On Analyzing a Problem-Solution Text Pattern.

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References
1. Introduction

McCarthy (1991: 157), Holland and Johnson (2000) point out that text patterning attempts to describe written discourse at a level beyond the grammatical sentence. Hence, patterns in English discourse include problem/solution, general/specific, claim/counterclaim. This essay attempts to look at the findings of written discourse analysis and relate them to a specific textual pattern based upon the problem-solution pattern proposed by Hoey (1994: 26-32) in order to analyze the elements of discourse which are present in the text taking into account written discourse theory. Some pedagogical issues related to the teaching of writing and reading will also be discussed, which will lead to a brief discussion into the area of English language teaching methodology.

Assuming that people naturally adhere to certain rules and norms when they create texts, McCarthy (1991:25) argues that “most texts display links from sentence to sentence in terms of grammatical features such as pronominalisation, ellipsis, and conjunctions of various kinds”. This is just to say that the study or creation of a text takes account its formal characteristics, its structure and its grammatical and lexical choices. Nonetheless, Nunan (1999:290) suggests that developing written discourse is problematical. He warns:

“…getting the students to turn a set of […] simple sentences into coherent discourse is […] relatively straightforward, [but] the processes the writer must go through are extremely complex”.
2. Characteristics of written discourse

Norman Fairclough (1992:28), giving his impression on discourse, suggested that “it is more than just language use; it is language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice”. In fact, any kind of language activity which takes into account the social aspect of communication relates to society and the culture it belongs to. Halliday (2001:187) distinguishes between spoken and written discourse, describing spoken as ‘language in flux: language realized as movement and continuous flow’, yet written discourse as ‘the language of the school’ and language ‘in fix’, by which “writers construe, or rather re-construe experience, […] all have been speakers and listeners first, so that the written world is their secondary socialization”.

Thus, a written text creates and generates a relationship between the writer and the reader and the meaning of the text is conveyed through this interaction: not only the writer writes, but the reader also takes an active part in this interaction, Hoey (1986). This creates what is called the interactive nature of written text. The reader is to interpret the relationships between textual segments and to question the text as it unfolds. Another characteristic of it has to do with its prospective nature. Following a linear scheme, the reader will certainly be curious about what is to happen in a text. This means that a good writer will always hook the reader’s attention by triggering his/her curiosity to know what will happen in the end. Consequently, all this is operated on an interactional framework, which leads the reader to read the whole text from the beginning to the end expecting to have his/her expectation(s) fulfilled. This also implies that a good text realizes its purpose thoroughly – it will inform and give the reader exactly what it proposed to do. For
instance, when we read a newspaper headline, we expect to have the statement made there responded to. This has to do with the kind of linearity that should be in a written text.

2.1 Definition of an authentic text

Although authors may have different opinions to define an authentic text, a clear view about the term will certainly shed some light on this area and help analyze the text chosen. In fact, the issue of authenticity has been thoroughly discussed among scholars and the breadth of the readings done allow me to draw my own conclusions on the topic.

On the one hand, Morrow (1977:13) affirms that “an authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort”. On the other hand, Harmer (1991:146) points out that “authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question”. Eventually, Nunan (1989:54) suggests that “a rule of thumb for authentic is any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching”. Nevertheless, the definition of authenticity used in this paper considers authentic any kind of text which conveys a comprehensible message to the reader and makes him/her (re) construe meaning in a natural way, which means that Morrow’s definition is suitable to back up the ideas with respect to authenticity in this paper. Therefore, the text chosen to be analyzed is authentic for it transmits its message to the reader and realizes its purpose which is communication.
2.2 Non-authentic texts

Apart from theoretical discussion on authenticity, an issue which must be brought up is what is done with a text. Hutchinson and Waters (1987:159) make the point well when they say that “authenticity is not a characteristic of a text in itself: it is a feature of a text in a particular context”. So a text can only be truly authentic in the context in which it was originally written, which implies that we should not be looking at some abstract concept of authenticity, but rather the practical concept of fitness to the learning purpose. Therefore, any text which does not relate to a given context or does not fit it, may be considered non-authentic. For instance, Widdowson (1979:80) points out that “to present someone with a set of extracts and to require him to read them not in order to learn something interesting and relevant about the world but in order to learn something about the language being used is to misrepresent normal language use to some degree. The extracts are, by definition, genuine instances of language use, but if the learner is required to deal with them in a way which does not correspond to his normal communicative activities, then they cannot be said to be authentic instances of use. Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response”. As it will be clearly seen and diagrammatically represented, Ward’s text requires an appropriate response from the reader.
3. The text chosen and text excerpt

In this paper, text analysis will be done using a text written by Andrew Ward, whose title is “Lift Your Feet”. He is the author of a number of books and articles and has been a contributing editor of Atlantic Monthly. The text was excerpted from Fits and Starts: The Premature Memoirs of Andrew Ward (1991), where he describes the effects of one of his mother’s personal traits on the family. Such text is really authentic as it relates to a given context and conveys the message to the reader, requiring a response from him/her. In addition, text analysis was not done with the didactic purpose of teaching language, Nunan (1989:54).

Extract

(A) (1) All her life, my mother wanted busy children. (2) Nothing infuriated her more than the sight of one of her offspring lying around, staring into space. (3) But she had a conflicting ambition which proved paramount: (4) that her house remain at all times tidy and hygienic, that it exhibit, in effect, as little evidence of human activity as possible.

(B) (5) You could turn your back for a moment in my mother’s house, leave a half-written letter on the dining room table, a magazine open on the chair, (6) and turn around to find it had been “put back”, as my mother phrased it, “where it belonged”.

(C) (7) My wife, on one of her first visits to my mother’s house, (8) placed on an end table a napkinied packet of cheese and crackers she had made for herself (9) and went to the kitchen to fetch a drink. (10) When she returned, (11) she found the packet had been removed. (12) Puzzled, (13) she set down her drink and went back to the kitchen for more cheese and crackers, (14) only to return to find that now her drink had disappeared. (15) Up to then she had guessed that everyone in my family held onto their drinks, sometimes with both hands, so as not to make water rings on the end tables. (16) Now she knows better…

(D) (17) These disappearances had disorienting effect on our family. (18) We were all inclined to forgetfulness, and it was common for one of us, upon returning from the bathroom and finding that every evidence of his work-in progress had vanished, to forget what he’d been up to. (19) “Do you remember what I was doing?” (20) was a question frequently asked, (21) but rarely answered, (22) for whoever turned to address himself to it ran the risk
of having his own pen, paper, book, tatting, (23) suddenly disappear into the order of my mother’s universe.

(24) My mother’s cleaning seems to have come to a head while I was in college. (25) She started to get terrible headaches and psychosomatic digestive problems. (26) Pretty soon, she hired some cleaning women to come in every week. (27) They were Teutonic, like her grandmother, and did a good job, and (28) she was delighted to find that she didn’t have to clean up after them half so much as she had cleaned up after her family. (29) My sister developed a second-hand passion for clean windows, (30) and my brother does the vacuuming in house, (31) perhaps to avoid having to be the one to lift his feet. (32) I try not to think about it too much, (33) but I have latterly taken to cleaning baseboard once a week. (34) I figure if you don’t keep after them they’ll just get filthy, and then where will we be?

**3.1 Authentic texts and overall textual patterns**

McCarthy (1996:148-149) points out that “Apart from specialist learners, who tend to have precise reading and writing needs, it is still difficult to gauge precisely what types of written text are most useful in language teaching and to find the right balance between reading and writing in most general language courses”. Furthermore, it is also important to take into consideration the learners’ background and necessities, the level of proficiency of the students, their beliefs about reading and writing, the school policy towards reading and writing.

However, McCarthy (1996:157), also reporting on textual patterning, argues that prevailing studies have shown three types of common patterns that are classified as problem-solution, claim-counterclaim and general-specific. The problem-solution pattern, identified by Hoey but cited in Holland and Lewis (1997:12), consists of four basic elements: situation (within which there is a complication or problem), problem (within the situation, requiring a response), response or solution (to the problem) and evaluation or result (of the response/solution). The Claim-counterclaim is one where a series of claims and contrasting counterclaims is
presented in relation to a given issue Holland and Lewis (1997:23). Finally the *General-specific* pattern is one in which a generalization is followed by more specific statements and perhaps might end with a broader generalization.

### 3.2 Identifying textual pattern

Being aware of text patterns may bring the reader interesting insights into recognizing a certain type of text. As for Ward’s text, the problem-solution pattern was identified on the basis of its common characteristics such as *Situation-Problem-Response-Solution* (see section 3.3). Moreover, Hoey (1994) demonstrates that writers have the option of signaling explicitly the structure of their texts to their readers, so as to make discourse structure more evident. Thus, clause relations in the text are connected through what is known as vocabulary, which comprises subordinators, coordinators and lexical items including nouns, verbs and adjectives, according to Winter (1994). Thus, (examples can be seen in the words in **bold** in the extract p.6). These elements also helped to identify Ward’s text as having a problem-solution patterning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situation</strong></td>
<td><em>(1) All her life, my mother wanted busy children</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem</strong></td>
<td><em>(4) that her house remain at all times tidy and hygienic</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solution to the problem</strong></td>
<td><em>(26) Pretty soon, she hired some cleaning women to come in every week</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation of the solution</strong></td>
<td>*(29) My sister developed a second-hand passion for clean windows, and *(30) my brother does the vacuuming in house <em>(33) but I have latterly taken to cleaning baseboard once a week.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1**
3.3 General comments on the Problem-solution pattern

Fairclough (1999:184) argues that intertextual analysis is a necessary “complement to linguistic analysis”. In this case, the problem-solution pattern starts with a given situation and then comes up with a problem with questions that need to be answered. Thus the writer attempts to answer the questions the reader may have and finally gives solution to the problem in the text with an evaluation as a follow-up. In Ward’s text, the problem-solution pattern can be commented as follows:

In (A 1, 2) there is a given situation. The author describes his mother as having a peculiar personality trait which set the mood in which she expected her offspring to behave accordingly: *Nothing infuriated her more than the sight of one of her offspring lying around, staring into space*. The contrast coordinator *but* placed in (3) *But she had a conflicting ambition which proved paramount*, signals a logical sequencing clause relation which prepares the reader for the next sentence as an advance label. Coulthard (1996: 73) considers advance labeling “a term used to refer to a category of Prediction in which the writer both labels and commits him/herself to perform a discourse act”. The writer’s discourse act is realized in (4) *that her house remain at all times tidy and hygienic, that it exhibit, in effect, as little evidence of human activity as possible*. Consequently, the reader’s expectation is also fulfilled when what was promised in (3) was complied in (4). In short, an advance label is to tell the reader what to expect from a text.
3.4 Analysis of Ward’s text

A) Situation – (1) All her life, my mother wanted busy children. What comes next is a complement to the situation stated. (2) Nothing infuriated her more than the sight of one of her offspring lying around, staring into space. Following the advance label in (3) But she had a conflicting ambition which proved paramount we have the problem.

B) Problem – (4) that her house remain at all times tidy and hygienic, that it exhibit, in effect, as little evidence of human activity as possible. This noun-clause introduces the reader to the problem stated by the author – His mother’s obsession to have everything around her clean and neat.

C) Solution to the problem can be seen in (26) Pretty soon, she hired some cleaning women to come in every week. In (26) Pretty soon, she hired some cleaning women to come in every week we have a solution to the problem, which the author’s mother found to be most appropriate to her problem. However, from 5 to 25 we have a series of problem-solution patterns occurring along the text which respond to a current problem described by the author. As we can exemplify the problem in (5) You could turn your back for a moment in my mother’s house, leave a half-written letter on the dining room table, a magazine open on the chair and the current solution or response to it in (6) and turn around to find it had been “put back”, as my mother phrased it, “where it belonged” or a situation (7) My wife, on one of her first visits to my mother’s house a problem (8) placed on an end table a napkin packet of
cheese and crackers she had made for herself and a current solution or response to that problem (11) she found the packet had been removed.

D) The evaluation (of the solution) can be found in the next three excerpts (29) 
My sister developed a second-hand passion for clean windows, and (30) my brother does the vacuuming in house and (33) but I have latterly taken to cleaning baseboard once a week. In the three examples cited above, it is clear that the overall evaluation of the problem is that the characters involved in the story take after their mother’s personality traits and assume a kind of behavior that was described by the author as being something negative. The matching relation between the logical sequencing leads us to affirm that the reader would expect that the three children had a different kind of behavior, but on the contrary, the characters seem to have assumed their mother’s personality trait, instead. By doing this, the writer kept the reader’s attention to what was going to happen in the end and brought a surprising element to it in the end of the story.
Figure 2 Diagrammatic representation of the text
4. Subordinate patterns

When a writer creates a text, s/he must be attentive to the various linguistic devices which will help the reader to understand the message that is being conveyed Jaworski and Coupland (1999). For instance, we can name them ‘coherence’ that is the way a sentence hangs together or makes sense, ‘cohesive markers’ which create a link across the boundaries of sentences an also chain together related items. However, we also know that making sense of a text also depends on our interpretation of it, taking into consideration our own personal schemata (shared knowledge of a subject). As we process texts, ‘textual patterns’, which are manifested in functional relationships between the parts of a text (phrases, clauses, sentences or groups of sentences) hang together so as to transmit meaning. McCarthy (1991: 28) calls them “textual segments”. They are signaling devices, which guide us in interpreting these relationships. For instance, conjunctions, or discourse markers signal relationships between segments of a discourse. They organize and 'manage' extended stretches of discourse, helping to make the text cohesive and coherent.

4.1 Analysis of cohesive devices

Winter (1977:1-92) argues that “the moment you put together any two sentences…your listener or reader looks for a sensible connection between their topics, and if they make sense to him/her, it will be because s/he can relate the two sentences in the same way as they relate to the constituents of the clause in expected ways”. In the text, we can identify some cohesive devices in the following lines: (3) **But** she had a conflicting ambition…  (28) **and** she was delighted to find… (30)
and my brother does the vacuuming in house (33) but I have latterly taken to cleaning.

4.2 Analysis of cohesion and the text

As it has been first mentioned, when we refer to a text, we have to consider cohesion, which relates to the elements that tie it together and make it meaningful to the reader. However, Thornbury (1997:126) says that "Cohesion alone is not enough to make a text coherent". In fact, he refers to an internal logic that there is in a text, in which readers can recognize meaning even without the aid of explicit cohesive devices. This is at the clausal level. However, the most basic organizational principle of text is that it is linear and unfolds in a linear way. While reading Ward’s text, the reader looks forward to the end, which alludes to the prospective nature of the text. However, we must consider that besides looking forward, a reader also looks back to what has been given and to what he/she already knows about the text. There is a prospective/retrospective duality in text.

4.3 Grammatical cohesion

Grammatical cohesion is divided into four types: cohesion through reference, through substitution, through ellipsis, and through conjunctions. As a matter of fact, Halliday and Hasan (1976) have the most pioneering work on cohesion in English text. Some grammatical cohesion elements (see 4.3.1 for a more detailed discussion) in Ward’s text will be pointed out only to give an idea about the relationship of words in the grammatical level in the text: (1) All her life, my mother wanted busy children. (2) Nothing infuriated her more than the sight of one of her offspring
lying around, staring into space. (3) But she had a conflicting ambition which proved paramount… : (4) that her house remain at all times tidy and hygienic, that it exhibit, in effect, as little evidence of human activity as possible. (5) You could turn your back for a moment in my mother’s house, leave a half-written letter on the dining room table, a magazine open on the chair. (7) My wife, on one of her first visits to my mother’s house, (8) placed on an end table a napkined packet of cheese and crackers she had made for herself.

4.3.1 Cohesion through reference

Once it is known that the items of a text can either work anaphorically (referring to something which was already mentioned in the text) or exophorically (referring to something outside the text, which gives its contextual situation) Halliday and Hassan (1976), most of the items described in the text are of this type.

**Personal** reference relates to the grammatical category of **person**. So we can see words such as: my, her, she, you, it, his. On the one hand, the following group of items work exophorically for it establishes a relationship outside the text, which gives the contextual nature of it: ‘all her life’… ‘my mother wanted busy children’…or ‘my mother phrased it’, referring to the author’s life with his mother. On the other hand, the following group of words work endophorically: ‘Nothing infuriated her more than the sight of one of her offspring lying around’ or she had made for herself, she set down her drink or that it exhibit, in effect, referring to the house and so on.

**Demonstratives** can be seen in: (15) **Up to then** she had guessed that everyone in my family held onto their drinks. (16) **Now** she knows better. (17) **These**
disappearances had disorienting effect on our family. When demonstratives relate to location, Halliday and Hasan (1976) call them a scale of proximity. **Up to then,** **now** among others, indicate distance (either actual or notional). The *deictic* these refer to a general situation and fact, as the author describes the disappearance of objects. **Comparative** references are shown in (2) Nothing infuriated her **more than** (4) as little evidence of human activity **as** possible (27) They were Teutonic, **like** her grandmother.

### 4.3.2 Cohesion through substitution

A very small group of words work as proforms, substituting other words. Therefore, in the text, we can only find an example of proform in line (31) perhaps to avoid having to be the **one** to lift his feet … a substitute for **person**, which works exophorically.

### 4.3.3 Cohesion through ellipsis

Cohesion thorough ellipsis is very similar to cohesion through substitution. The reference is always understood, even though unsaid. We can see some examples of it in (5) You could turn your back for a moment in my mother’s house, leave a half-written letter on the dining room table, a magazine open on the chair, (6) **and** turn around to find it had been “put back”. The subject of sentence (6) was elided, but one can easily understand who the subject is.

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1 “a word specifying identity or spacial or temporal location from the perspective of a speaker or hearer in the context in which the communication occurs”. R. Rommetveit
4.3.4 Cohesion through conjunction

As it was first mentioned, Halliday and Hasan (1976) subdivide cohesion through conjunction into four categories. **Additive** in which there is the addition of further information; **adversative** in which a new piece of information conflicts or contrasts with what has been said previously, or negates it in some way; **causal** in which conjunction shows relation of cause, consequence, result and purpose between the sentences and **temporal** in which sequencing in time is shown. In Ward’s text, examples can be found as follows: **Additive** (5) *You could turn your back for a moment in my mother’s house, leave a half-written letter on the dining room table, a magazine open on the chair, (6) and turn around to find it had been “put back”*. **Adversative** (3) *But she had a conflicting ambition which proved paramount, causal (22) for whoever turned to address himself to it ran the risk of having his own pen, paper, book, tatting… and temporal*. (10) **When** she returned… (24)… **while** I was in college.
5 Text pattern awareness and implications to language teaching

McCarthy (1996:170) points out that “the practical pressures of language teaching mean that teachers will always, rightly, want to evaluate carefully any descriptive insights before taking them wholly to heart as teaching points”. However, the question that should be posed is how students can best benefit from text patterns. In my own teaching context, students’ books are full of passages which bring different and diverse kinds of readings. Such texts are great opportunities for the teacher to start introducing the new concepts on written discourse analysis that might trigger the students’ curiosity with respect to the way the author structured his/her text. As for the problem-solution model proposed by Hoey (1994) and analyzed by Malcom Coulthard (1994b), it was implemented, even with younger adolescents, the concept of Situation-Problem-Response-Solution/Result-Evaluation. This was done based upon the assumption that the demonstration of different patterns might facilitate the learner the task of ordering the text and give him/her a pattern to stick to when s/he is to write.

Hence text analysis was done with Ward's text by making students realize the generic framework found in the text, whether it was Problem-Solution, Claim-counterclaim or General-Specific. Then a discussion on how a certain kind of behavior can hamper relationships in a family was initiated. By doing it, they were able to develop their critical analysis skills and the most important of all - they realized that texts have their own structure, with linear characteristics which allow the writer to develop his/her ideas into a very structured and logical way. Consequently, this activity made students become more aware of their own writing skills. Furthermore, their ideas were much more organized than ever and they have
also become better readers as well. In conclusion, anyone can benefit a lot from this kind of activity, regardless the authenticity of the text, whether it is used with a didactic purpose or not, meaning will certainly be construed once the teacher is able to establish a context in which the ideas and passages in the text are meaningful and have communication purposes.
6. Conclusion

Text patterns were demonstrated to students by means of utilizing reading passages so as to make them realize the different styles in which a writer can organize his/her ideas. However, it was observed that it was necessary not only to demonstrate textual patterns, but also the signaling vocabulary related to each pattern used in each kind of writing. In addition, it was necessary to establish a context so that students could possibly relate appropriate words to it. This certainly shed new light on working with reading and writing. Taking into account the interactivity there is between reader and writer, students were very motivated to find out the situation, the complication and current solution to reading passages, besides using other generic frameworks on general-specific or claim-counter-claim modes of writing, for instance.

Consequently, they became faster and more quick-witted readers, which led them to become more aware of the way they could write a text based upon a given topic. In fact, students referred to me more often than not and said: “teacher, I would like to write a problem-solution essay about the problem of air traffic control in Brazil” or “teacher, the author failed to give a more specific paragraph here on the effect of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere”, alluding to the general-specific pattern.

In fact, the awareness of textual patterning is quite important and was effectively used not only to analyze Ward’s text with my group of students, but also to apply them to other types of writing. Being aware of subordinate patterns, students started incorporating cohesive devices in their writings so as to facilitate written communication. However, quantitative research into writing so as to find
out the number of students who are aware of text patterns and cohesive devices and use them in a given context would also make a good study topic.
References


