

The effectiveness of five-paragraph formula
(macro-structure of essay) on ESL learners' text quality

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Abstract

This paper examined the effectiveness of five-paragraph formula (FPF) (macro-structure of essay) on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' text quality and presented pedagogical implications for teachers to help ESL learners arrange their ideas systematically. By studying the macro-structure of pre-class and post-class essays from 4 adult People's Republic of China (PRC) students in Singapore, the research investigated the effectiveness of the 1-hour lecture on FPF in terms of argumentative writing. Results showed that there was a significant improvement in macro-structure of essay after acquiring the knowledge of FPF. The text quality in the post-writing test was significantly better than in the previous writing test in terms of essay overall structure. Therefore, teachers should feel confident about FPF and encourage ESL students to practice FPF in their Second Language (L2) writings.

Keywords: effectiveness, five-paragraph formula, ESL learners, text quality

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Introduction

According to Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981), L1 writing model requires a writer's task environment, a writer's long-term memory, and the writing process. The task environment refers to the genre, writing tools, external sources, and the motivational factors, etc. The long-term memory is made up of numerous factors such as the literary topic, personal plan, and a writer's schema. The writing process involves textual planning, translating and reviewing (Flower and Hayes, 1980, 1981). The macro-structure of essay reflects the discursive nature of writing (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) in terms of genre (task environment), a writer's schema (long-term memory), planning and translating (writing process). These findings are imperative to second language learning and teaching because they allow insights to be drawn on the processes of L2 writing performance.

Moreover, after generating adequate ideas, L2 learners are frequently concerned with how to organize their ideas into clear and systematic structures, before they consider which words they should use to explain those ideas. However, L2 writers are confronted with challenges of paragraph organization regarding macro-structure planning and translating in academic settings because of the structure switching between L1 and L2.

Five-Paragraph Formula (Macro-Structure of Essay)

As it is known, the FPF consists of (1) an introductory paragraph providing background information, capturing the reader's interest and stating the thesis, (2) 3 middle body paragraphs, each of which develops one point from the thesis statement with a topic sentence that is supported with specific details, facts and examples, and (3) a conclusion part summarizing the main point and restating the thesis. The provision of unity, coherence and development makes FPF a highly structured macro-format for essay writing, in particular, academic essays.

For L2 writers or special needs students, FPF for generating an outline serves as a default format to help them overcome the major barrier of getting started (Knuston, 1980). FPF is said to be a valuable teaching tool because "a fledging biker does not use training wheels for the sake of it but relies on them for security while learning to balance" (Nunnally, 1991). In other words, the formula enables the teachers to guide l2 learners towards realizing that in fact they have something to say and they know how to arrange their ideas in a logical, systematic and efficient way. Therefore, Carignan-Belleville (1989) has characterized FPF positively as scaffolding to motivate students' writing confidence and interest. For students, FPF gives them security (Tremmel, 2011).

However, one does bear in mind that there are some scholars arguing that FPF prevent writers from moving around recursively between generating ideas and arranging ideas (Tremel, 2011). With FPF, it is just a write-by-number set rather than

a real writing (Nelson, 2001).

Chinese (PRC) ESL learners in Singapore

PRC students learning English in Singapore are defined as ESL learners because they learn a language in a community where the target language is used. The contributions of these learners in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) are prominent. Zhang (2001), for example, examined PRC ESL students' language learning anxiety, and suggested that anxiety is rooted in age differences. More importantly, these differences might also be attributed to "different language learning and epistemological experiences and their socio-economic backgrounds, and possibly a change in the learning environment in a study-abroad context." Kwah and Goh (1996) set out a relationship between learning strategies and PRC ESL learners' language proficiency. Their quantitative research suggests that the more proficient the learners' English was, the more cognitive strategies they used. In addition, these high-proficiency students applied more compensation strategies than their counterparts.

In light of PRC ESL learners' writing skills, Aryadoust (2014) studies the development in paragraph writing ability of ESL undergraduates including PRC ESL students. The research suggests that students' progress in L2 writing is attributed to a wide range of factors such as "explicit lessons and frequent practice, regular feedback through a continuous assessment approach and various opportunities to engage with class tutor, and the use of online technology in the course".

Furthermore, PRC ESL student learners constantly have difficulties in composing English argumentative essays in a logical structure because the macro-structure used in Chinese shows a great difference from those in English. This structure switching between L1 and L2 has hardly been studied and the relevant strategies in the research domain are insufficient. Therefore, a task strategy of formulating macro-structure FPF for ESL learners is of great significance for them to improve their text quality.

Predictions

Based on Knuston (1980) and Nunnally (1991) previous FPF characteristics and its benefits, I made the following prediction:

There is a significant effect of FPF (macro-structure of essay) on ESL learners' text quality. PRC ESL learners in this study are unfamiliar with the FPF because their writing structures are mainly influenced by Chinese culture and philosophy. The structure switching between Chinese and English is a great challenge for the participants. However, when they acquire FPF as an efficient format to get started, their texts tend to seem more logical and systematical.

Methodology

Participants

The participants (see Figure 1) were 4 PRC ESL students (2 females, 2males) enrolled in an Intermediate English Language Course at a Singapore-based commercial English learning center. They were between 22-24 years old. The sample

of ESL learners examined in this study was homogeneous in terms of their language and educational background.

Participants	Sex	Year of birth	Age
A	female	1994	23
B	female	1995	22
C	male	1994	23
D	male	1993	24

Figure 1: Basic information of 4 participants with sex, year of birth and age.

Design

Procedures. The study was conducted at the commercial English learning center located at Bugis, Singapore. The participants were told to have a total 2-hour English writing class including 2 writing assessments and 1 major lecture. Prior to the whole procedures, 4 participants were instructed to perform their best.

Initially, they sit for a pre-writing test. A writing task prompt and answer sheets were passed to the students and they were asked to complete the task within 30 minutes. After which, the papers were collected by the researcher and the major lecture on FPF began. The researcher distributed the handouts where specific bullet points of FPF and relevant examples and exercises were printed. Along with the handouts, slides were also used to assist explain the functions of the formula systematically. The lecture covered how to organize and develop the parts of introduction, 3 body paragraphs and conclusion. More precisely, within the

introduction part, writers should include background information and thesis statement; within each body paragraph, writers should include a topic sentence stating one specific main point and supporting evidence like anecdotes and examples, but the last body paragraph generally serves as a refutation; within the conclusion section, writers should restate their thesis in a different way.

After the 40-minute lecture, 4 participants were asked to complete an exercise figuring out each feature in a given argumentative text. Moreover, they had to tell the functions of each part and finally draw an outline of the passage.

During the last 10 minutes, students asked 2 questions about FPF. (1) Can we copy the first paragraph when we compose the last one? (2) Why we need to write a body paragraph as a refutation?

When the lecture finished, students were required to write another argumentative essay within 30 minutes by using what they learn in class. After the test, all the 4 papers were collected and rated according to the rating scheme. Last but not least, the results of 2 writing tests were compared via t-test.

Writing tasks. An argumentative genre was chosen for both pre-class writing test and post-class writing test because the FPF taught during the lecture aimed at argumentative essays. The pre-writing test required students to argue whether it is a positive development that an increasing number of people are choosing to see doctors online instead of hospitals. The post-writing test asked students to give views on the argument whether students should be sent to overseas colleges to further their studies.

Lecture. For the FPF training class, the researcher delivered a 1-hour lecture on the FPF of argumentative essay writings. Relevant handouts and slides were prepared and shown to the 4 participants. The researcher was allocated 40 minutes to explain the basic information and knowledge of FPF and exemplify how FPF works. 10 minutes was allocated to the 4 students to do exercises underlining all the 13 features in a text. The last 10 minutes involved a Q&A section.

Rating scheme. In order to assess the effectiveness of FPF on text quality, a 30 minutes' pre-class writing test prior to the instruction of FPF was implemented. A total of 4 pre-writing samples were collected and assessed in terms of their macro-structures. After the lecture, 4 post-writing papers were also collected and rated according to an FPF rating scheme. The scheme assessed 13 components of an argumentative essay (see Figure 2) with each element awarded 1 mark (if the element is contained in the essay, 1 mark will be given). Each essay was awarded a total score of 13 marks.

NO.	Scale	Mark	NO.	Scale	Mark
1	INTRODUCTION	1	8	Topic Sentence	1
2	Background Information	1	9	Supporting Evidence	1
3	Thesis Statement	1	10	3 rd BODY PART	1
4	1 st BODY PART	1	11	Topic Sentence	1
5	Topic Sentence	1	12	Supporting Evidence	1
6	Supporting Evidence	1	13	CONCLUSION	1
7	2 nd BODY PART	1		TOTAL	13

Figure 2: FPF rating scheme.

Results

Data Analysis

Figure 3 shows the distribution of pre-writing test and post writing test scores of 4 participants. The mean score of 4 participants' pre-class writing tests was 7.25, with 7 marks, 9 marks, 6 marks and 7 marks respectively. The mean score of the post-writing test was 12 marks with 13 marks, 13 marks, 10 marks and 12 marks respectively. Obviously, there was an overall increase from the pre-writing test to the post-writing test. Specifically, both student A and student B got full marks in the post-writing test. Collectively considered, the 2 females rank top, achieving 13 marks in the post-writing test. In particular, student B remains the top from pre-writing test to post-writing test.

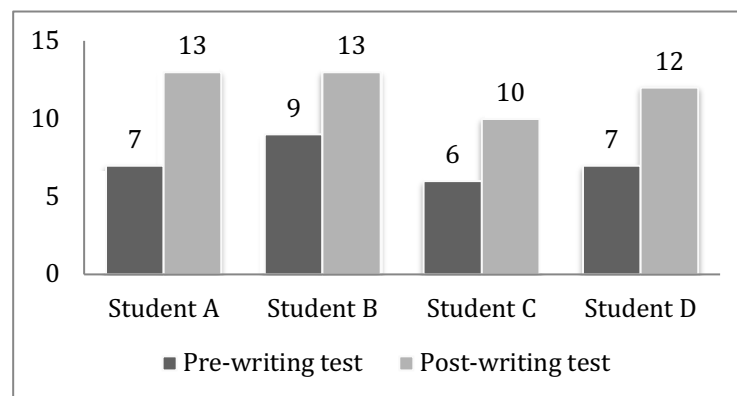


Figure 3: Distribution of pre-writing test and post writing test scores of 4 participants.

An independent-samples t-test was then conducted to compare writing test scores between the pre-class writing and post-class writing. There was a significant difference in the scores for the pre-writing test ($M=7.25$, $SD=1.26$) and the post-writing test ($M=12.00$, $SD=1.41$) conditions; $t(6)=5.0186$, $p = 0.0024$. These

results suggest that the post-writing scores are much higher than the pre-writing ones. Specifically, the results suggest that FPF improves the format of L2 argumentative writing effectively.

The data is consistent with the prediction that there is a significant level of effectiveness of FPF (macro-structure of essay) on ESL learners' text quality.

Review Samples

For the pre-writing test, 3 participants contained introduction section with only 1 student including both background information and thesis statement. Student A failed to write an introductory paragraph, directly opening her essay by supporting the first point. Student B and C composed insufficient introductory paragraphs with only background information and only thesis statement respectively. The introductory paragraph of student D included the background information and a thesis statement, which is considered to be a full introduction. Figure 4 indicates the marks participants received in terms of the introduction part.

Student A. "Online doctors can save patients' money because people don't have to go to hospital in person. Some patients even need to travel from a remote area to a good hospital in city centre. In this way, they don't need to spend money on transportation, which is very money-saving.

Secondly, patients can see the best doctor online from all over the world..."

Student B. "Nowadays, we live in a world dominated by different advanced technology, one of which is online doctor. It has opened up new venues for health

treatment so many patients prefer an online therapist rather than a hospital.

Firstly, it gives health information to people in rural and remote areas...”

Student C. “Personally, I think this development is positive.

First and foremost, online therapy gives us easier access to psychological treatment. The reason is ...”

Student D. “Recently, with the development of digital technology, we are encountered with various technological advance such as online doctor. I personally think it is a positive movement.”

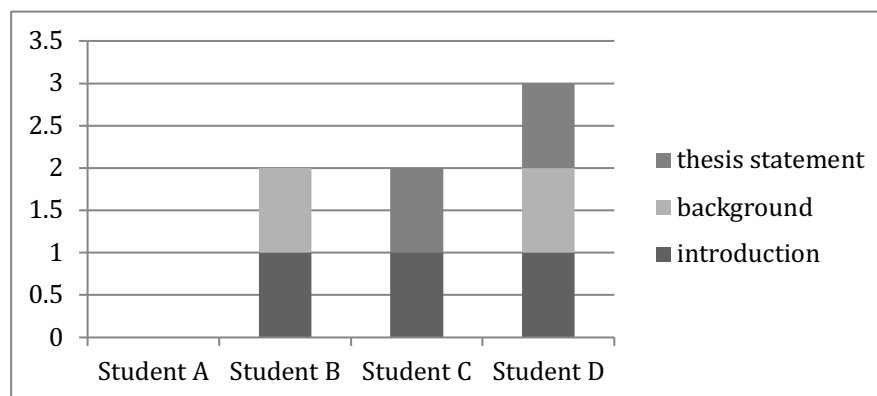


Figure 4: distribution of marks for introduction

After listening to the lecture on FPF, students showed improvement in writing introduction. The introductory paragraphs of the 4 participants all consisted of 2 major elements: background information and main thesis statement.

For the body paragraphs in pre-writing test, all of the participants included at least 1 body paragraph. In addition, 4 participants knew what to write in body paragraphs such as topic sentence plus supporting evidence. However, none of them completed 3 body paragraphs, with 3 participants having only 1 body paragraph and 1

participant composing 2 body paragraphs. By contrast, in the post-writing test, all except 1 participant (no supporting evidence was found in his last 2 paragraphs) composed 3 body paragraphs with the last paragraph as a refutation.

With regard to the conclusion part, the 3 students did a good job while 1 student did not have sufficient to compose the conclusion, losing 1 mark.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of FPF (macro-structure) on ESL learners' text quality. In targeting the functional use of FPF in L2 argumentative writing, the study found that learners who received FPF training performed better than previously in terms of text quality. It indicates, therefore, that FPF provides a systematical structure for ESL learners to organize and present ideas in a clear way.

The contribution that this study makes to the existing literature is its demonstration of the role that FPF can have on ESL learners' acquisition of certain linguistic structure. Previous studies have identified the significance and value of FPF for L1 writers and recent studies have illustrated its role in helping L1 learners overcome anxiety and have security about writing. No study that I am aware of has sought its effectiveness on ESL learners.

I acknowledge that the study only considers the macro-structure of FPF but given its positive findings I would suggest that further research study its effectiveness of other structure level such as micro-structure. Moreover, the study focused on only

4 participants which is a limited data collection so future studies would investigate a larger scale of data. Another limitation that needs to be acknowledged is the 2-hour research design. Since participants were required to write 2 essays and have a 1-hour lecture within a day, the heavy workload might negatively influence their performance in post-writing test. Consequently, studies that focus on an extensive period of time are now required to determine a more accurate effectiveness of FPF.

Despite these limitations, some pedagogical recommendations can be offered. Teachers should feel confident about teaching FPF for ESL learners. This study has shown the improvement of macro-structure among students in terms of coherence and logic. Therefore, teachers should explicitly impart the knowledge of FPF into students and provide adequate exercises for students to practice. In addition, FPF can also be applied on other genres like narratives or expository essays, giving students an efficient way to get started. Finally, teachers should encourage students to revise their FPF to make the essay more convincing and logical.

Note: 'who' has 'done' what in data collection

1. Contact the commercial English learning centre: Ruixue
2. Give instructions of procedures: Wu Qian
3. Collect writing samples and sample analysis: Wu Qian and Ruixue
4. Deliver lecture: Ruixue
5. Record think-aloud process: Wu Qian
6. Design and collect questionnaire of L1 transfer: Wu Qian
7. Give participants and the centre feedback: Ruixue

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