

USAGE OF COMPARISON/CONTRAST PATTERN IN UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC ESSAYS

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Abstract. The present paper discusses undergraduate essay writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Latvia. The goal of the paper is to examine the basic problems in student comparison/contrast essays. The analysis of 23 essays revealed that some students had problems with determining the purpose of communication and selecting an appropriate thesis statement to fulfil the task. Moreover, another problem was linked with the choice of the topic sentences and their supports which develop the controlling idea of the thesis statement, as well as the choice of information for the concluding paragraph. The analysis of the rhetorical patterns and linguistic signals revealed that one essay might display features of several patterns: comparison/contrast, description, problem-solution, cause-effect, illustration. Thus, the research showed that structuring of the comparison/contrast essay in the target language is one of the problematic aspects in EFL undergraduate writing in Latvia.

Key words: comparison/contrast essay, EFL undergraduate writing, rhetorical pattern, linking signals, coherence

INTRODUCTION

Several studies (e.g., Hirose, 2003; Heuboech, 2009; Bacha, 2010) have focused on the differences in the choice of schematic or rhetorical patterns in academic essays and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' needs while learning to meet the expectancies of the reader in the target culture. Taylor points out that comparison/contrast essay writing can cause difficulties to students if they are not aware of the purpose of communication (Taylor, 2009: 207).

The previous research on essay writing in Latvia demonstrated that EFL undergraduates have several problems in argumentative type of writing. The basic errors are linked with the selection of the thesis statement (ThS) to meet the demands set by the task, the selection of appropriate topic sentences (TSs) and corresponding supports, as well as the use of an inappropriate rhetorical pattern (Farneste, 2011a; Farneste, 2011b). Thus, the *goal of the present research* is to investigate the basic problems in comparison/contrast essays that have been written by EFL undergraduates in Latvia.

PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION IN ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING

In academic setting, the purpose of communication is usually determined by the task, given by the teacher. The essay prompt may include a topic, the rhetorical pattern and its subtype, for example,

Choose one of the suggested topics [e.g. ‘High school and college or university’] and write an essay using comparison/contrast organization. Use either point-by-point or block style. (Oshima and Hogue, 2006: 122)

In such a situation an EFL student needs to be aware of what is understood by the terms *comparison/contrast organization* and *point-by-point* or *block style* in the target culture. This task implies a definite purpose of communication – to compare or contrast the two selected institutions. They need to be able to use the structures or schemata expected in the target culture (Tribble, 1996: 33-34). Thus, knowledge about discourse organization in a particular context and situation may help the learners discuss the theme purposefully.

SUBTYPES OF COMPARISON/CONTRAST PATTERN

Depending on the purpose of communication, academic essays are grouped into narratives, description, exposition and argumentation (Heuboech, 2009:38). Kitsch (cited in Weaver and Kitsch, 1991, discussed in Dickson, et al., 1995: 23) distinguishes three types of relations in expository writing such as *general-to-particular* (e.g., identification, definition, classification, illustration); *object-to-object* (e.g., comparison/contrast) and *object-to-part* (e.g., structural, functional or causal analysis). Taylor has pointed out that mere listing of ‘descriptive characteristics’ is not an appropriate approach in comparison/contrast type of writing. The writers need to find some particular criteria for the analysis of similarities and/or differences (Taylor, 2009: 208).

The comparison and contrast pattern is often employed in student writing at tertiary level, e.g., essays, term papers, bachelor papers; therefore, this rhetorical structure is commonly included in an academic writing course. The essays which help to master the appropriate rhetorical pattern have a certain purpose of communication: to tell a story (narrative), to describe a place (description), to discuss similarities (comparison), to discuss differences (contrast), etc. Moreover, each rhetorical pattern may have several varieties.

Although the terms used to name the varieties or sub-patterns of the comparison/contrast pattern differ, still the varieties have several features in common. Sorenson (1992), for example, distinguishes three sub-patterns of comparison and/or contrast essays: *part-by-part*, *whole-by-whole* and *likenesses-differences*. White and Govern (1994:22-24) discuss only two sub-patterns:

horizontal and *vertical*. The latter classification coincides with Oshima and Hogue's theory (2006) of two types of organization: *point-by-point* and *block*.

Thus, ideas can be discussed in a *horizontal manner* and a *vertical manner* (White and McGovern, 1994). As shown in Table 1, the first *point-by-point* or *part-by-part pattern* comprises three points of comparison or contrast to discuss the two selected subjects (A and B). Each point becomes the controlling idea (CI) of a TS in a paragraph.

The second *point-by-point* or *similarities-differences pattern* has a similar sequence of points, but it deals with both similarities and differences. Although a common sequence is to start with similarities and then deal with differences, still the choice may be determined by the purpose of communication. The number of paragraphs devoted to similarities and differences in such type of writing also depends on the purpose of communication or the focus of the essay. Smalley and Ruetten (1990: 239) consider that 'less obvious' similarities or differences may be focused on after the familiar have been outlined.

Similarly, the *block pattern* may have two varieties. In the *whole-by-whole pattern*, the writer deals with one subject (A) and then with the other subject (B). In the *block* or *similarities-differences pattern* the writer discusses similarities of two subjects, which is followed by the discussion of differences.

Table 1 Varieties of sequencing information in comparison and/or contrast essays (based on Sorenson, 1992; White and McGovern, 1994; Oshima and Hogue, 2006)

Parts of an essay	Horizontal pattern		Vertical pattern	
	Point-by-point or part-by-part organization	Point-by-point or similarities-differences organization	Block or whole-by-whole organization	Block or similarities-differences organization
Introduction	ThS: similarities or differences	ThS: similarities and differences	ThS: similarities or differences	ThS: similarities and differences
1 st body para.	TS: point 1 A1-B1	TS: similarities A1-B1	TS: subject 1 A1 A2 A3	TS: similarities A 1 A 2 A 3
2 nd body para.	TS: point 2 A2-B2	TS: differences A2-B2	TS: subject 2 B1 B2 B3	TS: differences B1 B 2 B 3
3 rd body para.	TS: point 3 A3-B3	TS: differences A3-B3		TS: differences A 1 A 2 A 3
Conclusion	Summary and/or restatement of the ThS			

Thus, the choice of an appropriate sub-pattern depends on the purpose of communication and the focus made by the writer.

LINGUISTIC SIGNALS AS MEANS OF ACHIEVING COHERENCE

Coherence is commonly mentioned alongside with *cohesion* in writing (Tribble (1996: 30). If cohesion involves correct use of 'logical markers' (e.g., pronouns, reference words, lexical repetitions), coherence is related to logical sequencing of sentences to achieve a certain purpose of communication. Logical markers serve as signals of discourse relations (ibid.: 34). Vivanco holds the view that usually it is logical argumentation that ensures coherence, but not necessarily the use of connectives (Vivanco, 2005: 1235). However, in academic writing, connectives are important and, therefore, they are more frequently used than in some other texts, for example, technical publicity texts (ibid.: 1247).

There is no unanimous approach in the choice of terminology when discussing the linguistic signals that ensure a coherent text. When describing clause and sentence relations in a text, Winter (1974 discussed in Hoey, 2001) identifies: *sequence relations* and *matching relations*. The first type refers to time, cause-consequence, means-purpose and premise-deduction relations, while matching relations refer to contrast, similarity, exemplification, preview-detail and exception. *Matching relations signals* are subordinators (e.g., while, whereas, although), sentence conjunctions (e.g., however, moreover, nevertheless, furthermore, too, also), repetition and parallelism.

Tribble (1996: 30-34) uses the term *linking devices* and groups them into *referencing expressions* (e.g., this general rule, such over-ambition) and *discourse markers* (e.g., however, on the other hand), whereas Carter, Hughes and McCarthy (2000) use the term *discourse markers*. They distinguish between spoken or conversational and written discourse markers by pointing out that *formal discourse markers* (e.g., furthermore, on the other hand, moreover, nonetheless) are 'more common in written English' (Carter, Hughes and McCarthy, 2000: 178). However, spoken discourse markers can also appear in some written genres, such as personal letters and some cases of popular journalism (ibid.: 232). Fraser (2011) has a similar approach to *discourse markers*. His discussion about the sequencing of *contrastive discourse markers* is exemplified by a sentence that may comprise even several discourse markers of the same type, reverse order including (e.g. ... *However, in comparison with Joan, .../... In comparison, however, with Joan, ...*).

Sorenson (1992: 21), in her turn, uses the term *transitions* and defines them as words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs, functioning as clues for the reader in understanding 'relationships like time, space, addition, emphasis, example, comparison-contrast, and cause-effect.' In a longer text, *transitional sentences* are used to 'connect major ideas between paragraphs', but *transitional paragraphs* to 'summarise the subtopics before moving to the next major point'.

Similarly, Smalley and Ruetten use the term *transitional expression* or *transition*, the function of which is to 'help move smoothly from one idea to the next'. They distinguish three types (by syntactic functions like transitions in phrases, coordinating conjunctions and transitional expressions between sentences) and several subtypes within them (by functions like comparison, contrast and addition), (Smalley and Ruetten, 1990: 246-248). They also mention that the repetition of *key words and phrases* in the next paragraphs ensure transitions in a text (*ibid.*: 206).

Oshima and Hogue (2006: 116-117), in their turn, use the term *signal words*. When discussing coherence in writing, they mention that *transition phrases*, conjunctive adverbs, coordinating, correlative and subordinating conjunctions as well as nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs and prepositions may be used as *transition signals* (Oshima and Hogue, 2006: 25-29). In this case, *transition words and phrases* are used only as one of the types of comparison signal words: (1) transition words and phrases (e.g., similarly, likewise); subordinators (e.g., as, just as); (3) coordinators (e.g., and, both ... and), and (4) others (e.g., like + noun, similar to + noun). The same refers to the contrast signal words, which are grouped into words of concession (or unexpected result) and words expressing direct opposition (Oshima and Hogue, 2006: 119-120).

Similar to Tribble (1996), Carter, Hughes and McCarthy (2000) and Fraser (2011), Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008) also use the term *discourse markers*. They define them as signals of 'the internal structures of the essays', the purpose of which is to 'provide logical connection among the parts' (Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2008: 13). Viewing the term broader, Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008: 13) distinguish three types of discourse markers in essays:

- (1) overall meta-discourse markers (essay level) such as "There are three main reasons" and "In conclusion";
- (2) partial meta-discourse markers (connecting paragraphs or multi-sentential chunks of discourse within paragraphs) such as "First" and "There are several advantages";
- and (3) inter-sentential markers (connecting only two sentences) such as "But," "However," and "Thus."

Moreover, Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008: 13) point out that a whole clause may also be an overall and partial meta-discourse marker. For example, when analysing a student essay (on p. 25), they mark the ThS ('Which one is more beneficial travelling alone or group travel?') as an overall meta-discourse marker.

Thus, the terminology of linguistic means for achieving text coherence may differ because of the research goals undertaken in the studies. Since the focus of this paper is not on the classification of the means used to achieve text coherence by word-class categories or syntactic functions, but on their use and functions in comparison/contrast patterns in a particular type of students' essays, the umbrella term *linguistic signals* will be employed further.

METHOD

In order to detect the basic problems in EFL student writing, 23 comparison/contrast essays (E) were chosen for the study. The essays had been written by the first-year undergraduates at one of the universities of Latvia. Before writing essays, the students had studied paragraph writing, and they had written comparison/contrast paragraphs.

After the analysis of a sample, focusing on comparison/contrast essay structure, possible varieties in patterns and corresponding linguistic signals, the students were given the task to compare or contrast two subjects of their own choice. The volume of the papers was 300-350 words. The essays under analysis were written at home and peer reviewed in the next class. After the submission of the final copies, the essays were collected and coded.

The analysis was done in three stages:

1. the analysis of the choice of the communicative purpose and the title;
2. the analysis of the macro-structure:
 - a. coherence at essay level (analysis of the thesis statement),
 - b. coherence at paragraph level (analysis of the topic sentences);
3. the analysis of the rhetorical patterns and linguistic signals.

Frequency counts and qualitative analysis were employed in this research. Samples from the student essays are cited in the paper without any changes, except for italics, introduced for highlighting the linguistic signals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The title commonly includes the key idea of a text. In 21 out of 23 essays, it was easy to state that the essays discuss differences or similarities, as it had been set by the task, for example, *Two Types of Advertisements* (E 2), *Travelling and Tourism* (E 4), *Aerodium v. Latvia Bungeejumpers' Club* (E 6), *Comparison of Supermarkets* (E 14). However, in two cases, the titles were general: *Stiff Competition* (E3) or *Cosmetic Shops in Latvia* (E 13). Moreover, they could have been more appropriate for a definition or description rather than the comparison/contrast essay.

The analysis of each of the paragraphs revealed that only the writer of E3 had not fulfilled the task at all. As seen in the sample below, the ThS in the introductory paragraph proposes the discussion of a competition between many companies (e.g., 'business is stiff', 'very rival', 'there are many companies'),

- (1) Telecommunications is one of the most lucrative businesses in Europe. Our modern Latvian society is not able to live even a day without using a mobile phone. Everywhere around there can be seen people talking on telephones, writing text messages, using the Internet, or just listening to the music. However, this *business is stiff* and *very rival*, because *there are many companies*, who want to earn the money on our conversations, messages and other phone activities. (E 3)

Only in the second paragraph, which should already have been the body paragraph in a short essay, the writer introduces two companies for contrast (e.g., ‘competing’, ‘two most popular companies’, ‘fighting’), but the concluding sentence of the same paragraph proposes another purpose of communication, that is, the search for reasons for the situation (e.g., *Why is it so?*):

(2) In Latvia there are many telecommunication firms, which are *competing* with each other all the time. Still, there are only *two the most popular companies* among Latvians – *Tele2* and *LMT*. From the very first beginning these *competitors* have been “*fighting*” with each other in everything: low prices, practicability, comfort and services. However, the statistics show that there are much more *Tele2* users than *LMT*. There is a question: *Why is it so?* (E 3)

In the following two paragraphs, the writer returns to the enumeration of three differences (e.g., (1) less expensive; the design, the advertisements; (2) many big and memorable events; (3) tariffs or advantages of using services) rather than discusses the main reasons for the success of *Tele 2* suggested at the end of the second paragraph. Moreover, the last three sentences of the last paragraph below show that the writer has changed the theme from *success of Tele 2* to *LMT* (e.g., ... *LMT* still has much bigger turnover. What is the secret of such success?).

(3) Basically, sociologists say that, firstly, for many people it is habitual to think that *Tele2* is *less expensive*. *The design, the advertisements* say itself that this company is friendly.

(4) Secondly, *Tele2* is involved in *many big and memorable events*, while *LMT* is not. For every company the advertising is one of the most important things, because it stays in the mind of the current clients and it influences also the future clients.

(5) Thirdly, when looking at the *tariffs or advantages of using services* of both companies, it is clearly seen that *Tele2* offers also free calls and free messages to all *Tele2* users, which is a very friendly clap. Although *LMT* tries to be at the same level with *Tele2*, it is not quite possible. *LMT* is concentrating on the high quality, design and rich clients. In fact, it is their biggest mistake. Even though *Tele2* has more clients in Latvia, *LMT* still has much bigger turnover. What is the secret of such success? Unfortunately sociologists can not answer this question now. (E 3)

Although the writer has tried to find some differences between the companies, the concluding paragraph (Para. 6) does not summarise the main contrasting points, but focuses on similarities or common features (e.g., have developed plenty of strategies), which differs from contrast in terms of communicative purpose.

(6) In conclusion, I would like to state that these two companies are in the market for a very long time. There are no other such strong companies, who could compete with these two. There are no doubts that *LMT* and *Tele2* have developed plenty of strategies which help them to manage their businesses successfully. (E3)

All the 23 essays contained an introduction, body and concluding paragraphs. As to the discussion of similarities or differences, the majority of students dealt with differences (16 cases), similarities (1 case), differences and similarities (1 case). For example, the analysis of the CIs in the ThS and TSs showed that the purpose of communication to discuss differences or similarities of the two subjects was expanded in E 5, as it dealt with both differences and similarities:

Cf. ThS: The *differences and similarities* of these two operators can make a choice extremely complicated.

TS 1: The *most notable difference* between these two kinds of telecommunication is their signal quality.

TS 2: Yet *another difference* between these two operators is the tariffs.

TS 3: The *most substantial similarity* between these operators is a price. (E 5)

In three cases the students had introduced one type of CI (e.g., reasons (2 cases), advantages and disadvantages (1 case)), but in the body of the essay differences were discussed.

One of the basic problems was the choice of an appropriate ThS. Below is a sample of a ThS, proposing an analysis of reasons (e.g., to find out reasons) on the basis of comparison and contrast:

ThS: The purpose of this essay is to *find out the reasons* why "Narvesen" is the marked leader not "Pluss punkts", *by comparing and contrasting* different characteristics of the both companies. (E 11)

Another sample shows that the writer proposes an illustration of consequences or reasons, but not comparison/contrast:

ThS: The choice between two shops can *influence person's life significantly*. (E 1)

ThS: Nowadays everyone can choose which supermarket to choose and *this choice depends on* different aspects. (E 14)

In another essay (E19), the ThS would be more appropriate for an illustration rather than for comparison/contrast:

ThS: There is a *huge gap* between one's potential in university and in school. (E 19)

In one paper, although the writer has promised to discuss similarities in the ThS (e.g., E 6), the TSs do not develop the CI, instead, descriptive paragraphs are used:

Cf. ThS: They are very different, but they *both deal with extreme sports and are owned by one owner*.

TS 1: Latvian Bungeejumpers' Club was founded in 1994 but the first jumps were performed already in 1989. Latvian Bungeejumpers' Club was founded in 1994 but the first jumps were performed already in 1989. Bungee jumping is an activity that involves jumping from a tall structure. The tall structure in Sigulda is an air train; but it is also possible to jump from a movable object, such as a hot-air-balloon or helicopter, that has the ability to hover above the ground. When the person jumps, the cord stretches and the jumper flies upwards again as the cord snaps back, and continues to oscillate up and down until all the energy is dissipated. This can be a great fun, so it is advisable to try it by every one.

TS 2: Aerodium – It's all started back in 1979. (followed by the description of aerodium), (E 6)

Only in the conclusion, the writer returns to the idea about the similarities of both activity types:

To sum up, these two companies are united by the fact that *both belong to the extreme sports and the owner is Ivars Beitāns*. (E 6)

The undergraduates provide analysis not only in the body of the essay, but also in the last paragraph. As seen in the conclusion below, instead of summarising the main points, the writer continues the discussion of differences, adds less related ideas about the crisis, unemployed citizens and better management, thus ending with some elements from problem solution type of writing:

Considering everything said it is not a mystery why “Narvesen” has been the market leader for such a long time. The company “Narvesen” *offers higher quality and it invests more in advertising than “Pluss punkts”*. On the other hand Latvia is *facing economical crisis* and there are *many unemployed citizens*. Lower prices do not seem so bad; maybe “Pluss punkts” *just needs some better managing*. (E 11)

Not only inappropriate choice of the CI and corresponding supports, but also repetition of the same ideas can be found in student writing. In two essays (E 4; E 17), the writers had discussed the same ideas twice by rewording them, as in the sample below (e.g., *discovery* in the first paragraph, and *to observe and explore something* in the second):

Travelling is focused on exploring and participating actively in the process of *discovery*, in contrast, tourism is focused on already explored, easily accessible and polished places of interest. Compared with travelling, tourism is much easier way of getting around and doing leisure activities. Tourism is suited for people of any age and

occupation. The places of interest are everywhere around the globe and they can be accessed with no trouble of getting the information needed in tourism information points and in the internet.

However, travelling is a little more challenging and time consuming leisure activity. Travelling is usually practiced in order to *observe and explore something*, like untouched nature monuments, or collecting information about certain processes or places in the world. (E 4)

All in all, most students had chosen the point-by-point pattern (15 cases), some – block pattern (6 cases) and only two (E 3 and E 6) – mixed pattern, i.e., they used elements from different rhetorical patterns. The essays with an inappropriately verbalized thesis statement, but providing an analysis of differences or similarities, were grouped into those using the point-by-point or block pattern.

As discussed above, each essay type has its specific linguistic signals which act as clues for the reader. The most frequently used linguistic signals that indicated the rhetorical pattern in the student essays are displayed in Table 2. Words of the same root belonging to different word-class categories (e.g., similar, similarly; considering, considered) are regarded as separate occurrences. The items have been listed in decreasing occurrence order.

Table 2 Frequency of the usage of linguistic signals in comparison/contrast essays (number of occurrences and items)

Signal types	Most frequently used signals	Total (No. of occurrences)	Variety of signals (No. of items)
Contrast/ concession signals	but (47); different (35); however (20); differences (19); difference (18); while (14); differ (12); although (10); on the other hand (8); in contrast (7); despite, differ in, different from (5); still (4); though, unlike (3); whereas, on the contrary, differ from (2); instead, yet, nevertheless (1)	224	22
Comparison signals	both (25); the same (14); compared (with/to) (10); like (9); similar (to) (7); similarities (6); as ... as (5); similarity, not only ... but also (4); just as, compare (3); likewise (2); similarly (1)	89	16
Additive signals	and (289); in addition (9); furthermore (3); as well (as) (1)	303	5
Summative signals	all in all, considering... (3); to conclude, in conclusion, to sum up (2); looking back, consequently, thus (1)	15	8
Sequencing signals	second (5); first of all, first (3); firstly, secondly (2)	15	5

The table demonstrates that additive signals (303 cases) and contrast/concession signals (225 cases) dominated in the essays. The proportion of comparison/contrast signals to all the other signals is 313 to 333, which is possible in any type of writing. Summative signals were mainly used in the last paragraph to show that the conclusion is provided.

The students employed a variety of comparison (22 cases) and contrast (16 cases) signal words in their papers; however, additive and sequencing signals (5 of each case) had a smaller variation. This could be explained by the fact that the students had been given the list of comparison/contrast signals in class.

It should be noted that the additive *and* outnumbered all the other linguistic signals. Even though the use of *and* is common in any kind of writing irrespective of the purpose of communication, its abundant usage demonstrates that students rely heavily on linking patterns of spoken language, where logical links are often not specified. Moreover, some essays contained also informal signals (e.g., looking back, considering everything said), which have been borrowed from spoken language.

In some cases, the writers used sequences of two signals: one expressing addition and another – concession, thus trying to provide a more specific link between two sentences:

And although these advertisement types may seem similar, there are some evident differences between them. (E 2)

The analysis of linguistic signals demonstrated that the writers had chosen both sequencing and matching relations signals in the point-by-point pattern of comparison/contrast essays, while matching relations signals, in the block pattern.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study reveals that tertiary level students have problems in verbalizing the ThS to correspond to the task and, consequently, the purpose of communication. Another problem is selecting appropriate CIs in the TSs and appropriate supports to develop the paragraphs. Sometimes students do not start paragraphs with a TS to help the readers identify the main idea of the text.

When writing comparison/contrast essays, the students mix elements from different rhetorical patterns, such as cause-effect, description, illustration or problem-solution, thus misleading the reader. As comparison/contrast essays require an analysis of similarities and/or differences, the students sometimes choose a description, which is cognitively less demanding. The students use not only comparison and contrast signals, but also sequencing, additive and summative signals in their writing. Sometimes the students choose signals that are borrowed from spoken language and are not typical of academic writing.

Although certain conclusions could be drawn, the findings should be treated cautiously because of the small number of essays. Thus, in order to generalize the findings, further research should follow with a larger number of essays.

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