DISCOURSE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF ESL LEARNERS
AT THE BASIC EDUCATION LEVEL

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Abstract: Studies showed that the learners’ interlanguage exhibits acquisition order and developmental pattern. Empirical evidence of systematicity was provided by morpheme studies which led to the postulation of natural order hypothesis. This study aimed to determine the development of discourse skills as revealed in the written narratives of elementary pupils in three grade levels. It also aimed to find out if the development of discourse skills among the English as Second Language (ESL) learners follows a natural order as in the acquisition of morphemes. The longitudinal study presented and encapsulated a description of the development that the pupils go through in the acquisition of macro and micro discourse skills, as reflected in their written narratives in Grade 4, Grade 5, and Grade 6. Particularly it utilized the narrative compositions of 74 pupils when they were in Grades 4, 5 and 6, which yielded the discourse features that provided the corpus of this study. The variability and systematicity in the narratives were described and explained in the light of the Variable Competence Model of Ellis (1988) which distinguishes the process from product. The product refers to the narratives of the learners while the process refers to how the learners use their second language (L2) knowledge in writing. Consequently, insights into the natural order development were gained from the devices used in signaling the narrative compositions. Moreover, this study is concerned with variability since it accounts for developmental stages which the learners go through in the acquisition of macro and micro discourse skills. In analyzing the narrations on the macro level, Labov’s (1976) model was adopted. It has six sections, namely: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda. For analyzing discourse at the micro level, Hoey’s (1983) model was utilized. It has six clause-relations, namely: cause-consequence, condition-consequence, instrument-achievement, sequentially, compatibility and contrast. The group scores of learners in the aforementioned sections and structures revealed the sequence of development across grade levels. Likewise, systematicity was reflected where acquisition occurred. Form-function relationship was only established when they were in grades 5 and 6. The extended analysis used the implicational scaling or the scalogram to find out whether within a group of functions or forms, each one was acquired according to a systematic pattern. A scale showed an invariant sequence in three stages. The scalogram suggested that the presence of functions and forms in stage 2 implies the presence of functions and forms in stage 1, but not in stage 3. The available evidence supports the position that there are developmental stages in the acquisition of discourse skills reflecting the natural order or sequence. The data generate systematicity behind the route of development of functions and forms. The sequence of development is influenced by age since different functions and forms occur at different stages. The macro discourse functions acquired systematically were orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution. On the other hand, the micro discourse structures acquired systematically were cause-consequence, compatibility and sequentially. It is desired that this study can offer an impeccable impetus for further research in the functional perspective. Additional researches should focus on other genres such as description, exposition and argumentation to address critically the concern of language development. Furthermore, this language longitudinal qualitative research could be replicated to confirm or refute the findings and to gain deeper theoretical insights into the issue of discourse development.

Key words: Acquisition, Discourse Skills, Functions, Narrative discourse macro pattern, Narrative discourse micro pattern, Sequence, Systematic variability, Variability.
Background of the Study

The integrated system of language and how it may be acquired entails three distinct perspectives: the nature of language and language use, the nature of language acquisition and language learning and, finally, pedagogical orientations on how language might be taught (Francisco 1994). According to Klein (1987), the first perspective focuses on the code and the uses to which it might be put. The second considers the learner and the process he goes through as he acquires the language. The third perspective underscores language teaching. It is to the second of the three perspectives that the present research is addressed.

Widdowson (1983) claimed, “Little attention has been paid to the way sentences are used in combination to form stretches of connected discourse.” This implies that in the classroom, the teacher’s view of language is essentially knowledge of the syntactic structure of sentences. This perspective is happening in the educational system, particularly in the primary and secondary levels of education (Madrid 1996).

It is a reality, as confirmed by educators, that an average student has considerable difficulty coping with language in its normal communicative use. This problem requires a new orientation not only in teaching but also in research.

What this orientation dictates is a change of focus from the sentence as the basic unit of study to the use of a series of sentences in a discourse. In short, there is a need to study the nature of discourse. Hymes (1971) suggested that there should be a shift from grammatical competence to emphasis on the discourse skills.

In the communicative competence framework by Canale and Swain (1980), discourse competence: ...involves mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres... Unity of text is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesion deals with how utterances are linked structurally to facilitate interpretation of a text. Coherence refers to the relationship among the different meanings, communicative functions, or social meanings.

Where language acquisition is concerned, Hatch (1986) stressed that it is not enough to look at input and to look at frequency of occurrences. Instead, it is important to look at the corpus as a whole and examine discourse to determine the frequency of forms and how it shows language function evolving. This implies the trend from a product-oriented view to a process-oriented view of second language acquisition (SLA).

This study is part of an important trend in the discipline which takes a discourse-oriented look at writing development. This approach is a response to a need for interlanguage research in functional perspective.

Thus, in this view, the researcher investigated the development of form and functions in learners’ interlanguage and aimed to find out if the natural order which has been observed with morphemes is also a phenomenon in the acquisition of discourse skills.

Language teachers are amazed at how Filipino elementary pupils acquire L2, like English, in a few years of formal classroom exposure to it. The researcher looked into the systematicity and variability of skills to describe the way the learners arrive at establishing correspondence between form and function in the second language as reflected in the written narratives of pupils.

Narratives are believed to be the written mode which young writers are comfortable with. Halliday (1988) said that writing narratives is the most preferred channel of communication among children to express their ideas and emotions. In addition, Brown (1984) said, “The narrative is the first structure for extending texts that children acquire and one that many basic writers handle with ease.” Thus, narratives are good sources of discourse for analyzing their macro and micro structures.
Van Dijk (1986) made a distinction between the macro and micro discourse skills. The macro discourse is concerned with a more global level of semantic description which defines the meaning of parts of a discourse and of the whole discourse on the basis of the meanings of the individual sentence or sequence of sentences. Macro skills refer to the peripheral and obligatory elements of a narration namely: abstract and coda (peripheral elements); orientation, complication, evaluation and resolution (obligatory elements). Micro skills, on the other hand, refer to the use of six rhetorical patterns namely: cause–consequence, instrument–achievement, condition–consequence, sequentially, compatibility and contrast.

In this paper, the acquisition of narrative skills by learners of English in three grades in the basic education level was examined. Insights into the route of learning of macro and micro discourse skills was gained by investigating the learner’s variability in using different linguistic signals to realize certain functions. Thus, a description of the sequential learning of discourse skills in the English written narratives of pupils was clearly presented. This study looked into the development of discourse skills in English written narratives of pupils at the basic education level in the Philippines. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions: 1) what macro discourse skills are reflected in the English written narratives of pupils and at which grade level do these macro discourse skills become systematic?; 2) what micro discourse skills are reflected in the English written narratives of pupils and at which grade level do these micro discourse skills become systematic?; and 3) how do these discourse skills develop among ESL learners in the basic education level?

Since the developmental sequence of discourse skills in the L2 learning process is the focus of this study, it analyzed the English written narratives in composition notebooks of the pupils which were collected during the first term by the English teachers from SY 2004-2005 to SY 2006-2007. cause-consequence, compatibility, contrast and sequentially.

Using the written narratives of the learners in the three grade levels, forms and signals were examined to study the discourse skills present at a given grade level and to describe the pattern of discourse development.

This longitudinal descriptive study used the variable competence model which consists of: 1) an account of the variable nature of linguistic devices signaling functions in narratives at the macro and micro levels, 2) a description of variability, and 3) a description of the route of discourse development in the light of the natural order theory.
Figure 1. Research Paradigm.

Macro Discourse Skills
- Abstract
- Orientation
- Complication
- Resolution
- Evaluation
- Coda

Micro Discourse Skills
- Cause-Consequence
- Instrument-Achievement
- Condition-Consequence
- Compatibility
- Contrast
- Sequentially

Pattern of Discourse Development

WRITTEN NARRATIVE

[4]
Methodology

This is a descriptive study of second language acquisition (SLA) using the functional model (Pfaff 1987), natural order theory (Krashen 1980) and the clause relation approach (Hoey 1983) to written discourse analysis. It is a longitudinal qualitative study of the macro and micro discourse patterns of written narratives, and, signals that represent functions, in order to understand the pattern of discourse skills development of pupils at three grade levels in the basic education level. The locus of this study is 74 pupils in the Basic Education level. The 74 pupils came from one group of learners because it aimed to study the development of discourse skills reflected in the narratives of ESL learners who went through the three grade levels, namely; grades 4, 5 and 6.

The collected written narratives of the same group of pupils when they were in grades 4, 5 and 6 provided the corpus for the study. Specifically, the data consisted of the compositions of pupils during the first term in grades 4, 5 and 6; SY 2004-2005, 2005-2006, and 2006-2007, respectively.

Data analysis was undertaken on two levels: the macro discourse level, to determine the occurrence and non-occurrence of the six structures, and the micro discourse level, to determine clause relations existing between sentences or sequence of sentences. The data analysis focused on three concerns, namely:

A. Macro Discourse Analysis
   - Occurrence of Macro Discourse Structures
   - Identification of the Discourse Functions
   - Variability of Discourse Functions

B. Micro Discourse Analysis
   - Signaling the Micro Discourse Structures
   - Identification of the Linguistic Signals
   - Variability of Linguistic Signals

C. Pattern of Development
   - Macro Discourse Pattern
   - Micro Discourse Pattern

The coding system devised by Halliday and Hassan (1976) was used to record the functions and signals in macro and micro structures. The author adopted the concept of Brown (1973) wherein each discourse structure is considered as test item and each function was scored as follows: in macro structure, non-occurrence means zero (0) point, occurrence means one (1) point; while in micro structure, no signal supplied means zero (0) point, marked sequence means one (1) point and, unmarked sequence means two (2) points.

To determine the acquisition sequences, group score method (Dulay and Burt 1982) was used. The group score was obtained as follows: First, add the expected scores across all pupils in the grade level; second, divide the total actual score by the expected score; and third, multiply the result by 100. This will yield the group’s percentage of accuracy in producing the structure.

For evaluation, the percentage of occurrence for grade 6 was computed as follows:

\[
\text{Non-occurrence (–)} = 9 \\
\text{Occurrence (+)} = 36 \\
\text{Total} = 45
\]

\[
\frac{\text{Actual score}}{\text{Expected score}} \times 100 = \frac{36}{45} \times 100 = 80 \%
\]

With the use of the obtained scores using the group score method, the structures were ranked according to decreasing group score from which their acquisition sequence may be inferred using the scale of Pavesi (1987).
The pattern of development as sequence of acquisition discourse skills among elementary ESL learners was described using the scalogram or implicational scaling. A plus (+) sign meant that the function was signaled correctly (80%–100%) and therefore acquired systematically at that grade level. A minus sign (-) meant that signaling the function was below 80%, the acquisition level set for this study which was also the limit used by Pavesi (1987) and Corder (1975).

A minus–plus (⫹) means a move away from randomness (-) towards systematicity. A plus-minus (⫷) sign means that the function-form correspondence becomes more regular indicating a move even closer to systematicity (+).

Findings
The discourse structure of the narrative was examined on two levels – the macro discourse level and the micro discourse level. The analysis revealed that there is an invariant sequence of the discourse structures both at the macro and micro levels.

Acquisition increases with grade level as reflected in the obligatory structures in Table 1 such as orientation, complication, evaluation and resolution. Signaling orientation and complication structures becomes systematic as early as grade 4 while evaluation and resolution becomes systematic at grade 6 where spurts in the developmental stages were quite noticeable.

Table 1. Macro discourse development pattern across grade levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro Discourse Structures</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complication</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>⫷</td>
<td>⫷</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>⫹</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>⫹</td>
<td>⫷</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>⫹</td>
<td>⫹</td>
<td>⫷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: - Variable + More Variable than Systematic + Systematic ± More Systematic than Variable
On the other hand, the signals for both *abstract* and *coda* remain variable across grade levels. The peripheral structures of narrations such as *abstract* and *coda* remained variable and cannot be said to have been acquired as far as the macro discourse pattern is concerned. On the other hand, the obligatory structures of narratives are acquired and systematic at different grade levels.

The analysis of written narratives projected the sub-level types of structures and functions which the learners used themselves. The results reflected the choices made by the learners at the discourse level. The younger learners preferred the use of the nuclear abstract which consists of summarizing, advertising and heralding events. The older learners (grades 5 and 6) used both nuclear and expanded abstracts. However, the grade 6 pupils preferred to use the expanded form of more than two units signaling a combination of functions: summarizing, advertising and heralding events.

The *codas* the learners used are of three types. Type 1 or *formulaic expressions* were used across levels. Type 2 or *predicting future action* was used more frequently at grades 5 and 6 while type 3 or *pointing to a lesson* was used randomly from grades 4 to 6.

Obligatory structures such as *orientation*, *complication*, *evaluation* and *resolution* are acquired at different grade levels. Two kinds of *orientation* were used by the learners. *Partial type* was used across grade levels but its occurrence diminished with age. *Complete type* was used across grade levels with occurrence increasing with age and became systematic at grade 5.

Two types of devices were used to signal *complication*. Implicit devices occurred randomly at grade 4 but become systematic at grades 5 and 6. *Order of mention* occurred systematically across levels while *expectancy chains* occurred systematically at grades 5 and 6. Of the types of devices identified for this study, *order of mention* and *expectancy chains* are the most preferred by all of the pupils in this study. The learners at grade 5 used *scaffolding* but was abandoned later to be replaced by *contrasting events* and *implicit reference* which remained variable in the upper grades.

*Evaluation* is developed with the use of *external* and *internal* forms across grade levels. However, *attributing* was the only function which became systematic at grade 6 while other signals remained random across grade levels. From grade 5, the learners began to move away from randomness as the function appeared more frequently in the narratives of the learners.

*Resolution* expresses the solution to the problem. The learners used three types of signals. All types were used only at grades 5 and 6. Type 1 expresses *outcome* which was the only form preferred by the grade 4 learners in this study. Type 2 expresses both *outcome* and *solution* which is the least preferred form. Type 3 expresses both *outcome* and *solution* which was used systematically by the learners at grade 6.

There are six types of clause relations or micro discourse structures evident in the narratives of the learners. The micro discourse structures are classified into two: logical relations and matching classified relations. Logical relations consist of *cause-consequence*, *instrument-achievement*, *condition consequence* and sequentially.

*Cause-consequence* is signaled by the learners using syntactic signals *so* and *because*. Type 1 (*so*) became systematic at grade 5 and remained systematic at grade 6. Type 2 (*because*) became systematic only at grade six. *Cause-consequence* is also signaled lexically. However, only *collocation* and *repetition* were employed by grade 4 learners. All the lexical structures appeared randomly at grade 5. However, *near synonyms, synonyms, superordinate’s, collocation and repetition* became systematic at grade 6.

*Instrument-Achievement* is another causal relation where instrument is conveyed by signals such as *by +-ing* or *by this means* in answer to *how*. On the other hand, the question *what was the result?* is used to convey achievement.
The pupils in this study showed reliance on semantic forms in signaling this function. Beside repetition which was used across levels, the learners employed all the forms except superordinate’s as devices to represent instrument-achievement. Not a single of the signals was acquired at any grade level.

Condition-consequence was signaled syntactically using forms such as if, when, then, and since. In this study, these forms appeared randomly across grade levels. Likewise, the function was signaled semantically using the signals at all grade levels but not a single device occurred systematically.

Sequentially shows relations between two successive events as one of sequence in time. All the syntactic signals were used across grade levels and appeared systematically at different grade levels.

The result also revealed the learners’ reliance on semantic signals to realize sequentially. Only superordinate and repetition appeared at grade 4 and remained variable across grade levels.

Matching relations includes compatibility and contrast. The pupils in this study used several functions to express compatibility. Each function was inferred from a set of syntactic devices used in signaling compatibility such as also, too, indeed, in fact, such as, like and in other words.

The function conveying intensification and exemplification emerge as early as grade 4 but were used randomly until grade 6. The signal in addition to appeared at grade 4 but became systematic at grade 5. Semantic signals were used across grade levels and they became systematic only at grade 6.

Contrast simply means incompatibility and unexpectedness. It also conveys concession or corrective function. Contrast is signaled syntactically using different devices such as but, although, however, on the other hand, in spite of and instead. Unexpectedness was the only device that occurred at grade 4 and appeared regularly across levels. Other functions such as corrective and concession emerge later in grade 5. The semantic signals for contrast never appeared at grade four but occurred at grades 5 and 6 randomly.

Although there are variations, the sequences obtained from the three groups of learners reflect a developmental pattern. This trend suggests natural orders in the acquisition of macro and micro discourse skills.

The acquisition order for the macro and micro structures are grouped to identify groups of functions and signals which are acquired roughly at the same time and to determine the order in which each group is acquired. The resulting order is an acquisition hierarchy which is based on the acquisition levels computed from the frequency of occurrence of structures and signals. In this study a structure is acquired if it was signaled correctly 80% of the occurrences.

The language change over grade levels and time occurs in three stages with each stage consisting of functions and signals. The hierarchy shows that the functions and signals in Stage 1, complication and sequentially, are acquired before all the functions and signals in the stages after it. The functions and signals in Stage 2, orientation, complication, compatibility and cause-consequence are acquired after those in Stage 1 but before those in Stage 3, evaluation, sequentially, cause-consequence and contrast. The reverse also holds the acquisition of the functions and signals in Stage 3 implies the acquisition of the items in stages 1 and 2.

Likewise, the graph (Fig. 2) shows a proposition that other functions - instrument-achievement, condition-consequence and contrast remain variable from grade 4 to grade 6 levels except the former which is acquired at the grade 6 levels. It is very apparent that the resulting sequence at the three grade levels a developmental trend which is a positive
indicator that indeed natural order is a phenomenon observable in discourse skills as it is in morphemes. This finding shows that natural order of acquisition is likewise an observed phenomenon in micro discourse skills aside from morphemes. It emphasized that the six micro discourse skills of L2 learners expressed as complex propositions which is entailed by the copula of sequences in the narratives are acquired in natural order, same manner with the sequence of acquisition in morphemes.

Figure 2. The Sequence of Micro Structures Across Term Levels.
Conclusions

The micro discourse structures acquired systematically at different grade levels were the following: cause-consequence, compatibility, and sequentially. On the other hand, the macro discourses acquired systematically were orientation, complication, evaluation and resolution.

Semantic and syntactic signals perform functions in the discourse organization. The present study reveals that the learners have more difficulty in using semantic signals than syntactic signals because more semantic signals were missed and not used yet at the lower grades. This is inconsistent with the finding of Francisco (1994) stating that learners have more difficulty in using syntactic devices.

The acquisition of macro and micro discourse skills follow the natural order of development.

The functional approach to interlanguage reveals how learners use the resources of written language to convey meanings in discourse. The analysis of the written narratives uncovers how the learners demonstrate their competence and the deliberate choices they make in response to the communicative situation. Understanding the interlanguage is enhanced by the functional approach which considers beyond markers or morphological devices.

The clause relational approach which is used by the author in analyzing micro discourse structures explains many aspects of the writing acquisition process. Young writers make random and variable use of the signals. However, the learners acquire some of the structures as they move to the higher grade level. This phenomenon is likewise evidence to the claim of Halliday (1978) that second language learners tend to acquire naturally discourse structures. The learners presented evidence of a learner’s growth-in-progress.

Recommendations

The findings and conclusions of the study suggest some pedagogical directions and implications.

The developmental stages in the language acquisition would help determine the learnability or teachability of the linguistic items. Learning objectives can be sequenced in terms of the functions and linguistic signals that the learner is expected to use accurately according to the established natural order for their acquisition. This research recommends those macro and micro signals which appeared systematically should serve as guide for sequencing the syllabus or lesson plans of teachers. The variable functions and signals may be integrated at any point in the developmental cycle or stage. This suggestion is likewise confirmed by Pienemann (1985) when he says:

... aspects of language which appear to have universal pattern of development can be taught most successfully, if they are presented in the sequence which respects the natural order observed in the L2 acquisition of learners.

Language teachers must be aware of the natural order in macro and micro skills acquisition to help them speed up the acquisition process for the ESL learners.

Learners should have regular exposure to different genres noting the kinds of discourse signals. Taxonomy of signals should be made available to the learners. Linguistic signals (such as conjunctions, cohesive, devices, etc.) should be incorporated into the learner’s vocabulary as early as possible. Learners should be encouraged to develop sensitivity to the ways in which the various relationships between lexical items may themselves contribute to creating discourse. To give proper intervention, teachers of ESL learners must be aware and sensitive to the stages (e.g. the three stages in this study) the learners are in during the acquisition process. Acquired macro and micro
elements must be sustained while those which are variable must be intensively taught across grade levels.

Additional research should focus not only on analysis of narration but also include other genre such as argumentation and exposition to establish more extensively the description of the developmental trend and stage in discourse acquisition.

Another study could focus on the effect of instruction on the acquisition of discourse skills at different developmental stages using the grid of macro/micro functions and signals in the three stages established in the present study.

Finally the same design can be tried out with other second language learners in the secondary and tertiary levels. This will yield data to determine if acquisition sequences in discourse may be said to be a universal phenomenon.

References:


