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GENRE, TEXT-TYPES AND PROFICIENCY

Dr. VIJAYA^{1*}, Dr. MADHAVI GAYATHRI RAMAN²

¹Assistant Professor, The English and Foreign Languages University, Lucknow campus, India.

*Corresponding Author:Email: vijucief@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Materials Development, Testing & Evaluation
The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India.



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ABSTRACT

Genre provides an important frame of reference which helps learners in reading comprehension. Narratives are considered easier to comprehend and hence form the basis of early reading instruction. In an ongoing study, we compare the performance of first year undergraduate learners in an ESL context on texts belonging to two genres: narrative and expository (e.g., a museum poster and a travel brochure). Preliminary analyses suggest that L2 learners with low oral language proficiency may perform better on expository texts than learners with intermediate/high oral language proficiency. We suggest that learners find the expository texts easier because such authentic texts give learners a feeling that they are learning 'real' language which they are more likely to encounter in everyday life. Also, linguistically, they find the telegraphic language in such texts easier to process due to the absence of functional categories.

Key words: Narrative & expository texts; genre; proficiency; ESL

INTRODUCTION

In an English as a Second Language (ESL) context, learners may experience a "considerable gap" between their spoken and reading proficiencies. This is due to the fact that unlike L1 (English) children, ESL learners are required to acquire mastery in reading in a language which is different from their home language. They do not come equipped with the phonological, morpho-syntactic and lexical skills necessary for the task of learning to read in the L2. Speaking provides us the tools (phonological strings, morphemes, and words) that help to decode the written form of the language. It has been shown that oral language proficiency is a strong predictor of success in reading (Snow, Goswami, Burns, Griffin, 1998). In the Indian context, the language is acquired through reading in classrooms, often without any exposure to English outside it (Jangid, 2004; Vijaya, 2008; Raman, 2005). Oral proficiency therefore may not be a good predictor of reading ability in ESL context in India where students learn the second language through reading rather than through speaking. Vijaya (2008) shows that students start speaking (uttering complete simple sentences) only after five years of exposure to the language whereas they are reading and writing fluently by this time.

"These children are thus confronted with the task of learning to read in a language that they have yet to master orally. Because reading instruction strongly builds on oral language proficiency, second-language speaking children may therefore experience a considerable gap." (Droop and Verhoeven, 2003: 78)

English in India

India is a country of many languages.¹ English holds the pride of place in our country. In 35 states and 5 Union Territories, English is one of the principal languages that is a “medium of instruction” in private schools, right from kindergarten onwards: i.e., it is the language used for instruction in all other subjects as well.²

The policy of the Indian government (however) has consistently been to provide school education through the mother tongues and the official language(s) of the states or union territories. Therefore, English is also taught as a “subject” in the “regional-medium” schools throughout the country. Tarinayya (quoted in Amritavalli, 2001: 216) expresses this pithily: “India - where every school-going child has to be taught English-.” It was envisaged as being introduced as a second or third language between the 4th and 7th years of schooling depending on the policy of individual states of the Indian republic.

Given the growing importance of English in the context of the globalization of economic opportunities, however, there is an increasing demand for English. This is reflected in education in two ways: English is now being introduced as a “subject” as early as possible, i.e., in Class I or even kindergarten. A 2003 study by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) shows that English is introduced in Class I or III in 26 states or union territories while only 7 states or union territories introduce it as late as Class IV or V (National Focus Group on English - Position paper, 2005: 1). Moreover, it is no longer being sought just as only a “subject” or a foreign language, but also as a medium of instruction. The increasing demand for English-medium education has led to a spurt in the number of private English-medium schools. Many of these schools are “English-medium” only in name; most often instruction and interaction take place in an Indian language. The quality of instruction may be very poor, as more often than not teachers lack the required competence in English.

The result of this combination of parental aspirations and systemic capacities is that language education in general, and reading instruction in particular, may be extremely poor in our schools. The quality of reading instruction imparted may be somewhat better because of the relative prestige that English enjoys. However, we note that children learning to read in English in India suffer from a major handicap. While on the one hand they may not be taught to read in a language or languages that they speak in their homes, on the other hand they may have to learn to read in a language they do not yet know to speak. This situation is a more general post-colonial malaise that has been succinctly described by Warwick Elley:

Children in developing countries face multiple handicaps in learning to read. ... children in most developing countries are expected to become literate in a non-native language or dialect. Whereas the majority of children in (the developed, GR) countries have the luxury of learning to read and write in their mother tongue, those in most African, South American, South Asian and Oceanic schools are struggling to cope with English, ... or some other metropolitan language, usually a legacy of earlier colonial masters. This challenge of acquiring literacy in a second language ... is true of most developing countries (Elley, 2001: 128).

Text Structure and Reading Levels

Psycholinguistic studies on text structure and connectives have shown equivocal results about the role of connectives in facilitating reading comprehension (Sanders & Noordman, 2000; Sanders & Spooren, 2001). On one hand Gaddy, van den Broek & Sung (2001) provide evidence for the position connective do play a facilitating role *during* the reading process. On the other hand, Meyer (1975), Sanders (1992), and Sanders & Noordman (2000) show that connectives do *not* have this facilitating role.

¹ According to the 1991 census, there are 114 languages and 216 mother tongues, each having a speaker strength of 10,000 and above (Vishwanatham, 2001: 299).

² The importance of English was highlighted as early as in 1966 in the Kothari Commission report which says

For a successful completion of the first degree course, a student should possess an adequate command of English, be able to express himself with reasonable felicity and ease, understand lectures in it.... Therefore adequate emphasis will have to be laid on its study as a language right from the school stage (quoted in Agnihotri, 2001: 196).

In second language reading research, there isn't sufficient research to show how text structure impacts comprehension. Text features such as sentence length, sentence complexity, connectives, etc. across genres have an effect on the level of difficulty of reading. Hence, low proficiency individuals are likely to perform well on expository texts. High proficiency readers are expected to do well on narrative and expository texts.

Johnston and Pearson (1982) offer an explanation for the pattern of performance on the two kinds of texts used in the study. The developmental hypothesis proposed by them suggests that readers progress through three stages: (i) lack of awareness of explicit connectives, (ii) an awareness of explicit connectives and dependence on these, and (iii) inferring relationships even when explicit connectives are not used (Johnston and Pearson, 1982). Thus the level of proficiency along with the presence or absence of linguistic cues have a significant effect reading performance across genres.

In this study we propose that (i) the text structure (a narrative vs. expository) will have an effect on students' reading comprehension, (ii) high proficiency students will do well on both kinds of text, (iii) low proficiency students will do better on the expository/task-based text³.

Population

Thirty three Hindi-English bilinguals in the age-group of 18 to 19 years enrolled in the first year of their Bachelors (foreign languages) programme at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad (India) participated in the study. DIALANG was used to establish the proficiency levels of the entire group. This was in addition to the teacher's in-class judgement of their spoken abilities.

Methodology & Materials

Narrative texts tell a story while expository texts traditionally provide explanations and definitions. Task-based texts reflect the world of the learner. "...In other words, by "task" is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life." (Long 1985: 89) Two texts, "Homesickness" (narrative) and "Museum Poster" (expository), were chosen for the study. The texts were chosen for their naturalness, well-formedness, and for the presence or absence of simple connectives (viz. 'then', 'when', 'within', 'and', 'but').

These texts were selected so as to be accessible to average readers in the class based on the teacher's in-class judgment of their proficiency profiles. It was ensured that specific prior knowledge effects were reduced to a minimum (McNamara and Kintsch, 1996). Majority of our learners belong to the "regional medium" schools from different parts of India and had learnt English as a "subject". In such learning contexts, instruction and interaction takes place in Indian languages. Such learners present a unique learning scenario where the learners are fluent speakers and readers of their L1, but are not fluent readers of the L2 and often do not speak the language at all. Hence our decision to choose texts suited to the optimal level of proficiency of the class.

While the text "museum poster" is essentially a task-based text, it provides information on the lines of an expository text. Moreover, the text provides a rich ground for exploring the problem of reading a text sans connectives vs. one with connectives.

The texts were administered in the form of a pencil paper test. The questions were presented in the multiple choice format. Students had to mark their responses on a separate grid sheet. The two texts were administered during the same class hour by the teacher herself. The texts contained six questions each with one factual and five inferential questions. The preponderance of inferential questions was based on our hunch that though the learners may not necessarily be advanced L2 readers they read well in their language and they are cognitively at par with any adult user of a language. Therefore, in order to minimize the linguistic load, the language of the questions was kept simple.

³ The text used in the study combines features of task-based and expository texts (cf. methodology and materials section).

Analysis & Discussion

Three distinct patterns of performance emerged during our analysis: high, low and intermediate levels of reading proficiency. Our groups coincide with the developmental stages proposed by Johnston and Pearson (1982).

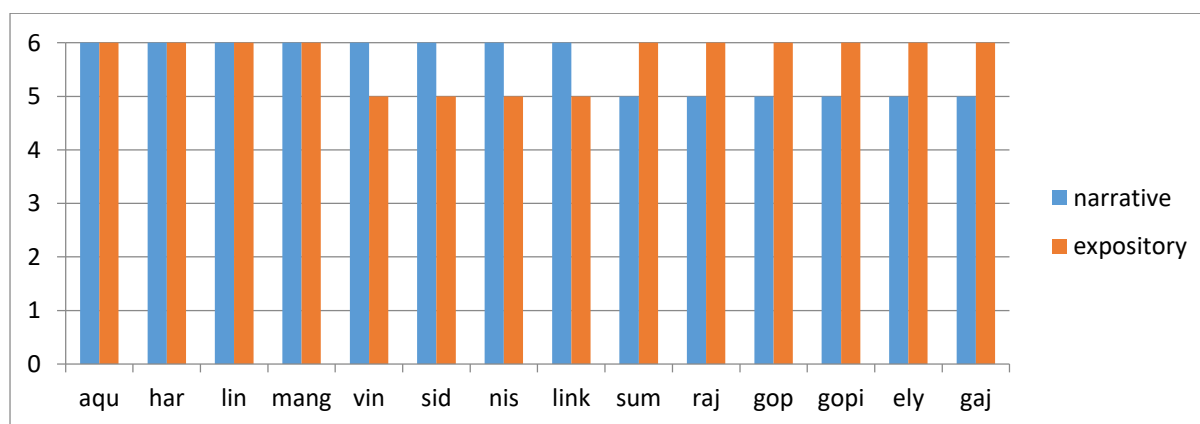
Group Performance

Mean performance on the narrative text is 4.78 and the mean performance on the expository text is 4.45 for the whole group. This does not give us a true picture of differences within the group. We felt that a closer look at the individual scores would provide a better insight into the performance on the two texts. Based on the student scores on the two kinds of texts we were able to identify three levels of reading ability: low, intermediate and high proficiency. Not surprisingly, the student ability groups arrived at coincide with the overall proficiency scores obtained on DIALANG and the teacher's in-class judgment of their spoken abilities. The spoken proficiency of the students in the low reading ability group was restricted to phrases or short simple sentences related to everyday life.

High Proficiency

All students in this group perform above the mean on both text types. 42.8% perform comparatively better on the expository text ($m=4.45$). Of the remaining students in the group, 28.6% perform equally well on both texts whereas 28.6% perform better on the narrative text ($m=4.78$). However, difference in performance on the two texts is too slight to be of significance. Our findings corroborate with our earlier proposal that high proficiency students would do well on both kinds of texts.

The use of connectives leads to longer and more complex sentences. Sentence complexity is known to be a powerful indicator of comprehension difficulty. However, it has been shown that some good readers are less bound to be influenced by text structure than others (Marshall & Glock, 1978-79 cited in Johnston & Pearson, 1982). They are unaffected by the presence or absence of connectives and text structure cues. We hold that the high proficiency students in our group are able to infer relationships in the text even when explicit connectives are not used.

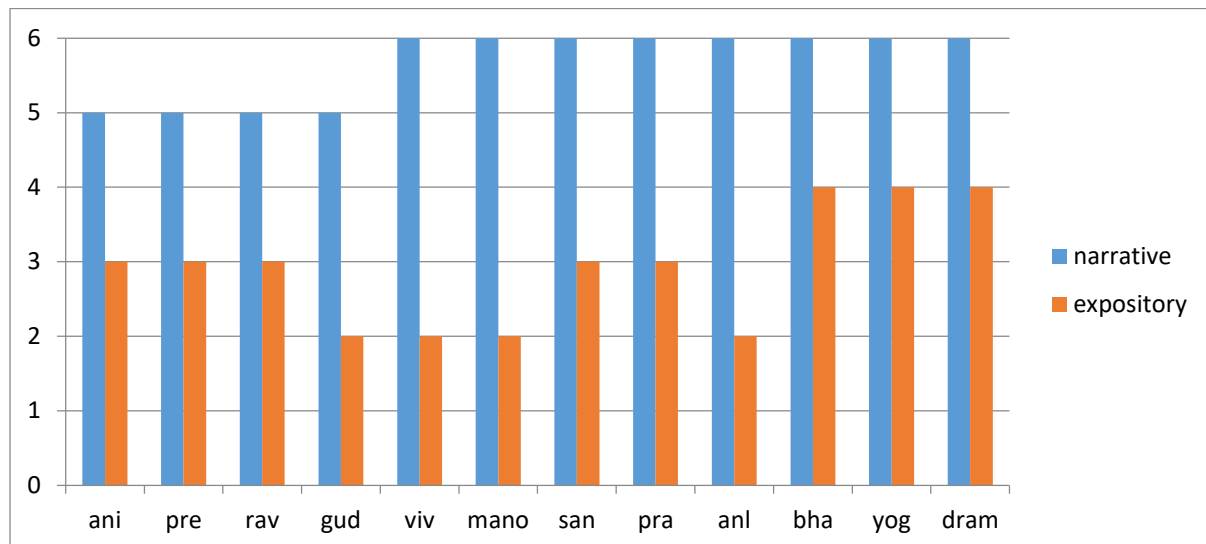


Intermediate Proficiency

Among the intermediate proficiency group, all students perform above the mean score ($m = 4.78$) on the narrative text. All the students in the group fall below the mean score ($m = 4.45$) on the expository text. This was a group which emerged out of our post-hoc analysis of the results. We expected the high proficiency group to perform well on both texts and the low proficiency group to not to perform well on the narrative text. The intermediate group with its better performance on the narrative text and below the mean performance on the expository presented itself as a surprise. This group seems to present an interesting profile of learners who perform almost like high proficiency readers on the narrative texts while at the same time not very different from low proficiency readers on the expository text. This pattern of performance is explained by the developmental hypothesis (Johnston & Pearson, 1982), where the intermediate stage is marked by an

awareness of explicit connectives and dependence on these. The proficiency of this group of L2 learners is high enough for them to understand the general functions of the connectives and their usage. Hence the better performance of the group on the narrative text type.

These students perhaps perform poorly on the expository text also due to their unfamiliarity with this text type. This is probably due to the fact that textbooks in India mostly consist of narratives and poems. Expository texts of the kind used in the study do not find a place in textbooks in lower grades (from grades 1 to the 8). In addition, students in the intermediate and low proficiency groups primarily belong to areas of India where the availability of reading material in English outside the class is sparse (McQuillan and Au, 2001). This is confounded by the lack of exposure to the spoken form of the language as well. The only source of English is reading through the textbook.



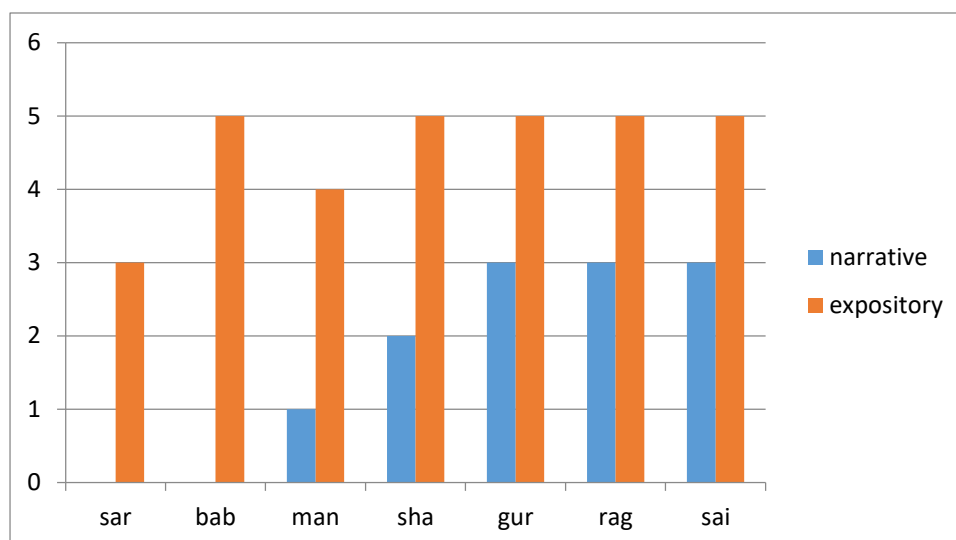
Low Proficiency

Among the seven low proficiency readers, all perform below the mean ($m=4.78$) on the narrative text. In contrast, five out of seven, i.e., 71.4% perform above the group mean ($m=4.45$) on the expository text. This is contrary to the belief that narrative texts are easier to read. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness of explicit connectives as suggested by Johnston and Pearson (1982) in their first stage of the developmental hypothesis. Later studies also show similar results.

“Zinar (1990) showed that, in the late elementary grades, better readers use a reading strategy involving attention to text structure signals. Less skilled readers do not develop such a strategy.

From this we can conclude that if the language proficiency of the L2- readers is too low, it is possible that the benefit from linguistic marking of text structure will disappear, because the readers simply cannot make use of them. Connectives and other relational markers typically belong to the type of linguistic knowledge that is relatively complex, acquired late and is hard to use correctly (MacLean & d’Anglejan 1988). Berman (1979) argues that connectives and other linking devices often cause problems for L2-readers because they are misunderstood or neglected.” (Degand and Sanders, 2002: 743)

We argue that L2 learners with low oral language proficiency may perform better on expository texts. In contrast to younger L1 learners, older L2 learners with their better world knowledge find the expository text easier to process because such authentic texts give learners a feeling that they are learning ‘real’ language which they are more likely to encounter in everyday life. Also, linguistically, they find the telegraphic language easier to process due to the absence of functional categories (see Appendix). Furthermore, the presence of connectives in narratives leads to complex and longer sentences that are more difficult to process for students with low language proficiency. This is borne out by the fact that there are two students with a score of zero on the narrative text. These were students who had been identified by the teacher as possessing poor oral language proficiency.



Conclusion

First language studies have shown that textual organization affects reading comprehension of narrative and expository texts. Research on expository prose provides evidence that knowledge and use of textual organization discriminates good readers from poor readers. Our study validates this idea in the second language context using student performance on the expository text. Low proficiency learners in the study perform better on the expository text because it's devoid of explicit linguistic marking. These learners are unable to make use of the knowledge of connectives and other relational markers (in narratives) which are acquired late and are difficult to use correctly.

The intermediate proficiency group that emerged in our analysis surprisingly performed better than expected on the narrative text. This could be attributed to their proficiency level which, though not as high as the high proficiency group, is still high enough to allow them to understand and use the connectives and relational markers in the text. Cummins' (1984) "inter-dependence hypothesis" states that cognitive and linguistic skills acquired in one language can be transferred to another language. Bossers (1991) argues that this transfer does not take place at low levels of L2 competence. These findings seem to reinforce our conclusion that our intermediate proficiency learners had a sufficiently high L2 competence level that helped them to make use of discourse markers.

Researchers have argued that connectives might be especially useful for early foreign language readers. A well-known effect of linguistic markers is that they make texts more 'understandable' by helping readers to recognize text structure. This is perhaps one of the reasons for including simple narratives in early reading programmes. Our results which have implications for early reading programmes for second language learners contradict these findings with low proficiency learners performing well on expository text. We suggest that for L2 learners, it may be useful to introduce expository/task-based texts in the early stages of reading acquisition before moving on to narrative texts. We believe that foreign language learners would also benefit from this teaching strategy. In fact, in the Indian context, foreign language teachers predominantly use expository/task-based texts for beginners⁴.

Appendix

Passage 1

I was so homesick during my first two weeks at St. Peter's that I devised a way of getting myself sent back home. My idea was that I should all of a sudden develop an attack of acute appendicitis.

⁴ At the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad (India), beginner level courses in foreign languages use expository/task-based texts like menu cards, concert invitations, posters, travel brochures, maps etc. to teach reading. Narrative texts are used primarily to teach the intermediate and advanced levels.

When I reported my sickness to the teacher, I was sent to the Matron. I entered the room clutching my stomach on the right-hand side and staggering pathetically.

'What's the matter with you boy?' the Matron shouted.

'It hurts, Matron,' I moaned. 'Oh, it hurts so much! Just here!'

'You've been over-eating!' she barked.

'I haven't eaten a thing for days,' I lied.

She began prodding my tummy violently with her fingers. I was watching her carefully, and when she hit what I guessed was the appendix place, I let out a yelp that rattled the window-panes.

'Ow! Ow! Ow!' I cried out. 'Don't, Matron, don't!'

Then I slipped in the clincher. 'I've been sick all morning,' I moaned.


This was the right move. Within an hour, the doctor arrived and as he examined me, I did my yelping at what I thought were the proper times.

The Matron returned half an hour later and said, 'Your mother's coming to fetch you this afternoon.'

I didn't answer her. I just lay there trying to look very ill, but my heart was singing all sorts of wonderful songs. As I was taken home on a ferry, I felt so wonderful to leave that dreaded school building that I very nearly forgot I was meant to be ill.

Passage 2




 Ministry of Culture, Government of India,
National Museum, National Museum Institute
and
National Gallery of Canada
 Present an exhibition

Inuit Art from
the Canadian
Arctic
 (An exhibition of Inuit masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)

SHRI JAWAHAR SIRCAR
Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Government of India

Will inaugurate the exhibition at 11:30 AM
On Monday, September 27th 2010
 at the National Museum, Janpath, New Delhi

The exhibition will remain open from 28th September 2010 to 2nd January 2011
 From 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM (Monday closed)
 and
 During Commonwealth Games 2010, 4th to 13th October, 2010
 From 10:00 AM to 9:00 PM

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