**Article**

**The role of information management in the assessment of grammar in**

**L2 academic writing: An exploratory case study**

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**Abstract**

*Information management of discourse – the ability of a writer to use linguistic forms to organize and present information in a written text – is a key component of second language (L2) ability models in the language assessment literature (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Weigle, 2002), but Purpura’s (2004) language ability model developed specifically for assessment purposes is the only one that considers it to be part of the ability to use grammar accurately and meaningfully when producing a text in an L2. The current study investigated whether L2 academic writing teachers consider information management of discourse as an assessment criterion when assessing grammar in L2 academic texts. Fourteen students in an academic English as a second language writing course at an English-medium university in Canada and their teacher participated in this case study. Students’ essay exam scripts were collected, and the Theme-Rheme progression (TRP) patterns and links (Daneš, 1974) as well as the distribution of new and given information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) in these essays were analyzed. Pearson correlation coefficients between the teacher-assigned grammar grade and the results from the TRP and information distribution analyses were calculated. The findings indicate that information management of discourse indeed forms part of the assessment criteria for grammar in academic writing for the teacher in this study. The implications of this finding for L2 writing pedagogy are discussed.*

Keywords: assessing grammar; second language writing; academic writing; information management; systemic functional linguistics

**[A]Introduction**

A growing body of second language (L2) writing research within a framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) has focused on providing L2 writing teachers with strategies to help their students improve their writing. The goal of SFL, broadly, is to examine texts in order to analyze the choices language users make in order to communicate messages in written or oral form, and L2 writing research within this framework has often focused on analyzing information management of discourse (henceforth simply referred to as information management). The term information management refers to the linguistic forms that are used by the writer to organize and present the information in a text so that the intended meaning is clearly communicated to the reader (Purpura, 2004).

In theoretical models of both L1 and L2 writing ability, information management is usually seen as a separate category or skill in its own right and as distinct from grammatical ability or language knowledge. For example, researchers have considered it as part of the textual knowledge that language users need in order to communicate in writing (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Weigle, 2002). It has also been considered as part of sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Weigle, 2002) or discourse competence (Canale, 1983a, 1983b), in both cases a category separate from grammar. In contrast, Purpura (2004) includes information management as one of several components that comprise the ability to use grammar in an L2 in his definition of grammatical abilityistinct from grammatical ability or language knowledge. For example – for the purpose of language assessment. Purpura (2004) argues that a comprehensive model of grammatical ability needs to include the ability to organize information effectively into texts and discourse as well as the ability to apply knowledge of graphology, lexicon, morphology, and syntax. In his model, information management refers to a writer’s ability to use specific linguistic forms and devices to organize the discourse. In particular, Purpura refers to the ability to manipulate sentence structure so that new and given information can be placed appropriately in the flow of the written discourse. For Purpura (2004), grammatical ability is, therefore, not just defined on the sentence level but also includes knowledge on the suprasentential and text level so that texts can communicate the writer’s message effectively. The inclusion of information management techniques and strategies as part of a model of grammatical ability is one of the key differences between Purpura’s (2004) model and the models by other researchers (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale, 1983a, 1983b; Canale & Swain, 1980; Weigle, 2002). It has not been investigated, however, whether information management is actually assessed as part of an overall assessment of grammatical ability by teachers in L2 writing classrooms, as Purpura argues. In other words, the degree to which this theoretical model of grammatical ability corresponds to what is assessed in practice needs to be examined. The purpose of the current study is to draw on an SFL framework to examine whether L2 academic writing teachers consider information management to be part of the construct on which they base their assessment of grammar in academic texts. The SFL framework was chosen as an analytical tool because it allows a detailed text analysis of the linguistic forms used to manage the placement of information in written texts.

**[A]Investigating Information Management in L2 writing using an SFL framework**

While SFL has been used extensively in L1 writing research, L2 writing researchers have only relatively recently started to work within an SFL framework. The aim of such research has been to identify textual characteristics that make written texts more effective (Gebhard, Willett, Jimenez, & Piedra, 2010; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007; Wang, 2007) in order to help teachers diagnose issues in their students’ writing (e.g., Gebhard, Demers, & Castillo-Rosenthal, 2008) and to track L2 writing development over time (e.g., Christie, 2002; Go, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2004; Schleppegrell & Go, 2007; Wu, 1997). Only a few studies have focused specifically on examining and assessing information management techniques employed in L2 texts, the focus of the current study. Those studies have relied on two methods to examine information management in L2 texts: topical structure analysis (TSA, Lautamatti, 1978, 1987) or a Theme-Rheme progression (TRP, Daneš, 1974) analysis. These two methods of analysis are very similar in that both examine and record the number of topical links and the type of link patterns among clauses and sentences that create a cohesive and coherent text structure. In other words, both trace what is discussed where in a text and how ideas in sentences are connected to other ideas mentioned elsewhere. The methods differ, however, in the terminology that is used by the researchers. TSA focuses on topics or content of the text and uses general terminology to describe and discuss the analysis. A TRP analysis, on the other hand, uses SFL terminology such as Theme and Rheme. Using this terminology, the analysis starts by identifying T-units[[1]](#footnote-2) in the text, which are then split into the topical Theme (the first noun, verb, or adverbial phrase of a sentence) and the Rheme (the rest of the T-unit).[[2]](#footnote-3) The TRP analysis examines how the Themes relate to Themes and Rhemes in other T-units. In brief, they both allow the examination of linguistic and syntactic aspects of texts and their relation to the management and placement of information in the discourse. In the following, I have retained the terminology used by the original researchers when reporting on the research of others but employ TRP terminology when discussing the research in the current study.

TSA has been used in a number of studies. Knoch (2007), for example, developed an empirically constructed rating scale based on TSA to develop an effective coherence rating scale which would consider information management. Another line of TSA-based research has examined the relationship between the level of coherence in texts and the assessment of overall writing quality This research found statistically significant differences in terms of topic progression patterns, although the association between the writing quality ratings and types of progressions found in high- and low-rated compositions differed in these studies. In L2 writing research, low-rated essays tend to have significantly more parallel progressions, where the topic from one sentence to another remains the same, than sequential progressions, where the comment on one topic becomes the topic of the following sentence (Burneikaitė & Zabiliūtė, 2003; Schneider & Connor, 1990). In L1 writing, Witte and Faigley (1981) found that high-rated essays had more cohesive ties in general, and Witte (1983) found that low-rated essays contained more sequential progressions than parallel progression, the inverse of the finding from L2 research. Wu (1997), on the other hand, did not discover differences in the patterns of progressions used in the high-and low-rated essays by both L1 and L2 writers, even when accounting for L1 background and overall rating of the essays.

In L2 writing research, TRP analysis has mainly been used to examine the communicative effectiveness of L2 texts, especially in terms of where information is placed and how ideas are linked to other ideas mentioned in the text. A TRP analysis is particularly useful in determining the communicative effectiveness of texts in terms of information management independently of the level of grammatical accuracy because it is able to detect why a sentence may be grammatically accurate but does not fit well into the overall discourse, thereby identifying shortcomings in information management (Mauranen, 1996), especially in relation to the distribution of new and given information (D. Kies, 2009; S. G. Kies, 2009). Mauranen found that Finnish writers of L2 English frequently employed unmotivated themes (having no purpose in linking discourse as would be expected in English) and Rheme-to-Rheme connections rather than Theme-to-Theme or Rheme-to-Theme connections, as would be expected in English. D. Kies (2009) found that the US-educated English as a second language (ESL) writers in his study had difficulty using Theme-Rheme progression appropriately since often the new information was not placed towards the end of the Rheme of the T-unit but elsewhere, resulting in ineffective discourse. S. G. Kies (2009), on the other hand, identified a wider range of issues in the L2 writers’ texts in her study. Among the most important ones were the inclusion of too much or too little information in the Rheme of a sentence and the lack of links or the presence of only weak links between the ideas in different sentences.

Both Go (2003) and Christie (2002) focused on developmental aspects of information management in written texts. In a case study of developing L2 writers, Go was able to trace and document different stages of development in these writers than Theme-to-Theme or Rheme-Theme, Go was able to focus in on information management and different performance levels in that respect independently of the level of grammatical accuracy evident in these texts. Despite the continuing linguistic challenges experienced by the young L2 writers in her study, she was able to track progress towards more academic genres by focusing on how information was presented and linked in their texts. Christie (2002), on the other hand, examined the texts of young L1 writers and discovered that this group experienced similar challenges as those found in the texts of developing L2 writers, but that writers developed control over information management and Theme-Rheme links as their literacy skills advanced. According to Christie, this control over information in the Theme is essential in order to link what has been said to new information and thereby develop the discourse. Finally, Alonso Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998) employed TRP analysis in instructional materials designed to explain to students the source of information management problems in their texts. Some of the common issues that were targeted in their materials include the overuse of the same Theme, inappropriate or lack of Theme-Rheme links, and empty Rhemes that contain no substantial information. These issues are similar to the ones identified by S. G. Kies (2009) in her study.

In brief, there is a growing body of research that contributes to our understanding of issues surrounding information management in L2 writers’ texts by examining whether information management techniques distinguish between the texts of L1 and L2 writers and between texts that were rated high and low using a holistic rating scale of overall text quality. However, it has not been investigated whether information management is or should also be assessed when assessing grammar in L2 writers’ academic texts, as Purpura’s (2004) stipulates in his model of grammatical ability for language assessment.

The purpose of the current study is, therefore, to examine the relationship between information management and the assessment of grammatical ability in L2 academic texts. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research question: Does information management form part of the construct of grammatical ability assessed in an L2 academic writing classroom? In order to answer this question, the information management in students’ essay exam scripts was analyzed using TRP and information distribution analyses. A teacher interview about the assessment of grammatical ability was also conducted in order to determine the assessment criteria. The results from the text analyses were then triangulated with findings from the interview data.

**[A]Method**

***[B]Research context and participants***

The research question was investigated in a case study of one academic ESL writing class focusing on academic writing and vocabulary development at an English-medium university. All students in this course had scored at least 75 on the TOEFL iBT or 6.5 on the IELTS, which means that they were considered to be ready to commence their academic study at this university but were also required to take one to three credit ESL academic writing courses based on the their performance on an in-house placement test. Consequently, these students took ESL and discipline-specific academic courses at the same time. The study took place in the third course of a three-course sequence of ESL academic writing courses.

Fourteen students and their teacher participated in the study. All student participants were undergraduate students in the first two years of their degree, and half were in their first or second semester. The students ranged in age from 18 to 39 (*M* = 23.1, *SD* = 6.0) and came from different L1 backgrounds (5 Chinese, 3 Arabic, 2 French, 1 Portuguese, and 1 Spanish; two participants did not declare a first language). Although most students (*n* = 6) pursued a degree in the business school, the other students were enrolled in a variety of academic major programs (2 in social sciences, 2 in engineering, 2 in natural sciences, 1 in humanities, and 1 in fine arts). The teacher was a native speaker of English with a degree in teaching ESL and 33 years of experience teaching and assessing ESL in the classroom.

The case study approach chosen for this study naturally means that the number of participants is small in order to allow for a more detailed examination of the issue at hand. Some might argue that because of this the findings from this study cannot be generalized to other research contexts and participants. Yin (2009), however, argues that this is not a limitation applicable only to case study research but one that applies to all empirical research even with larger numbers of participants. In other words, the findings of the current study will have to be confirmed by research in other research contexts and different groups of participants, as is the case with any empirical study.

***[B]Data collection***

The data analyzed for the current study was collected as part of a larger research project (Neumann, 2011, 2014) that examined the assessment of grammatical ability more broadly and was not limited to information management in particular. At the end of week 7 of a 13-week semester, the students wrote their midterm exam, a timed-impromptu writing test. Although the timed-impromptu test has been criticized, it is still a commonly used writing assessment tool (Barkaoui, 2010; Crusan, 2010; Cumming, 2013; Hamp-Lyons, 2011; He & Shi, 2012; Weigle, 2002) because there can be no doubt regarding who the writer of the produced text is (Weigle, 2012; White, 1995) and no doubt regarding ability in what they write since no assistance is available (Weigle, 2012). Furthermore, even alternatives to the timed essay, such as the writing portfolio, often include timed pieces of writing (Crusan, 2010; White, 1984). For the midterm exam, students could choose one of three topics[[3]](#footnote-4) that elicited a cause-and-effect essay (see Appendix A for the list of topics) and had 2.5 hours to write the essay. Before the teacher marked the essays, the exam scripts were photocopied for subsequent analysis. After the teacher had assigned the grades, the completed evaluation grid (see Appendix B) for each exam script was photocopied. The teacher then returned the exam scripts and evaluation grids to her students. Towards the end of the semester, the teacher was interviewed to inquire about her criteria for assessing grammar in L2 academic writing. An interview protocol was developed, and four of the 14 essays in the data set were selected for discussion during the interview. The interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed.

***[B]Data analysis***

The analysis of information management focuses on the linguistic and syntactic aspects of how the information is managed in discourse. For this analysis, Themes and Rhemes for all T-units in the essays were identified. Following Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), a Theme was defined as the word, group, or phrase that realizes an experiential function, in other words the first constituent of the clause that relates to the content of the message and is related to the speaker’s representation of the world. It can be preceded by other elements that relate to the interpersonal metafunction (establishing and maintaining social relationship with interlocutors, especially in oral discourse) and the textual metafunction (organizing and constructing the text), but the Theme only ends after the experiential function has been realized and the clause has a topical Theme. The topical Theme is realized by one clause constituent – a noun phrase, a verb phrase, an adverbial group, or prepositional phrase – that is related to a participant, process, or a circumstance. The process, realized by a verbal group, is the central element of the clause. It must be accompanied by participants, expressed through a nominal group, and may be complemented by a circumstance, in the form of an adverbial or prepositional phrase. The Theme of a clause, therefore, ends after the first participant, process, or circumstance has been expressed in the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Figure 1 contains several examples of different topical Themes. In Example 1, both topical Themes are realized by noun phrases. In Example 2, the first Theme is realized by an adverbial group (the *in order to* clause), whereas the second is realized by a prepositional phrase (*in Harvey’s*). Once the Theme had been identified, the rest of each T-unit was coded as its Rheme.

After the identification of Themes and Rhemes, the TRP was analyzed in all essays. Three progression patterns identified by Daneš’ (1974) and illustrated in Figure 1 with data from this study were used as reference points to identify TRP links: (a) the constant Theme progression, where the topical subjects of two Themes are the same or refer to the same idea; (b) the zigzag Theme progression, where the Rheme or one of its elements becomes the topical Theme of a subsequent T-unit; and (c)the split Rheme progression, where one Rheme is linked to multiple subsequent topical Themes. Second, the distribution of *new* and *given* information in Themes and Rhemes was examined using Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2004) definition: *Given* information is considered by the writer as using Halliday and Matthiessen’s topical Themes. Second, the *new* information. Each Theme and Rheme was coded as containing new and/or given information. Finally, Pearson correlation coefficients between the grammar grade that the teacher had assigned on the grammar criterion of the analytical evaluation grid (see Appendix B) and the values from the TRP and the information distribution analyses were calculated.

**Figure 1:** Theme-Rheme progression patterns

1. The constant Theme progression:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Rheme** |
| All the big fast food chains, | prepare their sandwiches with frozen meats, |
| and they | deep fry their french fries. |

1. The zigzag Theme progression

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Rheme** | |
| In order to attract more consumers, | | many fast food restaurants have their unique way of processing food. |
| For example, in Harvey’s, | | they grill meat instead of frying them for making hamburgers. |

1. The split Rheme progression:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Rheme** |
| There | are various reasons for which they prefer those over a healthier way of eating. |
| First of all is | the idea that they can spend some time in the company of their colleagues, enjoying a tasty meal and saying a couple of jokes before they go back in the office. |
| The other reason for which they choose these kind of foods | is because is more convenient to take out the credit card or the debit card and pay for an already prepared meal, than to actually prepare it at home. |

A second coder verified the researchert the credit card or the debit card and pay for an already prepared meal, than to actually prepare it at home, or grade that the teacher had assigned on the grammar criterion of the analytical evaluation the researcher reviewed the coding for the remaining essays to ensure coding consistency for the data set.

The interview was analyzed using open and axial coding techniques associated with grounded theory to identify themes and categories in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding requires the researcher to approach the qualitative data without any preconceived notions about what information they might contain. Axial coding refers to a technique whereby each instance of a code or category that appears in the data is examined against other instances in the data to ensure coding consistency and guide the emergence of codes and categories. To validate this analysis, peer-debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) was used. A second researcher not involved in the study but familiar with the research project reviewed the data, the emerging codes and themes, and the final summary and presentation of findings to assess the validity of the interpretation of the data.

**[A]Presentation of results**

***[B]TRP and Information Distribution Analyses***

Table 1 presents the results of the TRP analysis and the grammar grade for each student.[[4]](#footnote-5) Most students relied exclusively on constant and zigzag progressions. Overall, students used more zigzag progressions although some students (namely, Anas, Carolina, Emilie, and Sun) used the constant progression more often than the zigzag progression. Only three students employed one split Rheme progression respectively with two to four links. Khaled is the only student to rely solely on one type of progression (the zigzag progression), and he also clearly established the lowest number of TRP links in his text. Correlation coefficients were computed between the teacher-assigned grammar grade, the TRP links per T-unit ratio, the percentage of given information in Themes, and the percentage of new information in Rhemes. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for these variables, and Table 3 displays the Pearson Correlation Coefficients. A *p* value of 0.05 was required for statistical significance. Only the strong correlation of 0.75 between the grammar grade and the TRP links per T-unit ratio was statistically significant, which suggests a higher number of TRP links is associated with a higher grammar grade. In other words, the more TRP links students included in their essay, the higher the grammar grade assigned by the teacher is likely to be.

**Table 1:** Theme-Rheme progression types and grammar grade by student

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student** | **Constant**  **Links** | **Zigzag**  **Links** | **Split Rheme** | **Split Rheme Links** | **Number of**  **T-units** | **Links per**  **T-unit** | **Grammar Grade** |
| Anas | 8 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 47 | 0.34 | 60 |
| Basil | 9 | 17 | - |  | 49 | 0.53 | 86 |
| Bolin | 4 | 6 | - |  | 41 | 0.24 | 62 |
| Carolina | 10 | 6 | - |  | 36 | 0.44 | 76 |
| Emilie | 6 | 3 | - |  | 24 | 0.38 | 82 |
| Gabriela | 3 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 33 | 0.42 | 84 |
| Hassan | 1 | 9 | - |  | 22 | 0.45 | 92 |
| Julio | 9 | 11 | - |  | 33 | 0.61 | 86 |
| Khaled |  | 3 | - |  | 16 | 0.19 | 70 |
| Li | 7 | 12 | - |  | 38 | 0.50 | 84 |
| Marissa | 2 | 6 | 1 | 4 | 49 | 0.24 | 76 |
| Sun | 5 | 2 | - |  | 22 | 0.32 | 78 |
| Wei | 3 | 2 | - |  | 23 | 0.22 | 62 |
| Yi | 6 | 9 | - |  | 52 | 0.29 | 66 |
| **Total** | **73** | **104** | **3** | **8** |  |  |  |

**Table 2:** Means and Standard Deviations for the Grammar Grade, TRP Links per T-unit, the Information Distribution

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *M* | *SD* |
| Grammar Grade | 76.0 | 10.4071 |
| Links per T-unit | 0.3697 | 0.12783 |
| Given Information in Themes (%) | 57.2 | 10.8467 |
| New Information in Rhemes (%) | 85.0 | 10.3164 |

**Table 3:** Pearson Correlations Coefficients between the Grammar Grade, TRP links per T-unit, the Information Distribution

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Grammar Grade | | Links per T-unit | Given Information  in Theme (%) | New Information  in Rheme (%) |
| Grammar Grade | | – | 0.752\*\* | 0.362 | 0.170 |
| Links per T-unit | |  | – | 0.376 | 0.247 |
| Given Information in Theme (%) | |  |  | – | −0.250 |
| New Information  in Rheme (%) | |  |  |  | – |
| \*\* *p* < 0.01 | |

Table 4 presents an overview of the results for the information distribution analysis and the grammar grade for each student. The expected or standard pattern of distribution in English is that given information should be found in the Theme of a T-unit and new information in its Rheme (Halliday, 1967). As can be seen from Table 2, the Themes the students found the Theme of formation at least 50% of the time, and most values fell between 50% and 70%. Overall, 56.2% of all Themes contain given information. The percentage of students who placed new information in the Rhemes of the T-units in their texts is even higher: 85% of the students did so at least 75% of the time. Overall, 86.2% of all Rhemes contain given information. Consequently, we find very limited variance on these two variables in the current sample. It is, therefore, not surprising that the correlations between the teacher-assigned grammar grade and the percentage of given information in Themes and new information in Rhemes, respectively, are not statistically significant (cf., Ortega, 2003).

**Table 4:** Information Distribution and Grammar Grade by Student

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | THEMES | |  | RHEMES | |  |
| Student | New Information | Given Information |  | New Information | Given Information | Grammar Grade |
| Anas | 20.5 (46.6%) | 23.5 (53.4%) |  | 34.5 (78.4%) | 9.5 (21.6%) | 60 |
| Basil | 20 (40%) | 30 (60%) |  | 45 (90%) | 5 (10%) | 86 |
| Bolin | 16 (40%) | 24 (60%) |  | 37 (94.9%) | 2 (5.1%) | 62 |
| Carolina | 14.5 (43.9%) | 18.5 (56.1) |  | 32 (97%) | 1 (3%) | 76 |
| Emilie | 10 (40%) | 15 (60%) |  | 24 (96%) | 1 (4%) | 82 |
| Gabriela | 6 (22.2%) | 21 (77.8%) |  | 17.5 (64.8%) | 9.5 (35.2%) | 84 |
| Hassan | 7 (30.4%) | 16 (69.6%) |  | 19 (86.4%) | 3 (13.6%) | 92 |
| Julio | 16 (51.6%) | 15 (48.4%) |  | 28.5 (91.9%) | 2.5 (8.1%) | 86 |
| Khaled | 8 (47.1%) | 9 (52.9%) |  | 14 (82.4%) | 3 (17.6%) | 70 |
| Li | 11 (30.6%) | 25 (69.5%) |  | 31 (86.1%) | 5 (13.9%) | 84 |
| Marissa | 34.5 (67.6%) | 16.5 (32.4%) |  | 46.5 (91.2%) | 4.5 (8.8%) | 76 |
| Sun | 10.5 (47.7%) | 11.5 (52.3%) |  | 16.5 (75%) | 5.5 (25%) | 78 |
| Wei | 11.5 (47.9%) | 12.5 (52.1%) |  | 16 (66.7%) | 8 (33.3%) | 62 |
| Yi | 23 (43.4%) | 30 (56.6%) |  | 47 (88.7%) | 6 (11.3%) | 66 |
| **Total** | **208.5 (43.8%)** | **267.5 (56.2%)** |  | **408.5 (86.2%)** | **65.5 (13.8%)** |  |

***[B]Teacher interview***

A number of themes emerged from the interview data. However, only those related to information management are mentioned here. For a detailed discussion of the complete findings from the teacher interview, please see Neumann (2011, 2014).

According to the teacher, her instructional focus for grammar was to enable students to write ‘sentences [that] are logical, reasonable, and coherent/, which carries over into the assessment of grammar, where her biggest criterion is comprehensibility. To her, this means that the text does not make ‘the back of [her] head go *screech!’* to the teacher, her instructional focus for grammar was to enable students to write ‘sentences [that] are logical, reasonable, and coherent’, which carries over into the assessment of grammar, where her biggest criteria: vocabulary, sentence structure, and the thought process that is evident in students’ texts. She explains the idea of how this thought process becomes visible with reference to the second paragraph from Julio’s essay. According to the teacher, in this student’s essay we can see ‘how the sentences relate to the previous one, the following one’. This is also evident in the TRP analysis of a paragraph from Julio’s essay, which is displayed with the TRP analysis in Figure 2. There are a number of both constant and zigzag links evident in this paragraph, and they illustrate the links between sentences that the teacher was referring to. In other words, although the teacher did not refer to TRP progressions during the interview, in her comments on this paragraph, she clearly picked up on the same links that the TRP analysis discovered and assigned a high grade of 43/50 (86%) on the grammar criterion on the evaluation grid.

**Figure 2:** TRP analysis of Julio’s second paragraph

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Rheme** |
| It is a fact | that [stress] makes individuals to concentrate and focus in some task. |
| Stress due to some difficulty | is what make people work faster. |
| If stress were not present in our lives | we would not have the necessity to do things. |
| Workers in the industries | [need to feel pressure from the boss to work harder]. |
| [For this reason], in some companies | if the president needs to solve some problem fast sometimes he will give the task to [the work with more duties]. |
| This worker | is under a level of stress than anyone else, |
| then he | will solve the difficulty faster. |
| It | is the same for schools and universities, |
| students | always study harder for final exams because they are [under a lot stress and pressure]. |
| Stress | makes people more efficient. |

**[A]Discussion**

This study examined the question whether information management forms part of the construct of grammatical ability assessed in an L2 academic writing classroom. This appears to be the case in the research context of this study because there is a strong positive correlation between the TRP links per T-unit ratio and the teacher-assigned grammar grade. Furthermore, the teacher explained that she considers the TRP when assigning a grammar grade although she used different terms in her explanation of this aspect of the assessment criteria. The TRP analysis used here to operationalize information management focused on linguistic and syntactic elements of text structure and development and analyzed the relationship between the starting point of the sentence (the Theme) and what precedes it (Fries, 1981). These are the links the teacher pointed out during the interview as part of what she called grammatical ability assessed in an L2 academic writing classroom. Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2004) model of grammatical ability, which includes information management as one of its components. His model differs from other models of language ability in this regard, which consider grammatical ability and information management as separate categories (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale, 1983a, 1983b; Canale & Swain, 1980; Weigle, 2002). The distribution of given and new information between Themes and Rhemes, however, was not related to the teacher from the grammar grade. This may be due in part to the fact that many students already mostly conformed to the expected distribution, thereby limiting the variance on this variable, which may have impacted the results. In the interview, the teacher did not indicate information distribution as a focus of instruction in the class. It, therefore, seems unlikely that the students were formally taught about this expected information distribution in the course. According to the teacher, she focused on helping her students learn how to write ‘sentences [that] are logical, reasonable, and coherent’. For her, this means sentences that are grammatically sound with logical word choices so that the meaning can be easily understood. Students may have picked up on the expected information distribution by themselves or may have been formally taught about this distribution in previous courses. There is, however, no data available to accurately determine the source of the students’ knowledge.

While information management was found to form part of the teacher’s assessment criteria, it would be wrong to conclude that information management was the teacher’s only or her most important assessment criterion. In fact, as part of the larger study (Neumann, 2011, 2014), grammatical accuracy was found to be a primary focal point of this teacher’s assessment criteria, it would be wrong to conclude that information management was the teacher’s only, or her most important, assessment criterion. In fact, as part of the larger study ([Neumann, 2011](#_ENREF_31), [2014](#_ENREF_32)), grammatical accuracy was found to be a primary focal point of this teacher’s grammar assessment. However, at least for this teacher, information management formed part of the overall assessment criteria for grammatical ability in L2 writing.

This study has important implications for pedagogy in the L2 academic writing classroom. It provides further support for the call by Schleppegrell (2004, 2009) and others (e.g., Alonso Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998; Byrnes, 2009; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Gebhard et al., 2010; Meyer, 2008) to explicitly teach information management by drawing on TRP and effective distribution of new and given information in T-units using an SFL framework. Other studies have found that the quality of information management is related to overall ratings of writing quality of both L1 and L2 academic texts (e.g., Burneikaitė & Zabiliūtė, 2003; D. Kies, 2009; Mauranen, 1996; Schneider & Connor, 1990). The current study contributes to this research by providing evidence that information management is also related to grades on the grammar criterion of an analytical rating scale, independently of the overall score for the essay. In the current study, the teacher did not focus on teaching TRP or effective distribution of information. However, she did notice and assign higher grades when students succeeded in using TRP effectively, as she pointed out in relation to Julio’s essay during the interview. Because the assessment of both TRP and information distribution contributes to scores and grades even through raters may not be aware of considering these criteria (see the current study as well as Burneikaitė, & Zabiliūtė, 2003; D. Kies, 2009; Mauranen, 1996; Schneider & Connor, 1990; Witte, 1983), it is even more important that L2 writers learn to employ both effectively in their texts.

If information management were taught explicitly in L2 academic writing classrooms, this would be advantageous for students. Students are more likely to notice and become aware of the connection between the information management in their texts and the linguistic resources needed to manage information effectively. This kind of instruction would draw their attention to the linguistic forms and the syntactic structures and manipulation required to do so. This noticing would then enable students to focus on the linguistic technicalities that could help them improve the management of the information that they wish to include in their texts and ultimately the communicative effectiveness of their texts. In turn, students would be better equipped to improve or change the ‘flow of information and discourse’ when teachers comment on these areas of information management in their feedback. When teachers comment on the flow of information, this comment is directed not at *what* information is included in the students’ texts but rather at *how* this information is presented. In other words, mastering the linguistic resources and syntactic manipulations that lead to good TRP links can help students in their revisions when such a shortcoming is identified by a teacher in students’ texts. This is particularly important for writers whose first language follows different principles of information management. Whereas it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss this issue in detail, the findings regarding L1 Finnish writers of English as an L2 discussed above illustrate how unexpected use of Themes and Rhemes and TRPs can affect the effectiveness of texts in English (Mauranen, 1996).

What difference this type of instruction could make to L2 writers can be observed in the analysis of two paragraphs from two participants’ texts on the effects of the popularity of fast food restaurants. Figures 3 and 4 display the TRP and information distribution analyses for these two extracts. In Sun’s text in Figure 3, new and given information is not effectively distributed. The Themes of the first two T-units contain new information and their Rhemes given information instead of the expected distribution in English texts. If she had been more aware of the effective distribution of information, she could have started her paragraph by linking to given information, such as her preceding discussion of two other positive effects: the convenience of fast food when traveling and leading a busy life. Furthermore, if Sun had been more conscious of the importance of TRP links and the role they play in creating a cohesive text, she would have been in a better position to introduce at least some links into her text; her fourth paragraph contains none. Marissa’s text in Figure 4 contains almost exclusively new information. As a result, she is unable to establish effective links between previously mentioned information and the new information. Had she been more aware of the effect of information distribution and the TRP links on the effectiveness of her texts, she could have focused on ensuring that she does not have empty themes (the three pronouns in the Themes of T-units three to five) and that the Themes in her example (T-units seven to eleven) are connected to preceding Themes and Rhemes.

**Figure 3:** TRP and Information Distribution Analyses of Sun’s fourth paragraph

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Rheme** |
| (1) Last, the people who suffer from obesity because they enjoy fast food | bring the awareness of the importance of healthy food. |
| (2) Mainly because fast food restaurant provide high calorie food, | the customers are tend to be obesive or tend to have cardiac problems eventually. |
| (3) There | are so many concerns related to the food habbit that the modern people often eat fast food rather than they cook themselves with fresh food. |
| (4) The popularity of fast food restaurants | makes them dismiss the value of good food; |
| (5) however, it | has an effect on the modern people to think the importance of the healthy food habit due to the obesity problem related to fast food. |

New information is highlighted in grey.

**Figure 4:** TRP and Information Distribution Analyses of Marissa’s second paragraph

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Rheme** |
| (1) Time | is money. |
| (2) This expression | summarizes the logical thinking of most people. |
| (3) It | ‘s hard to find today those who can actually seat and enjoy a good meal because most of the time we are all on the go or simply have some thing to do. |
| (4) It’ | s then that fast food comes in our lives. |
| (5) I’ | [am preety sure that this morning not a lot of us had the time to have an actual breakfast,] |
| (6) so a quick stop at a coffee place | was required. |
| (7) An example within just two blocks from the hall building of the university | there is at least seven coffee stores, not counting those inside the building. |
| (8) Students | are those that have less time to enjoy a real meal. |
| (9) Sometimes | between two classes or classes and work. There is only a few minutes and not enough time; |
| (10)however, on the way | there they are |
| (11) fast food restaurants | is the way to keep it going. |
| in the case of executives, | lunch breaks are getting smaller each day; |
| (12) the solution | is the fast food restaurent situated on the hall of the building. |
| (13) When time is short and our body ask for more energy, | fast food restaurent is the way to go in our lifestyle nowadays. |

New information is highlighted in grey.

In brief, this study found that the teacher considered information management to some extent when she assigned a grammar grade on the analytical evaluation grid; this finding provides empirical support for the inclusion of information management in Purpura’s (2004) model of grammatical ability. From an SFL perspective, the inclusion of information management as a criterion in the assessment of grammar may be obvious since lexico-grammatical resources such as cohesive devices and word order need to be employed and manipulated successfully in order to manage information in discourse. However, as the discussion of the language ability models in the L2 assessment literature and the writing ability models in the L1 and L2 writing literature at the beginning of article shows, Purpura is the only one to have done so. The results of this study provide support for his model in that the teacher registers TRP links even though she does not consciously pay attention to such links when she looks for what she called ‘elegant language’ and rewords students who are able to establish such links with a higher grammar grade.

The findings of this study also concur with those from other studies (Burneikaitė, & Zabiliūtė, 2003; D. Kies, 2009, November; Mauranen, 1996; Schneider & Connor, 1990; Witte, 1983) and add weight to the argument made by Schleppegrell (2004, 2009) and others (e.g., Alonso Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998; Byrnes, 2009; Byrnes et al., 2010; Gebhard et al., 2010; Meyer, 2008) to include the teaching of information management based on a SFL framework in both L1 and L2 academic writing classrooms. Raters and teachers notice discrepancies and shortcomings in information management consciously or unconsciously; it is, therefore, very important that especially L2 writers, who may be used to different information management expectations and techniques (such as the Finnish students writing in English in Mauranen’s (1996) study), learn to employ information management techniques in order to consciously construct their texts and organize the information in their texts in a way that facilitates their communicative effectiveness.

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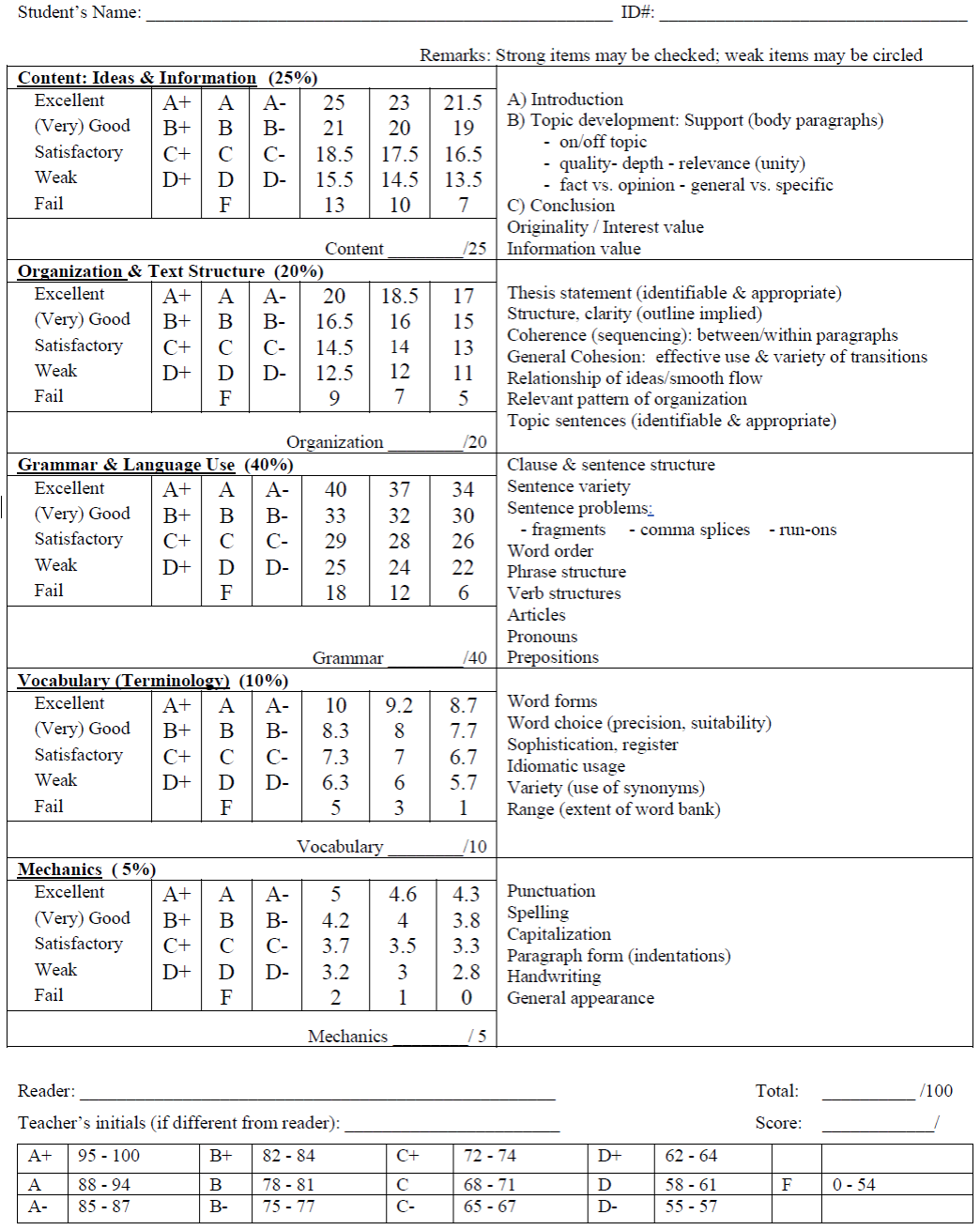
**Appendix A**

**Essay Topics on the Midterm Exam**

1. We have all experienced stress in our lives. It comes from our work, our family life, and our relationship with people. Discuss the positive effects of stress in our lives.
2. Fast-food restaurants are everywhere. They are in shopping malls, office buildings, city centers, and neighborhoods. Discuss EITHER the causes OR the effects of the popularity of fast food restaurants.
3. Despite the social safety net and various assistance programs run by governments and charity organizations, we see many homeless people in streets, in parks, and at metro stations. Discuss the causes of homelessness.

**Appendix B**

**Evaluation Grid**



**GUIDE FOR COMPLETING THE EVALUATION GRID**

**Content: Ideas & Information (25%)**

1. Thesis statement (explicit, identifiable; appropriate to essay type or topic; predictive)
2. Topic development (depth and quality/originality of information)
3. Support (relevant, sufficient, detailed; general vs. specific support, fact vs. opinion)
4. Information level/value

Excellent (A+, A, A-) Very clear and appropriate thesis, defined and supported with sound generalizations and substantial, specific, and relevant details; distinctive, original content for maximum impact; excellent information level; strong introduction and conclusion.

(Very) Good (B+, B, B-) Clear and appropriate thesis; selects; suitable and appropriate content with sufficient details; informative; occasional minor problems with focus, depth, and/or unity; good introduction and conclusion.

Satisfactory (C+, C, C-) Thesis may be unclear (e.g. too broad/narrow); acceptable topic development; some support points may be vague, insufficient, obvious, unconvincing; satisfactory introduction and conclusion.

Weak (D+, D, D-) Thesis not apparent or weak; poor topic development; lacking in substance; many support points are insufficient, irrelevant and/or repetitive; low information level; weak conclusion.

Fail (F) lacks main idea; unacceptable topic development; too vague, insufficient, unconvincing, or off-topic; not enough to evaluate.

**Organization & Text Structure (20%)**

1. Presence and logical sequencing of introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion
2. Use of relevant patterns of organization (related to topic or essay type)
3. Coherent and unified relationship of ideas (NB: grammatical accuracy related to cohesive devices is considered under Grammar & Language Use)

Excellent (A+, A, A-) - exceptionally clear plan connected to thesis; well organized, effective and logical sequencing; smooth flow of ideas; excellent use of transition techniques; clarity of message enhanced by organization.

(Very) Good (B+, B, B-) - appropriate pattern of organization relevant to topic or essay type; generally smooth flow of ideas and appropriate use of transition techniques; overall organization good; most transitions used appropriately but would benefit from more frequent and varied use of transitions; sequencing generally logical.

Satisfactory C+, C, C-) - shows understanding of pattern of development; somewhat choppy; relationships between ideas not always clear; overall organization satisfactory, but some elements may be loosely connected or lacking in transitions; most points logically sequenced but some problems in organization still exist.

Weak (D+, D, D-) - problems with pattern of organization; disjointed; ideas do not flow well and relationships between ideas are often not clear; ideas difficult to follow because they are often not logically sequenced and/or are unrelated

Fail (F) - does not show understanding of pattern of organization; no clear organization: confusing, vague, or seemingly unrelated ideas; pattern of organization not pertinent to topic/essay type; ideas not developed in separate paragraphs; not enough text to evaluate

**Grammar & Language Use (40%)**

1. Sentence structure (coordination and subordination; variety)
2. Sentence problems (fragments, comma splices, run-ons)
3. Verb structures (agreement, tense, form)
4. Phrase structure
5. Articles, pronouns, prepositions

Excellent (A+, A, A-) – sentences skillfully constructed, effectively varied with simple and complex forms; harmonious agreement of content and sentence design; hardly any errors in basic sentence or grammatical forms

(Very) Good (B+, B, B-) – sentences accurately and coherently constructed with some variety; good use of complex constructions; only a few errors in grammatical forms; meaning not affected by errors.

Satisfactory (C+, C, C-) - effective but simpler constructions and/or problems with complex constructions; meaning generally clear; several errors in grammatical forms.

Weak (D, D+, D-) - some problems in simple constructions and/or frequent problems in complex constructions, or avoidance of complex structures; clarity weakened by awkward grammatical structures; many problems in grammatical forms.

Fail (F) - many problems in sentence structures (both simple and complex) and/or absence of complex structures; frequent sentence structure errors which confuse and distract the reader; frequent errors in grammatical forms; not enough text to evaluate.

Vocabulary (Terminology) (10%)

1. Word forms
2. Word choice (precision)
3. Register
4. Idiomatic usage
5. Range

Excellent (A+, A, A-) high level of sophistication; impressive range; effective use of vocabulary to express ideas; only a few minor errors with word choice/form/idiom.

(Very) Good (B+, B, B-) – (very) good range and variety in the use of vocabulary; effective word/idiom choice and usage; appropriate register; several minor errors related to word choice/form/idiom.

Satisfactory (C+, C, C-) – adequate range in the use of vocabulary; occasional errors of word choice/form/idiom or usage, meaning generally clear (some minor ambiguity).

Weak pass (D+, D, D-) - limited range; frequent errors of word choice/form/idiom and usage; meaning sometimes unclear or ambiguous as a result of errors.

Fail (F) - very limited range; words recycled, reused, or too general; frequent errors of word choice/form/idiom and usage may obscure the meaning; problems with basic vocabulary; not enough text to evaluate.

**Mechanics (5%)**

1. Punctuation
2. Spelling
3. Capitalization
4. Presentation (NB: punctuation involving fragments, comma splices and run-ons are considered under
5. Grammar & Language Use)

Excellent, (A+, A, A-) – very few errors either in punctuation, spelling, or capitalization; correct indentation; neat presentation.

(Very) Good (B+, B, B-) - only a few minor errors in punctuation, spelling, and capitalization; clarity of message never affected by errors; correct indentation; legible handwriting.

Satisfactory (C+, C, C-) - occasional errors in punctuation, spelling or capitalization, problems with indentation; meaning still clear despite errors; handwriting hard to read but basically legible.

Weak (D+, D, D-) - many errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization; meaning sometimes unclear as result of mechanical errors; absence of indentation; nearly illegible handwriting affecting text comprehension

Fail (F) - dominated by errors in punctuation, spelling, indentation and capitalization; illegible handwriting.

1. A T-unit consists of one independent clause and all its dependent clauses ([Hunt, 1965](#_ENREF_23)). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The methodology section of this article provides more detailed definitions and examples of different Themes and Theme-Rheme link patterns. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. When these topics were written, item writers considered that students would not be able to do any research on these issues before writing their response, and item writers also ensured that the target population (international students in their early 20s) would have sufficient knowledge and personal experience to be able to respond to these three topics. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. All names are pseudonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)