

Where's Your Thesis Statement and What Happened to Your Topic Sentences? Identifying Organizational Challenges in Undergraduate Student Argumentative Writing

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The authors examine the challenges students faced in trying to write organized texts using effective thesis statements and topic sentences by analyzing argumentative history essays written by multilingual students enrolled in an undergraduate history course. They use the notions of macro-Theme (i.e., thesis statement) and hyper-Theme (i.e., topic sentence) from systemic functional linguistics to categorize students' challenges constructing effective macro-Themes and hyper-Themes. They compare higher graded essays and lower graded essays at six time points during one semester. Both higher and lower graded essays showed challenges with the fronting, specificity, and consistency of their macro-Themes and hyper-Themes. However, there was improvement over the course of the semester. By identifying these challenges, the authors aim to help teachers and students develop a meta-language to talk about these textual features of academic writing and thus enhance the teaching and writing of academic writing. They call for the need for explicit instruction to enhance students' organization of their ideas.

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Writing organized texts is an important characteristic of academic writing (Schleppegrell, 2004). However, novice writers, in particular English as a second language (ESL) writers, tend to face challenges trying to organize their ideas following the norms of fronting their main argument in the beginning of their text in the form of a thesis statement and fronting their sub-claims in the beginning of their paragraphs by using effective topic sentences. When giving feedback to novice writers, teachers may ask, “Where’s your thesis statement and what happened to your topic sentences?” Although teachers may expect students to front arguments and sub-claims, they may not have the meta-language to talk to students about their challenges meeting these expectations (Brisk, 2014). In addition, much of the writing in schools and universities occurs in courses across the curriculum that are taught by faculty who, though knowledgeable in their disciplines, may lack the knowledge base to help students with their writing (de Oliveira, 2011).

By analyzing argumentative history essays written by multilingual students enrolled in an undergraduate history course, this study examines the challenges students faced and their improvement in trying to write organized texts using effective thesis statements and topic sentences. By identifying these challenges, we aim to help teachers and students develop a meta-language to talk about these textual features of academic writing and thus enhance the teaching and writing of academic writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Organizational Features in Argumentative Writing

Research on argumentative writing in the discipline of history emphasizes the importance of writing organized texts to meet genre expectations (Coffin, 2006; de Oliveira, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2004). According to Coffin (2006), the argumentative history essay follows an organizational structure that includes an optional background section to orient the reader to the historical

context, a thesis statement that introduces the points to be explained or argued, followed by subsequent paragraphs with effective topic sentences, culminating in a reinforcement of the points discussed.

Clearly, in argumentative history writing logical structure is text-driven and consequently the textual features of academic language play an important role. Ravelli (2004) emphasizes that “the student who can successfully predict where they are going, flag where they are, and reiterate where they have been, is more likely to be able to convince through their writing than the student who cannot” (p. 104). Similarly, Christie and Derewianka (2008) argue that in order to successfully write arguments, students need to

manage the flow of information in lengthy, complex texts, deploying such strategies as creating metadiscoursal signposts for the reader by foreshadowing at the beginning how the text will unfold ... and subsequently predicting the method of development of each stage or paragraph. (p. 116)

Drawing on a corpus of history essays, the focus of this article is precisely on the textual features the students used or failed to use to signal the flow of information in their writing through the use of effective thesis statements and topic sentences.

Textual Features of Argumentative History Writing: Macro-Themes and Hyper-Themes

For our analysis of effective and ineffective use of thesis statements and topic sentences in the argumentative history texts in our corpus, we rely on the notions of macro-Theme and hyper-Theme from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). According to Martin (1992), a macro-Theme is the opening generalization in a text and serves to predict the text’s overall development. In other words, a macro-Theme is similar to what is known in school rhetoric as a *thesis statement*. Usually located toward the end of the first paragraph (introduction) of an essay, a thesis statement expresses the essay’s main idea. It announces the topic and suggests the way in which the writer will support his or her point of view. Coffin’s (2006) analysis of history

genres shows that successful essays contain a macro-Theme that accurately predicts the content of the essay. Similarly, in de Oliveira's (2011) analysis of 11th-grade history essays, macro-Themes were a distinguishing feature of the more successful essays.

A hyper-Theme is "an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interaction among [lexical] strings, [reference] chains and Theme selection in following sentences," and is, thus, "aligned to the school rhetoric notion of the topic sentence" (Ravelli, 2004, p. 113). According to Oshima and Hogue (2006),

A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It briefly indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss. For this reason, the topic sentence is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include (and what information to exclude). The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is therefore better prepared to understand it. (p. 4)

Usually in the initial position in a paragraph, the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph, limiting the topic to one specific area to be discussed through the use of controlling ideas.

Ravelli (2004) shows that effective hyper-Themes have a dual function of retrospective and prospective connections. Core paragraphs to the development of a text have hyper-Themes that predict the content of the paragraph, but also "connect 'back' to the unfolding conceptual framework of a [text]" by referring to either the previous paragraph or the overarching macro-Theme (p. 113). According to Ravelli (2004),

It is this potential to refer which is critical to the management of the dual function of the hyper-Theme, in terms of its retrospective connection to an already established framework, and its prospective connection to additional components of that framework. (p. 118)

In the example below, the first part of the hyper-Theme (1) has the retrospective characteristic of connecting back to a preceding paragraph or the macro-Theme of the essay, and (2) introduces what will be the focus of the paragraph.

- (1) An example of the negative impact of the colonization of the Americas [retrospective]
- (2) is the destruction of its indigenous culture [prospective].

In addition to retrospective and prospective functions, hyper-Themes can signal the argumentative structure of a text. Ravelli (2004) describes two main types of structure that hyper-Themes signal: cascading and taxonomic. *Cascading* structure builds up an argument paragraph by paragraph, with each part of the argument leading to the next. On the other hand, *taxonomic* structure begins with a central concept, and each paragraph elaborates a part of that concept.

Macro-Themes and hyper-Themes can help with achieving successful writing of arguments, and their effective use is an indicator of academic literacy development. In this article, we investigate students' use of macro-Themes and hyper-Themes in writing in an undergraduate history course at a U.S. university in the Middle East, focusing on the challenges that students had in constructing effective macro-Themes and hyper-Themes. In the next section, we describe the context and methods of the study.

THE STUDY

Data Source

Our data come from student writing in a required first-year world history course at a branch campus of an English-medium U.S. university in the Middle East. There were a total of 83 students, mostly of Arab and South Asian backgrounds, enrolled in multiple sections of the course, all taught by the same professor. Students wrote a series of six essays during the semester in response to prompts based on primary and secondary sources on historical periods and events. In the assignment description, the professor stated that "students must answer the questions in an essay format, with a clearly articulated one-paragraph introduction, several body paragraphs to support that introduction, and a brief conclusion."

The professor valued clearly stated macro-Themes and hyper-Themes, and expected students to make connections between macro-Theme, hyper-Themes, and evidence. In our interview with him, he said that students should write “arguments . . . where you introduce a topic, outline in your introduction what you are going to do and then do it, constantly referring to the evidence and relating the evidence back to the argument.” He also emphasized that topic sentences “should not be general; they should be specific. And they should not include quotations or examples.” The grading rubric puts great emphasis on having a “clearly stated thesis statement,” “evidence clearly related to thesis statement,” and “use of strong topic sentences to summarize each paragraph’s contents and link the evidence in the paragraph with the essay’s overall topic.”

From our corpus of 498 essays, we selected a sample of 60 texts, including 30 high-graded essays (above 80% average) written by five students (6 essays per student) and 30 low-graded essays (below 80% average) written by another five students. The mean essay length was 570 words ($SD = 188.5$).

Analysis

The essays were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. First, we identified macro-Themes and hyper-Themes. Macro-Themes were defined as information in the opening paragraph of a text, which introduces the argument of the text (regardless of whether these points are actually realized in the subsequent paragraphs). Following Ravelli (2004), hyper-Themes were not limited to the opening of a paragraph, and included sentences that identified the method of development of a paragraph, regardless of where they appeared in the paragraph. Based on the literature and the history professor’s expectations, we evaluated macro-Themes and hyper-Themes based on their location, their level of specificity, their relationship to the content of the essay or paragraph, and (for hyper-Themes) use of a dual function. We compared lower and higher graded essays and compared the six essays written by each student longitudinally to determine whether students got better at using these features.

RESULTS

Challenges Meeting the Macro-Structure of Expository Writing

In this section, we outline the categories of challenges that students had creating effective macro-Themes.

One-paragraph macro-Themes. Macro-Themes that constituted the entirety of the opening paragraph, without a background stage to contextualize the thesis statement, were a common challenge. These occurred more often in lower graded essays (43%) than higher graded essays (27%). This can be seen in (3), the introduction paragraph of a lower graded essay.

- (3) From analyzing Hammurabi's Code, we can tell that Hammurabi viewed women as important to the society. In Hammurabi's Code, some of his points disputed that women have the ability to prove their rights and how men's right is against that. According to Hammurabi's law, he presented how women rights in general should be considered at the society. (Lamya, Essay 1)

The introduction begins immediately with a macro-Theme, which answers the essay prompt about the treatment of women according to Hammurabi's Code, lacking a frame with which to contextualize the macro-Theme.

The higher graded essays more often made use of contextualizing information before the macro-Theme. For example, in (4), the introduction paragraph of a higher graded essay, the macro-Theme (*The main view we get throughout the laws is that, women were considered to be much less important than the men*) is preceded by a sentence in which Hammurabi's Code and its significance are explained, helping to contextualize the macro-Theme.

- (4) Hammurabi's Code is a set of written laws from the ancient Babylonian civilization, which makes it an important source for finding out about the treatment of women, in terms of the laws that were applied in society; which themselves reflect the cultural attitudes during that time period. The main view we get throughout the laws is that, women were considered to be much less important than the men, and their lives consisted of mainly being confined to household tasks, with few rights in important matters such as divorce and marriage. (Serena, Essay 1)

Inclusion of this type of contextualizing information was also seen to increase over time in both the lower and higher graded essays. For example, (5) is the introduction paragraph of the sixth essay written by Lamya, the same student who wrote (3).

(5) Nowadays, China is becoming one of the fastest urbanization countries in different fields. However, they are facing environmental threats such as overpopulation, increasing in economy, grassland degradation, deforestation, and air pollution. These problems are not only affecting China, but also other countries surrounding it. Since the environment is a system that is united, any problem occurring in one country will have an effect on the whole world too. According to Jared Diamond in his article "China, Lurching Giant," he advocates that the problem that is occurring in China is affecting on the world since we are "sharing the same planet, ocean, and atmosphere with China" (p. 358). (Lamya, Essay 6)

In this introduction, Lamya begins the paragraph with two sentences that provide general information about development and environmental threats in China, which contextualize the macro-Theme about the effects of those threats on the rest of the world.

Overly general macro-Themes. Some students wrote macro-Themes that introduced only a general topic rather than the specific issues and participants that were to be discussed in the essay, as seen in (6), the opening paragraph of a lower graded essay.

(6) Hammurabi's Code represented the humans' nature in organizing laws and forming societies through history since it was written long time ago. Although it was harsh regarding to penalties, it organized different aspects of life precisely and accurately considering the obligations and rights of the community and individuals at the time. One of these aspects is economy in Babylon. (Farooqa, Essay 1)

Here, the macro-Theme (underlined) contains only a very broad, general description of the essay's focus, without indicating the specific issues that will be discussed in the essay. Because the issues are not labeled, the macro-Theme is less able to predict the unfolding development of the essay.

Overly general macro-Themes were seen in both the higher and lower graded essays to a similar degree (10% in each), and development was seen in both groups during the semester, with

macro-Themes becoming more focused. Near the end of the semester, Farooha, the author of (6), was able to write a much more specific macro-Theme, as seen in (7).

- (7) Through reading the narrative of Olaudah Equiano, an African slave that was captured and sold in Africa and America, it can be clearly seen that **white people were not responsible for creating slave trade, but they are absolutely blamed for creating much worse conditions for the slaves.** (Farooha, Essay 5)

Here, the macro-Theme predicts the content and organization of the essay by labeling two issues (in bold), which are subsequently elaborated and discussed in the following two body paragraphs.

Mismatch between macro-Theme and hyper-Themes. Many of the essays struggled with aligning the topics in the macro-Theme with those in hyper-Themes in the essay. Some or all of the topics that students included in the macro-Theme did not appear in the body paragraphs, and some or all of the topics in the body paragraphs did not appear in the macro-Theme. Excerpt (8) shows the macro-Theme in such an essay, and (9) shows the hyper-Themes of the subsequent body paragraphs in the same essay.

- (8) After reviewing the select information presented in this document, it seems fairly certain that the social structure of the society was defined by classes, with the ruling party being on top of the social strata and slaves at the bottom. (Amaar, Essay 1)
- (9) (a) The pattern of less reward for lower classes indicates the difference of importance and respect of the different classes.
(b) It appears that the society functioned as a well-knit community with a sense of belonging, an observation derived from the law that if a person was robbed then the whole community would contribute to compensate for his loss.
(c) The king's hand was above the rule of law.
(d) A prominent feature of the social strata is the male domination in the society, as seen in laws that concern men and women.
(e) In addition to the above inferred features, the existence of the article itself tells us that the society was well-structured, with proper laws being enforced on the people to ensure little conflict, something which had not been found in almost any other society of Hammurabi's time. (Amaar, Essay 1)

Here, the macro-Theme in (8) predicts that the essay will argue that Babylonian social structure was based on class,

with information about the ruling party and slaves as evidence. However, of the five hyper-Themes of the five body paragraphs, only (9a) and (9c) seem to follow the predicted structure. The others illustrate relevant ideas that were not included in the macro-Theme (social structure based on gender [9d], ideas that seem to be unrelated to the macro-Theme [9e], or ideas that seem to be counter to the macro-Theme [9b]).

This type of mismatch occurred in both the higher graded and lower graded essays to a similar degree (20% of higher graded essays and 23% of lower graded). However, by the end of the semester, students in both groups showed improvement in their ability to align the macro-Theme and body paragraphs. Examples (10) and (11) present the macro-Theme and hyper-Themes, respectively, of the sixth essay written by the same student who wrote (8) and (9).

- (10) In chapter 12 of the book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, the author Jared Diamond presents the current state of environmental pollution in China and tells how the rapid development in the country has greatly affected the environment of the country. While portraying this, the author has also showed how this is not just a problem with China, but every other country which is transitioning from an underdeveloped country into a developed country will have to face. (Amaar, Essay 6)
- (11) (a) Almost all things related to China are growing exponentially Because it is progressing so fast, we can see all the problems it is facing in its attempt to become developed and catch up with the rest of the developed world
- (b) It can be said that China's big size helps us in viewing the environmental impact of other developing countries, impacts not much visible to us because their size is not comparable to that of China
- (c) However, China's environmental problems cannot be compared to those of developed countries, because these developed countries do not need to catch up with the living standards of other countries like in China's case. (Amaar, Essay 6)

Here, we see much clearer connections between the topics presented in the macro-Theme and the hyper-Themes in the body paragraphs. These connections predict the content and structure of the essay, which is one of the major functions of a macro-Theme.

Challenges with Hyper-Themes

In this section, we outline the categories of challenges that students had writing hyper-Themes.

Hyper-Themes focusing on a specific example. One challenge that appeared in both the higher and lower graded essays to a similar degree (9% of hyper-Themes in higher graded essays and 7% of those in lower graded essays) was finding the right level of specificity of the hyper-Themes. Students often focused their hyper-Themes on specific examples, rather than the claims that those examples evidenced. The course professor stated specifically that he did not value this type of hyper-Theme. In addition, a hyper-Theme focused on an example is less effective because it does not indicate how the hyper-Theme, and thereby the paragraph, fits into the essay's overall argument structure. For example, (12) is a body paragraph that supports a macro-Theme stating that there are "some advantages for agriculture and disadvantages for hunting and gathering." In this paragraph, the hyper-Theme focuses on the specific example of milk from a variety of mammals having more calories than meat. However, the hidden claim of the paragraph that raising and maintaining animals was an advantage of agriculture over hunting is not explicitly stated.

- (12) Milk produced from some mammals, such as cows, sheep, and goats, have more calories than having the mammal itself slaughtered and eaten as meat. This reduces the benefit of hunting. Also we can benefit from mammals in different way, as the author say "Big domestic mammals also interacted with domestic plants in two ways to increase crop production" so instead of killing mammals and eating them, we can get their milk and let them work for the crop. In this way we can make benefit from the mammal without losing it. (Tahir, Essay 2)

Over time, however, hyper-Themes in both groups became more focused on the overarching claim that the paragraph was making, rather than specific examples. This can be seen in the hyper-Theme in (13), from Tahir's sixth essay.

- (13) Although the author was sad that he and his sister where kidnapped by a group of people, his real sadness and desperateness of life wasn't when his master was black, but when his master was white. (Tahir, essay 6)

Here, the hyper-Theme predicts the upcoming paragraph about the cruelty of White slave owners toward their slaves in the West Indies in the 1700s. Rather than immediately giving examples of how Black and White slave owners treated slaves differently, and expecting the reader to extrapolate from that to a general claim, Tahir gives this claim at the outset of the paragraph.

Overly general hyper-Themes. Whereas some hyper-Themes were too specific, there were others that were problematic because they were overly general. Overly general hyper-Themes were unable to adequately preview and control the organization of the paragraph. An overly general hyper-Theme is seen in the first sentence of (14).

- (14) There were some sort of activities that were important to the Babylonian economy. First of all, wages of some workers were determined by the code. For instance, a physician received ten, five, or two shekels in money depending on whom he is treating (codes 215, 216, and 217). In addition to that, some codes were put to insure that workers do their job well. As we can see in codes 218, 229, and 230, workers who make mistakes received serious penalties ranging from cutting hands off to death. (Farooqa, Essay 1)

Here, because the hyper-Theme refers only to *some sort of activities*, it does not give the reader enough information about what to expect in the paragraph. A more specific hyper-Theme would have been one about the ways in which Hammurabi's Code impacted work in Babylon.

Overly general hyper-Themes were found in both the higher and lower graded essays. However, over time, both groups became better able to make hyper-Themes specific enough to control and predict the method of development of the paragraph. For example, (15) shows a hyper-Theme from Essay 6 written by Farooqa, the author of (14).

- (15) Importing and exporting materials between countries can also contribute in one country's environmental problems being globalized. For example, China has a problem of declining domestic supply of wood; therefore it imports timber from other countries such as Malaysia, Gabon, and Brazil, which results in exporting deforestation to those countries. As the author says: "In effect, this means that China, like Japan, will be conserving its own forests, but only by exporting deforestation to other countries." He

explains that a country's issue of lack of timber is the driving force behind deforestation to other countries. Clearly, the environmental issue of deforestation is globalized. (Farooha, Essay 6)

In (15), we can see that the hyper-Theme is more specific in naming *importing and exporting between countries* as the focus of the paragraph. By naming these topics specifically, the hyper-Theme is better able to preview the topics and the development of the paragraph.

Late hyper-Themes. Locating the hyper-Theme at an appropriate position in the paragraph was the most common challenge that students encountered. Because a hyper-Theme is seen as the point of departure for the paragraph, the most effective position for hyper-Themes is near the opening of the paragraph or as the first sentence in the paragraph, as expected by the history professor. Nonetheless, many students located hyper-Themes in the middle or at the end of the paragraph, as seen in (16), from a lower graded essay. Here, the paragraph begins with a statement that does not relate to the macro-Theme of the essay (that parting between slave families was the most distressing aspect of slavery) and proceeds with a narrative about a slave and his sister. The student concludes the paragraph with the hyper-Theme, stating that the narrative shows us that separation of slaves from family members was a malicious act, which acts as support for the macro-Theme.

(16) Equiano acquaints the readers about his own personal experience as being a slave. Equiano explains that one day he and his sister were kidnapped and were made to travel far away from their native land. He says that during the journey the most painful part was when his sister was separated from him, "she was torn from me, and immediately carried away, while I was left in a state of distraction not to be described" (p. 2). This proves that Equiano was in a state of total shock and regards parting "(as) thus aggravates distress and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery" (p. 8). Equiano claims that the white have no scruples because they separate friends and relatives mercilessly who may never see each other again. He proves that by parting the slave families the Whites do not have any advantage; rather it was intended solely for the purpose of antagonizing them even more. (Marko, Essay 5)

Rather than a hyper-Theme, this is more similar to a *hyper-New*, or a summary statement of the accumulated information in a paragraph. The existence of a hyper-New is not, by itself, infelicitous. However, the absence of an overt hyper-Theme does not fit the macro-structure that was expected by the professor and that is common in this genre. Such hyper-New statements occurred in the higher graded essays as well, but more often concurrently with hyper-Themes. For example, (17), a paragraph from a higher graded essay, contains both a hyper-Theme (the first sentence) and a hyper-New (the last sentence).

- (17) However, the status of slaves was almost the same in both the continents. The slaves were considered to belong to a lower class. For example, the author Equiano mentions that [in Africa] he wasn't allowed to eat with the free-born children. Similarly, he mentions that people in the Americas were gathered up like "so many sheep in a fold." This also conveys a similar notion of class difference. Thus, it can be seen that although the slaves in Africa were treated with more care the place that they held in society was the same as the place held by slaves in the Americas and the basic horridness of slavery was present in both the continents. (Amaar, Essay 4)

Here, the hyper-New statement at the end of the paragraph reiterates the claim that was made in the hyper-Theme at the start of the paragraph, while also summarizing the other content of the paragraph.

Over time, hyper-Themes became more fronted in the higher graded essays, whereas the lower graded essays tended to continue to have problems with locating hyper-Themes near the start of the paragraph.

Split hyper-Themes. In a number of cases in both the higher and lower graded essays, students divided the hyper-Theme into two distinct parts, located at separate locations in the paragraph. This often occurred when students compared or contrasted texts or ideas. In these cases, the two parts of the split hyper-Theme each addressed one of the texts, such as in (18).

- (18) According to Domat, a renowned French jurist at the time of Louis XIV the prince should be considered as a lieutenant to God and obedience to the prince should be considered as obedience to the power of God Himself. Domat argues that "Since the power of princes thus comes to them from God," (p. 3) it is actually God Himself ruling the society through the

hands of princes. Machiavelli on the other hand believes that all a prince ought to do is focus on war, its rules and disciplines. The quote that explains this is, “for this[war] is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes.” Machiavelli supports the idea of prince being a tyrant when he says “for many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen” (p. 6). (Marko, Essay 4)

Here, the paragraph contrasts the views of Domat and Machiavelli on the role of a prince, with each of the parts of the hyper-Theme describing either Domat’s or Machiavelli’s viewpoint. However, the contrast is not realized until *on the other hand* in the second part of the hyper-Theme, making this contrast unclear as the main focus of the paragraph. This can be contrasted with the more direct contrast seen in the hyper-Theme in (19), taken from the same essay as (18).

- (19) Domat and Machiavelli have conflicting ideas in regard to the position of a prince in the society. Domat states that the prince represents God in the society and hence he must be respected by the government and his citizens. Machiavelli in contrary to Domat says that the prince ought to inspire fear. Machiavelli believes that it is essential for a prince “to hold his own to how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity.” He also argues that a prince has to be devious in his actions because of a constant threat of losing a state. “it is necessary for him to be sufficiently prudent that he may know how to avoid the reproach of those vices which would lose him his state.” For Machiavelli all a prince has to confront is the security of his state before another individual conquers it. (Marko, Essay 4)

This hyper-Theme indicates that the paragraph will contrast the ideas of Domat and Machiavelli by explicitly stating in the opening sentence of the paragraph that they have “conflicting ideas.” Because the contrast is presented at the point of departure, the reader can immediately expect the paragraph to develop in this way.

Split hyper-Themes also occurred when students separated a complex idea into component parts and then discussed each component in a different part of the paragraph, such as in (20):

- (20) The first-most noticeable fact is the language itself in which each of the laws is written. Every single law is addressed to the men, with the use of the pronoun “he” throughout the text, even when the laws are closely

referring to female issues. The general idea we get from this is that women were regarded as negligible when it came to issues that would deeply affect society (like laws). This not only gives the sense that Babylonian women were considered as incapable of applying laws in society, but also shows that men were given a superior right to enforce the law over women. (Sakina, Essay 1)

Here, the paragraph first describes how the language that was used in Babylonian laws and then how that language shows that women were *regarded as negligible when it came to issues that would deeply affect society*. However, the student has divided this idea into two separate hyper-Themes, each followed by a short description. This can be contrasted with a revised hyper-Theme suggested by the professor, seen in (21).

- (21) One indication of the subordinate status of women in Hammurabi's Code that we get from the document comes from the language in which each of the laws is written.

In the professor's revised hyper-Theme, we see the two ideas that were in separate parts of the split hyper-Theme combined into a single hyper-Theme. This revised hyper-Theme provides a preview of the complete paragraph, rather than only part of it.

Mismatch with paragraph content. The biggest difference between the higher graded essays and lower graded essays was found in the relationships between hyper-Themes and the paragraph content. Among the lower graded essays, 30% of hyper-Themes were either partially or completely inconsistent with the content of the paragraph, compared with only 3% of the higher graded essays. We see an example of such a mismatch in (22), from a lower graded essay.

- (22) In Hammurabi's code, there are many penalties that contain death sentence. Many of them are for acts other than killing. For instance "If any one break a hole into a house (break in to steal), he shall be put to death before that hole and be buried." That is justice in Hammurabi's opinion. *However, in the religions that came after Hammurabi, the penalty differs for the stealing issue. In Islamic religion, the hands of the person who steals are to be chopped off.* (Tahir, Essay 1)

Here, the first half of the paragraph is related to and supports the claim made in the hyper-Theme. However, the second half of the

paragraph (in italics) is not about the death sentence in Hammurabi's Code, but rather about the death sentence religions that came later. Because the topic shifts midway through the paragraph, the hyper-Theme is not able to preview the paragraph structure.

Although there were improvements over the course of the semester, they were not consistent, and students in the lower graded group continued to have difficulty creating hyper-Themes that accurately reflected the content of paragraphs. For example, in (23), we see a paragraph from Tahir's last essay of the semester.

- (23) Although the author was sad that he and his sister where kidnapped by a group of people, his real sadness and desperateness of life wasn't when his master was black, but when his master was white. Because the African master has some common manners, customs and languages with their slaves, they treat them well. On the other hand, the white people don't have any common thing with the slaves, and they give them the worst things to be done ever. *Even though white people were treating the slaves badly, they are not the source of this issue. They are just the root of the source which is the Africans who trade with slavery. So the Africans traders are to be blamed more than the white people even though the white people where more vicious. The source of this idea is the Africans and they should carry most of the responsibility.* (Tahir, Essay 6)

Here, again, the hyper-Theme does not encompass the entire content of the paragraph, and instead reflects only the first half of the paragraph, about the treatment of slaves by White owners being worse than treatment by African owners. However, in the second half of the paragraph (italicized), the focus shifts to who should be blamed. Although some students did show improvement over the semester, many did not.

Paragraphs without a hyper-Theme. Another challenge that appeared more often in the lower graded essays than the higher graded essays was the lack of a hyper-Theme. This type of paragraph can be seen in (24), from a lower graded essay.

- (24) Whatever was the color, nationality, and gender of the slaves, they will be still human. In the same time, the slavery is not different to any other jobs. They are workers, but many not based on their knowledge as the engineering or the manager does, but based on the poorness they are suffering from it. (Habiba, Essay 5)

Here, the paragraph begins by making the point that slaves are still human. The second sentence moves on to make the point that slavery is not different from other jobs. The final sentence then draws a distinction between slavery and other types of jobs. Among these three sentences, there does not appear to be a single statement of the paragraph's argument, evidence, or how it fits into the rest of the essay. This type of paragraph appeared more often in the lower graded essays than the higher graded essays and also appeared consistently in the lower graded essays throughout the semester.

Dual function. Overall, a higher proportion of the hyper-Themes in the higher graded essays had a dual function of both connecting back to previous information and predicting the content of the upcoming paragraph than those in the lower graded essays (66% and 43%, respectively). In addition to differences between the two groups, there were also changes over time. Figure 1 shows the percentage of hyper-Themes that had a dual function in the higher and lower graded essays over the course of the semester. In Essay 1, both groups had similar proportions of hyper-Themes with a dual function (higher graded 29%, lower graded 35%); however, over time, dual function hyper-Themes in the higher graded essays increased substantially while the proportion in the lower graded essays stayed relatively flat. By the fifth essay, all of the hyper-Themes in the higher graded essays

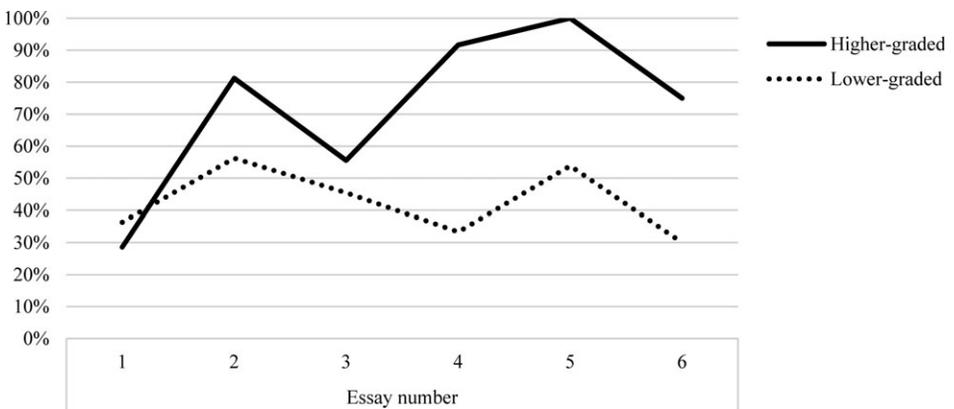


Figure 1. Dual function

had a dual function, whereas fewer than 60% of the hyper-Themes in the lower graded essays did. In the sixth essay, we see that although the percentage of hyper-Themes with a dual function was still higher in the higher graded essays, both groups decreased considerably. This decrease may be a result of the time in the semester; overwhelmed by the demands of final exams and projects, students may perform lower in their writing assignments at the end of the semester.

Looking more closely at the types of retrospection used in hyper-Themes reveals differences in use of taxonomic and cascading organization. Hyper-Themes that are retrospective only to the macro-Theme are evidence of a taxonomic organization, with each hyper-Theme connecting back to a part of the macro-Theme. On the other hand, cascading organization, which Ravelli (2004) indicates is the preferred organization in history writing, is evidenced by hyper-Themes that connect back to the previous paragraph, building an argument paragraph by paragraph.

Overall, the lower graded essays contained a much higher proportion of hyper-Themes indicating taxonomic organization (52%) than cascading (4%). Similarly, the higher graded essays also contained more taxonomic organization than cascading, although these were much closer (16% and 11%, respectively). Even more distinct between the two groups was the combined use of taxonomic and cascading organization in hyper-Themes. The lower graded essays used much less of this combination (14%) than the higher graded essays did (46%). An example of the combination of taxonomic and cascading organization can be seen in (25).

(25) Despite routine trade before, it was the establishment of traders in caravans which started the main thread of lethal infectious diseases spreading from one civilization to the next. (Sakina, Essay 3)

This hyper-Theme organizes the text in a cascading style because of the first part of the sentence, *Despite routine trade before*. This builds on the previous paragraph, which described the *routine trade established between China, India, the Mediterranean and the Middle East*. Furthermore, it fits into the taxonomic structure of the essay by connecting back to the macro-Theme, which, in part, states that “[the spread of disease] changed when trade began

between the four main civilizations of the time; the spread of disease was made easier by carriers moving from one land to another.”

Longitudinally, there were changes seen in the use of the combination of taxonomic and cascading organization. Among the lower graded essays, the use of this combination increased from 14% in the first essay to nearly 30% in the last essay (see Figure 2). Similarly, the use of the combined organizational strategies also increased in the higher graded essays, from nearly 38% in the first essay to 71% in the last essay (see Figure 3). Although there was an overall increase in both the lower and higher graded essays, it is important to note that this increase did not occur in a linear fashion, a common feature of writing development (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Sternglass, 1997).

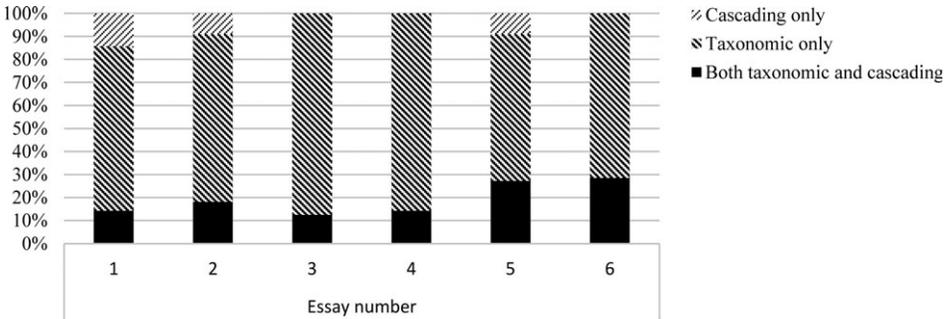


Figure 2. Retrospection (lower graded essays)

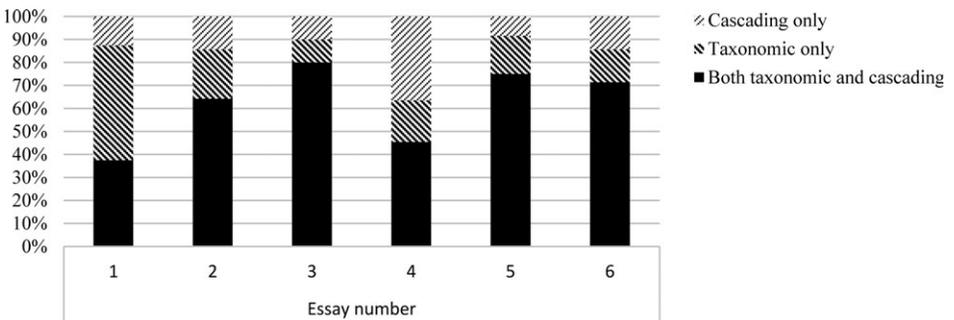


Figure 3. Retrospection (higher graded essays)

Inclusion of both types of organization seems to be valued by the course professor as well, evidenced not only by the greater occurrence in the higher graded essays, but also by his comments. For example, in (26), we see a hyper-Theme from a student essay that includes only retrospection to the macro-Theme.

(26) An important aspect that connects society and the economy of a place is the jobs that people take up. However, the impression left by most of the laws is that women were confined to the household and that almost all professions were occupied by men. (Sakina, Essay 1)

In (26), there is taxonomic organization from the hyper-Theme linking back to the macro-Theme (which stated that in Babylon, women's "lives consisted of mainly being confined to household tasks"); however, there is no retrospection to the previous paragraph. In the student's essay, the professor made a comment on this and offered a revised hyper-Theme, seen in (27).

(27) The subordination of women in Hammurabi's Code is also attested by the fact that the laws confined women to the household and in general most professions were occupied by men.

In the professor's revised hyper-Theme, we see both taxonomic organization through retrospection to the macro-Theme (*confined women to the household*) as well as cascading organization through retrospection to the previous paragraph (*The subordination of women in Hammurabi's Code is also attested by*).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This analysis of students' history texts examined differences between higher graded and lower graded history essays, as well as changes over time, in use of macro-Themes (i.e., thesis statements) and hyper-Themes (i.e., topic sentences). The analysis allowed us to identify students' challenges in effectively organizing these texts using these linguistic resources. Inconsistent with the professor's expectations and with what is valued in academic writing, students' macro-Themes, particularly those of early lower graded essays, tended to be general and inconsistent with the argument put forward in the rest of the essay. Problematic hyper-Themes tended to be too general or too specific, relying on an example or a

quote from the source text. At times, the student writer made the point of the paragraph at the end of the paragraph or not at all. Similar to the macro-Themes, the hyper-Themes sometimes were also inconsistent with the content of the paragraph. Developing a meta-language to talk about students' difficulties with macro-Themes and hyper-Themes can be empowering for both teachers and students. Not only can students be reminded to have a thesis statement and effective topic sentences in their writing, they can also be reminded of the relevant writing pitfalls to avoid (Reid, 1994).

Over time, the student essays showed improvement in their fronting, consistency, and appropriate specificity of their macro-Themes and hyper-Themes. Students' macro-Themes became more focused by labeling participants and issues explicitly and became more consistent with the body paragraphs by previewing the ideas discussed in the essay, as valued by the professor and recommended in writing instructional materials (see Coffin, Curry, Goodman, & Hewings, 2002; Derewianka, 1990; Folse, Vestri Solomon, & Clabeaux, 2010; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Consistent with the professor's expectations, hyper-Themes that focused on a specific example decreased and those that were overly general decreased, more effectively previewing the organization of the paragraph. According to Oshima and Hogue (2006), if a topic sentence is too general, the reader will not know what the paragraph is going to be about. If it is too specific, there will not be much for the writer to write about in the remainder of the paragraph.

One reason that many students may have, at least initially, written texts with late (or sometimes nonexistent) macro-Themes or hyper-Themes is because such organization is common in their first language. Rhetorical and discourse organization strategies are linguistically and culturally bound, and second language writers may transfer organization strategies from their first language to their second language (Connor, 1996). Although a clear macro-Theme in the introduction and fronted hyper-Themes in each paragraph may be expected in English argumentative writing in academic contexts in North America, a more inductive structure (with macro-Themes and hyper-Themes occurring later) may be

preferred in other languages (Hirose, 2003; Kubota, 1998; Yang & Cahill, 2008). The first language of many of the participants in the present study was Arabic, and argumentative texts in Arabic often delay claims until the end of the text or sometimes do not state claims at all (Bacha, 2010; Ostler, 1987).

Part of the effectiveness of hyper-Themes is their ability to perform a dual function, connecting back to previous information and simultaneously connecting forward to the following content. The inclusion of this dual function also increased during the semester, in particular among the higher graded essays. In addition, the hyper-Themes in both the higher graded and lower graded essays increasingly utilized a combination of both taxonomic and cascading organization. The inclusion of both types of organization may reflect the dual expectations of the professor and the genre. The professor's expectation was a typical five-paragraph essay, with a strong thesis statement (macro-Theme) and strong links between the thesis statement and the topic sentences (hyper-Themes), which may lend itself to a more taxonomic organization. On the other hand, as Ravelli (2004) describes, history writing lends itself more to cascading organization. These dual expectations may have resulted in the increasing inclusion of both types of organization in the texts in the present study.

The present study found that students' use of these organizational features showed an overall improvement trend even without explicit instruction of these features. Because this study was conducted during these students' first semester at the university, this change may be a result of students' increasing exposure to academic texts through reading. However, we also saw that the same amount of improvement was not seen among all students. Thus, we argue that explicit instruction on the use of macro-Themes and hyper-Themes could enhance student writing development to an even greater degree. Such instruction could include discussion of the valued characteristics of macro-Themes and hyper-Themes and the common infelicities students make in trying to use these linguistic resources to organize their ideas. Because the most common infelicity we found among macro-Themes was having a macro-Theme that encompassed the entire

paragraph, we would suggest that instruction of macro-Themes focus especially on contextualizing the macro-Theme with background information. Second, instruction could focus on making sure that the macro-Theme matches the claims of the hyper-Themes, which was the second most common infelicity.

In terms of hyper-Themes, we would suggest that instruction should focus in particular on location of hyper-Themes, because late hyper-Themes was the most common challenge for students in the present study. We also found that students were more likely to use a split hyper-Theme when addressing topics involving making contrasts or topics that were multifaceted, and it could be useful for instructors and students to be aware of this tendency. In addition, 34% and 57% of hyper-Themes in higher graded and lower graded essays, respectively, lacked a dual function, showing that this would also be deserving of explicit attention in the classroom. Lastly, explicit instruction of a cascading structure could be beneficial. Ravelli (2004) describes cascading as the preferred structure in history writing; however, among the lower graded texts only 4% used a cascading structure and only 14% used cascading and taxonomic structure in combination, in comparison to 16% and 46% of higher graded texts, respectively. Thus, we would suggest that in writing specifically for history, use of cascading structure be emphasized.

In the classroom, we would suggest that a genre-based pedagogy such as the teaching and learning cycle (see Dreyfus, Humphrey, Mahboob, & Martin, 2015; Rose & Martin, 2012; Rothery, 1994) would be useful for teaching the above features. In this method, teachers present to their class samples of a genre (such as a historical argument) and deconstruct the sample with their students while drawing students' attention to specific features. Once these desired features have been made explicit to students, the teacher and student can engage in joint construction, during which they, together, construct a new text incorporating the features. Following teacher–student joint construction, students can then construct a text jointly with another student, or students could engage in independent construction of a new text, again incorporating the specific features that were made explicit during deconstruction.

Finally, we also call for increased pedagogical connections between the expectations of writing across the curriculum and writing courses. Transfer of genre knowledge and writing skills from writing courses to disciplinary courses can be particularly difficult as subject-area knowledge generally precedes control over genre form (Carroll, 2002; Tardy, 2006). Closer, more explicit alignment of expectations between, for example, history and English composition courses could help students with this transfer.

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