

「外国语言文学研究文库」

山东省社会规划研究项目 (12CWXJ24)
山东大学自主创新基金 (HFW12021)

英语议论文写作

语篇特征实证研究

Discourse Features in English Argumentative Writing:
An Empirical Study

高云 著

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

英语议论文写作语篇特征实证研究:英文/高云著. — 济南:
山东大学出版社, 2014. 9
ISBN 978-7-5607-5133-7

I. ①英… II. ①高… III. ①英语—议论文—写作—研究
IV. ①H315

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2014)第 207946 号

责任策划:王桂琴
责任编辑:王 潇 张申华
封面设计:张 荔

出版发行:山东大学出版社

社 址 山东省济南市山大南路 20 号
邮 编 250100
电 话 市场部(0531)88364466

经 销:山东省新华书店
印 刷:济南景升印业有限公司
规 格:720 毫米×1000 毫米 1/16
13 印张 226 千字
版 次:2014 年 9 月第 1 版
印 次:2014 年 9 月第 1 次印刷
定 价:32.00 元

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序

作为语篇分析领域中的两个最基本的概念,衔接和连贯一直是语篇分析的重要议题。自 20 世纪六七十年代以来,语言学家对语篇的衔接与连贯问题进行了大量的研究。语篇分析不仅研究衔接与连贯的特征及其在语篇中的体现,而且对二者之间的关系进行了深入的探讨。到目前为止,虽然人们对衔接和连贯的理解仍然有分歧,但关于衔接和连贯的理论已经比较成熟。同时,衔接与连贯的相关理论也在语言研究和外语教学领域得到了广泛的应用。在外语教学领域,特别是在写作教学中,衔接和连贯是两个非常重要的概念。从某种程度上讲,衔接与连贯与否往往被看作衡量一篇文章优劣的重要指标。但不无遗憾的是,相较于对母语写作研究的详尽完备,二语(或外语)写作中的语篇特征却未能引起研究者的足够重视,对于衔接、连贯、写作整体质量三者之间的关联度更是缺乏深入、细致的定量、定性研究。

高云博士正是在此背景下,于攻读博士学位期间对二语(或外语)写作中的语篇特征产生了浓厚兴趣,并以此为切入点开始了自己的研究与论文撰写。她独辟蹊径,巧妙选题,从中国英语学习者限时议论文写作入手,用语篇分析中衔接与连贯的相关理论关照英语写作的整体质量,发前人所未发,深入剖析所收集整理的学生作文样本,并在此基础上从语篇连贯、写作质量和衔接手段变量三个维度对作文样本作了评定或标注,通过持续的跟踪实证研究,将定量、定性相结合,描述分析了中国英语学习者在写作中语篇特征的发展模式,探究揭示了语篇连贯、衔接与写作质量间的关系。其研究,无论在方法论上还是在理论建构上,都体现出了较强的创新意识。其研究成果对当下二语写作的教与学也有着重要的启发意义,可以激发读者对外语写作教学的深入思考。

本书在实证研究过程中,使用了社会科学统计软件包(第 16 版)对统计数据进行了初步及探究性的分析。具体来讲,使用“单项方差分析”(ANOVA)来测试三个阶段衔接手段的使用频率和语篇连贯评分是否存在显著差异;通过“事后两两比较”(Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons LSD Tests)分析

了研究变量中哪一组学生在使用衔接手段和语篇评分时和另一(两)组存在显著差异;通过皮尔森积差(Pearson Product-moment Correlation)研究了衔接与连贯的相关性。此外,本研究还通过独立样本 t 检验对高、低分作文进行了对比分析,得出高、低分作文在衔接手段的使用以及语篇连贯评分上的异同。正是在这种科学、严谨的定量分析下,本书自然引出中国英语学习者在写作层面表现出的语篇发展模式以及衔接手段与语篇连贯、衔接手段与写作质量、语篇连贯性与写作质量间的相互关系。而这种定量分析恰是当下语篇分析理论指导二语写作所急需的。

我国是世界上英语学习者(作为二语或外语)最多的国家,而写作又是二语(或外语)教学与研究的重头戏,是学习者二语(或外语)综合能力的体现,因而如何切实进一步提高英语学习者的写作质量,值得每一位教学者和研究者深思。高云博士的《大学生英语议论文写作语篇特征实证研究》一书恰是从语篇分析理论角度对提高二语写作质量的一种有益探索。高云博士在本书选题与撰写过程中所表现出的这种发现问题的敏锐触觉、研究问题的独特视觉和解决问题的高度自觉尤其显得珍贵。当然,二语写作教学研究涉及诸多因素,许多问题还需要进一步的深入探讨和研究。特别是随着语篇分析研究的不断深入,我们对语篇特征的理解也会越来越深刻。只要我们按照科学的方法,通过语料分析和数据分析加以探究,许多问题会迎刃而解。

“冰冻三尺,非一日之寒。”希望高云博士以此为起点,在以后的教学与研究中,锲而不舍,持之以恒,踔厉奋进,推出更多的研究成果。

苗兴伟

2014年2月21日

List of Abbreviations

ANT	antonymy
CD	cohesive device
COG	cognate
COL	collocation
COM	comparative reference
CON	conjunction
Cr	coherence
Cs	cohesion
DEM	demonstrative adverb
DET	determiner
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELLIP	ellipsis
ESL	English as a second language
GD	grammatical device
HYPHO	hyponymy
L1	first language
L2	second language
LD	lexical device
MERO	meronymy
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NNS	Non-native speakers
NS	Native speakers
PARA	parallel structure
PRON	pronoun
REP	repetition
SLA	second language acquisition

SPSS	statistical packages for social sciences
SUB	substitution
SYN	synonymy
TC	T-unit count
WC	word count
WS	writing score

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Chapter One

Introduction

In the past few decades, a question of continuing interest to researchers in essay writing has been what internal characteristics discriminate essays, ranked high and low in overall quality (Chiang, 1999, 2003; Luk, 2008; McCulley, 1985; Todd et al., 2007; Witte & Faigley, 1981). Empirical studies at the college level have, for the most part, come across this problem: “examining grammatical errors and syntactic features, while generally ignoring the features of texts that extend across sentence boundaries” (Witte & Faigley, 1981, p. 189). Neither the error approach, nor the syntactic approach, is entirely satisfactory. Indeed, research in writing quality leaves much space for further development.

In light of extended discourse in written English, studies in such fields as linguistics, psychology, artificial intelligence and anthropology address questions about how humans produce and comprehend discourse units which were referred to as texts. One such effort that gives rise to attention of researchers in writing is *Cohesion in English* (1976) by M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan. Although Halliday and Hasan do not state how humans produce texts, they do attempt to conceptualize text. To them, the parts of a text, a semantic unit, are linked together by explicit cohesive ties. Therefore, cohesion defines a text as text.

Halliday and Hasan’s concept of textuality, defined with reference to grammatical and lexical relationships that span across sentence boundaries, suggests a number of possibilities for conducting essay research beyond its

frequent analysis of sentence-level operations and features.

1.1 Statement of the Problems

A review of writing research shows that studies on first language (L1) writing have gained recognition (Altenberg & Granger, 2001; Bolton et al., 2003; Chase, 2011; Cheng, 2007; Matsuda & de Pew, 2002; Shaw & Weir, 2007; Silva & Brice, 2004). However, this growth in research output has not applied equally to research on second language (L2) writing (Despite differences between second language and foreign language, L2 in this book, unless specified, refers to both). Therefore, when L1 writing study has expanded at the levels of empirical research, theoretical discussions, and pedagogical recommendations, L2 writing has given rise to less prominently theoretical and pedagogical discussions in this field (Ortega, 2004).

Nevertheless, it is also true that empirical research on L2 writing has steadily grown, particularly in the last decade. This has found expression in academic publications and conferences. The editorial in *Journal of Second Language Writing* (JSLW2009) states that 75% of the articles on L2 writing featured in this journal from 1999 to 2008 have been published. It should also be noted that the second language writing research has been conducted in a variety of foreign language contexts (e. g. Arabic, Chinese, English, Italian, Japanese and Spanish), and the range of language studies in L2 writing research has been opened up.

L2 writing in English has attracted the attention not only of researchers but of writing instructors. College teachers hold that students who produce grammatically right sentences may still not be able to write coherent essays. Much importance has been attached to text cohesion and coherence in the classroom teaching and assessment of English writing (Castro, 2002; Liu & Braine, 2005; Qin & Wen, 2007; Yasuda, 2011; Zhang, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2008). Cohesion and coherence, though disputable, have long been recognized as important discourse features to label whether a piece of writing is “good” or “poor”.

Despite such progress on this aspect, holistic investigation of L2

writing is not adequate and the previously used methods are not without limitations. To begin with, the generalizability of the findings of previous research is questionable since most of them are conducted in natural settings rather than highly controlled environments. Secondly, previous research fails to capture elements of coherence that are hard to be quantified. Given the importance of factors of such discourse features as cohesion and coherence, it is highly advisable to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research in concern with a combination of different methods to strengthen the validity of triangulate data. Finally, the complex and multi-faceted nature of cohesion and coherence calls for more research to complement the findings of previous research on L2 writings. As a line of writing research with an aim of improving writing instruction, studies on discourse features are more practical and more likely to generate pedagogical implications for literacy education.

Although there has been an intense interest in the study of EFL learners' writings, studies on cohesive devices employed in their writings are relatively small in number. There is even a comparative dearth of empirical studies of discourse features, both cohesive devices and coherence in L2 learners' essays. Considering the great number of people learning English in Chinese context, more thorough and detailed investigation into L2 writing is of great significance and necessity. Therefore, cohesion and coherence studies involving Chinese tertiary EFL learners are likely to supplement the research findings of other studies and cast light on the nature of writing in general.

1.2 Purpose and Method of the Study

Considering the limitations of the previous studies, the present study aims to investigate the developmental patterns of discourse features in tertiary Chinese EFL learners' timed argumentative writings at different levels of English proficiency in relation to the theories of cohesion and coherence. There are three objectives to conduct this study. The first objective is to explore the developmental patterns of discourse features in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writings, in particular, grammatical

and lexical devices, ratings of coherence scales so as to help explain the relationship between cohesion, coherence and writing quality. The second objective is to investigate the relationship between cohesion and writing quality that covers the frequency of the use of cohesive devices, the kinds of grammatical and lexical devices most commonly used, and the density of cohesive devices at different grade levels. The third objective is to reveal the relationship between coherence and writing quality that includes the elements predicting a coherent text, the ratings of coherence scales in different levels.

To achieve these goals and obtain reliable data, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are employed in the study. Several instruments, including rating holistic writing quality, coding cohesive devices and rating coherence scales, are used to collect quantitative data. Essay descriptions are used to collect qualitative data, which is a supplement to the quantitative findings. After these essays are rated holistically adapted from Lu (2010), they are coded based on the cohesion coding scheme adapted from Halliday and Hasan (1976), and then categorized and analyzed in accordance with the suggested procedures in cohesion, coherence and writing quality model. The coherence rating scale is adapted from Chiang (1999, 2003) with an aim to explore the relationship between coherence and the overall writing qualities.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The present study is, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, one of the few in-depth studies of discourse features concerning Chinese tertiary EFL learners' argumentative writings across three different levels of English proficiency by means of discourse analysis. Aimed at a better understanding of the nature of cohesion and coherence, a longitudinal study is conducted of the timed argumentative essay writings by Chinese EFL learners across levels intended to explore the developmental patterns of discourse features, relations between cohesion, coherence and writing quality. The present study is significant in theory, methodology and pedagogy.