her into the lake. She said she knew that Nadia pushed her from the back.

Since that moment, they were never a best friend. Swee Lin never forgives Nadia for what she had done to her. Nadia also never apologize to Swee Lin. They never talked to each other anymore.

#### Informational Text Sample Essay : Student 19

A happy moment of a 13 old girl had become a tragedy when she is in coma after she was pushed by her own friend into a lake. Swee Lin, 13 years old girl, and her friend, Nadia, 13 years old, as being told by their parents, were planning to go for a flower picking near the lake, situated only one kilometer from their house.

The victim was told that she slipped her feet while picking flowers that was right on the lake's bank, before she fell into the lake and drowned. Her friend, Nadia, as told by a boy and his friends, who happened to be at the lake, she was shouting for help when Swee Lin fell into the lake. One of the boys, Zali Ahmad, 17 years old, plunged into the water and tried to save Swee Lin, but, Swee Lin, by the time he dragged her onto the lake, she was already unconscious. About 15 minutes later, ambulance came, after another boy called, and the victim was brought to hospital, and now in coma because she swallows too much water while drowning.

After an investigation being done at the place of the case, it was discovered that, she didn't slipped herself, but was pushed into the lake. A witnessed, which is also one of the three boys who happened to be there, Thinagaran a/l Muthu, 17 years old, reported that, he saw Nadia pushed Swee Lin into lake while she is picking flower by the lake's bank. After being interrogated, Nadia finally admitted his wrongdoing, and was brought to court for a case of trial of murdering. She was brought to Juvana's school and will undergoing her punishment at the school.

Interaction Essay Sample: Student 19 (Interlocutor names were deleted prior to corpus analysis)

Kamal : Raju, yesterday, when I was on my way back from the shop, I saw many people were gathering at the lake behind our neighbourhood. There were also police car and ambulance. What happen?

Raju : Oh! A girl drowned in the lake yesterday. She died before the ambulance arrived at the scene.

Kamal : Dear God! What a poor little girl. How old is she? How did she get drowned?

Raju : She was 15 years old. People said that she fell into the lake while picking flowers with her friend, but in the news that I read, it said that she was unintentionally pushed into the lake.

Kamal : What? She was pushed? It couldn't possibly be her friend! If it's true, why would she do that? And, what do you mean by she was unintentionally pushed?

Raju : There were three boys who were happened to be at the scenes. Based on their story, while the girl was picking flower, a bee flew and stop on her back, her friend tried to chase the bee away, but her hand happened to pushed the girl, and caused her to fall into the lake. The friend then shouted for help. One of the three boys jumped into the lake and dragged her to the lake's side, and the other two helped to pull the girl up on the land, run to call for the ambulance, unfortunately, she was already unconscious, and she was said dead when the ambulance came.

Kamal : Oh, what a tragic event! What happen to the girl's friend then?

Raju : The news said, she was brought to police station for the statement, what a poor little girl! Let's hope that she wouldn't be charged!