Towards a Functional Approach to the English Research on the Writing skills in Sudan

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to evaluate the Sudanese postgraduate research on the writing skills that was conducted in the 1990s. In so doing, it has tried to show whether or not this research has properly addressed the learners' writing problems. Upon examining selected post-graduate research, the paper has concluded that a great deal of what was done related to what has come to be known in the literature as "sentence linguistics, which can hardly be argued to benefit writing. For language, as a system of communication, requires that it be approached as sets of discourses: spoken or written. Sadly enough, these developments have not been convincingly considered by Sudanese EFL course designers and researchers, some of who still rejoice in the structural and transformational-based principles of language teaching and research.

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1. Introduction

In the 1990's , a huge body of post-graduate research was conducted on the EFL learners' written production in Sudan. Impetus for such research interests seems to stem partially from the researchers' awareness of the writing difficulties experienced by their research subjects. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged in the relevant literature that writing is the most difficult skill to practise. To substantiate this claim, consider these statements made by two celebrities concerning their own writing experience and that of their ESL students respectively. Widdowson (1983:35) contends that, in his daily experience, "writing is an irksome activity and an ordeal to be avoided whenever possible". Raimes (1983: 258), on the other hand, observes that when writing, her ESL students".. ..chew their pencils, shuffle their feet, sigh, groan, and stretch " -all are symptoms of the difficulties they experience when they are required to perform a writing assignment.

The question that this paper attempts to answer is: to what extent has the above-mentioned research addressed the students' writing worries? A preliminary answer to this question would be that the bulk of what has so far been done does not live up to the latest developments in the linguistic theory, and could not, therefore, be expected to have diagnosed the relevant writing problems. One such argument in support of this claim is that both under- and post-graduate programmes offered by various higher education institutions in Sudan seem to overemphasize course items that belong to what has come to be known in the literature as

"sentence linguistics": a type of linguistics that approaches the sentence as the basic unit of language. Suffice it to say that batch 2 of the M.A. programme at the University of Khartoum (1998/2000) took much pride in their time-consuming struggle with Fries' (1952) structural-based grammar. This can be argued, in the course of this presentation, to provide only lip service to the acquisition of communicative competence in general and written discourse competence in particular despite the general assumption that knowledge of the grammar contributes to the learners writing competence.

In this paper two tasks will be attempted: first, the findings of the major linguistic models will be reviewed. Secondly, Sudanese writing research will be surveyed and assessed in the light of these findings.

2. Linguistic Background

To use Harsh's (1982) terms, the history of linguistic theory is characterized by a series of "revolutions" and "counter revolutions". The introduction of .such "revolutionary" terms into linguistics is a strong hint to the competing accounts of human language. However, lest this paper gets trapped by the kaleidoscopic linguistic scenery, a summary procedure is needed to highlight the major findings of the linguistic theory, and then show the way(s) such findings could benefit writing research.

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into models advocating his own theory, and those holding on to the Chomskyan theory of "linguistic competence". As to the latter, it has been argued by a number of communicativists that the advocates of this theory are ".. ..limited to the formal enumeration of structural description of the sentences of the language..;" (Van Dijk 1972:3). Hymes (1979) was particularly concerned with Chomsky's (1965) notions of "competence" and "performance" (i.e. speaker-hearer's knowledge of their language and the actual use of language respectively). He criticized these two notions on the grounds that "competence" is a theory that "posits ideal objects in abstraction from socio-cultural features", while "performance" is concerned with "psychological by-products of the analysis of grammar, not, say, with social interaction" (p.7). So, knowledge of language structure in default of any socio-cultural features is not enough to guarantee effective communication (the core of Hymes' theory). For effective communication, the argument goes, requires that acquisition of linguistic competence has to be fed by social experience, needs, and motives (ibid).

Hymes' communicative model has greatly influenced linguistic research and language teaching. McDonough and Show (1993:27) associate seven implications with the communicative approach to the study and teaching of language of which the sixth lies at the heart of this paper. It is, that is, "the concept of communication takes us beyond the level of sentence". Following Hymes' theory, a number of articles and books were published during the 1970s and 1980s questioning the

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legitimacy of the structural and transformational linguistic theories. These works concluded that "traditional morphological and syntactic tools were not adequate to explain texts and that new discourse tools needed to be developed" (Connor 1996:80). Therefore, an alternative linguistic model has been proposed where the notion of the "text" has been considered as the basic unit of language. Connor reports that the new linguistic model has been given a variety of names: "text linguistics", "written discourse analysis" and "discourse linguistics" (ibid).

But what is it that linguists mean by the concept of the "text"? And what are the socio-cultural constraints on the "text" that are needed for different communicative purposes? Concerning the first of these questions, it was shown above that the text was viewed as the basic unit of language which manifests itself as discourse (Van Dijk (1972:3). Van Dijk argues further that since the text cannot be described in terms of independent sentences alone, it must formally "account for the important notion of coherence" which signifies the native speakers' ability to produce and interpret utterances as wholes, viz. as pieces of "connected discourse, and not merely as a linearly ordered set of discrete grammatical sentences" (ibid). Halliday and Hasan (1976:2) propose that what distinguishes a text from something that is not a text is "texture" which is created by reference, conjunction, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion. The standard term that Halliday and Hasan use to refer these forms is "cohesion".

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However, since awareness of the text alone is not enough to guarantee effective communication, linguists have also been concerned with a variety of socio-cultural constraints on the use of language for communication. For example, one of the reasons why Hymes (1979) was dissatisfied with Chomsky's (1965) "linguistic competence" was that the language user was viewed as an "an abstract, isolated individual, almost an unmotivated cognitive mechanism, not, except incidentally, a person in the social world" (p.8). Viz. the language user should not be approached as an isolated individual but as a member of a given speech community with definite conventions of interaction. For awareness of these conventions is the sole key to successful communication.

Along the lines of his systemic theory, Halliday (1979:34) gives a sociological explanation of meaning. As such, meaning is viewed as a realization of behavior patterns that have to do with social and situational aspects of language. The social aspects of language, he maintains, are the establishment of familiarity and distance, various fonDS of boundary maintenance and types of personal interaction. The situational aspects, on the other hand, are the settings in which language is used.

Influenced by Halliday's systemic theory, some linguists have maintained that the text is an "instrument of social interaction conveying multiple messages about the social world in which it has been used" (Brandt 1986:93). Brandt posits further that since the text grows out of a given situation, it reflects that situation in its lexical and linguistic structures (p.94).

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To sum up, consideration of the linguistic literature has so far differentiated between theories viewing the sentence as the basic unit of language (i.e. sentence or formal linguistics), and theories viewing the text as the basic unit of language (text or functional linguistics). The legitimate question to ask .now is which type is relevant to research on the writing skills? Such a question cannot be answered before considering the subject matter of each type.

As its name suggests, sentence linguistics centres upon the structure of the sentence. As such, its prime objective will be the consideration of a set of grammatical categories (i.e. lexical, phrasal and clausal categories) as well as a set of grammatical functions within the sentence (i.e. subject, predicator, complement, etc.). By contrasts, the business of text linguistics is to view language as sets of discourses: spoken or written. In so doing, it investigates textuality (inter-relationship between the sentences within a text) rather than grammaticality (the relationship between grammatical categories within a sentence that makes it grammatical) (Xu 1991).

Apparently, then, academic writing is closer to text linguistics than to sentence linguistics except if such writing is intended to illustrate a point which has nothing to do with the use of language for communication. As it will be shown in (3) below, the writing that was the focus of research took either composition or essay forms. In the proper linguistic terminology, these two forms of writing are "texts", and could have ideally been investigated within a text linguistic framework.

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It is now widely argued that the introduction of text linguistics has greatly benefited writing pedagogy and research. The influence of Halliday's systemic linguistics has been particularly acknowledged by writing specialists as a crucial factor in the formulation of the functional approaches to the written text (Couture 1986:1).

3. Empirical research on the EFL learners' written discourse in Sudan

To begin with, following what has come to be known as "the higher education policies" in Sudan in 1990, Arabic replaced English as the medium of instruction, but that English became a compulsory (required) subject for all the students at tertiary level. This in turn necessitated a teaching load that overmatched the available manpower. Therefore, in an attempt to redress the balance, postgraduate EFL programmes were offered by some universities. The University of Khartoum has so far been the leading or even the sole Sudanese academic institution to offer integrated post-graduate programmes on all levels: TEFL and ELT postgraduate Diploma, ELT masters by courses, M.A. by research, M.A by courses and research, and Ph.D by research. For this reason the data for this paper will exclusively be based on the post-graduate research carried out in this University.

As will be shown below, Abdalla (2000) argues that considerable body of research that was done during the closing decade of the twentieth century seems to suffer from two problems. First, some researchers

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conducted studies where limited aspects of students' writing were considered. For example, Gaibir (1995) investigated the use of cohesive devices in the writing of Sudanese university students. While such a study can provide insight into writers' use or (misuse) of cohesive devices, it is not always the case that these devices can alone account for the overall writing quality (cf. Brown and Yule 1983). It is true that research results have shown that correlation exists between writing quality and the use of cohesive devices (cf. John 1987), but it is uncertain whether or not the use of cohesive devices is the only index of writing quality. For a written text consists of a number of linguistic and non-linguistic elements that eventually shape the relevant writing quality.

Second, research investigated learners' writing from contrastive and error analysis perspectives (e.g. Attia 1990; Mohammedain 1995). The problem with this kind of research is that it did not go beyond the sentence level. Grammatical awareness, no doubt, has a role to play in the students' writing. However, emphasizing the structures of individual sentences will overshadow the discoursal aspects of the relevant texts.

The table below summarizes the writing research that was carried out in the 1990s at the University of Khartoum.

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Summary of the Postgraduate research on EFL writing conducted at

the

University of Khartoum in 1990s

Study	Subjects	Degree	Findings
Attai (1990)	First year university students	M.A.	Abundance of grammatical and spelling errors
Karadawi (1994)	Third year secondary school students	Ph.D.	Unaware of paragraphing, bad handwriting, reduce linguistic value and overuse of the full stop.
Farahat (1994)	First year university students	M.A.	Grammatical and spelling errors
Ibrahim (1995)	Second year university students	M.A.	Lexical errors: orthographic, grammatical and morphological in nature
Mohammedain (1995)	First year university students	M.A.	Erroneous Communication Stratgies at the sentence level
Mohammed (1999)	First year university students	M.A.	Difficulties with cohesive devices and paragraphing

The findings of the majority of these studies give a strong support to the claim that was made in (I) above, viz. that Sudanese post-graduate research on the writing skills could but provide lip service to the writing pedagogy.

To begin with, grammatical errors are almost everywhere. This perfectly matches classroom practice. But classroom practice culminates in the description of the sentence and its constituents. As such, sentence could only be approached individually (cf. Widdowson 1979). However, since the sentence itself is a constituent of the relevant piece of writing (discourse), logical reasoning will not warrant the application of "some" property to an all "entity". In other words, consideration of the sentence grammar alone could not provide sufficient answers to questions about the nature of the written text. Therefore, the identification and correction of grammatical errors does not produce well- formed written texts necessarily.

Researchers seem to be much concerned with the identification of the mechanical errors (mainly spelling and punctuation). These can sometimes be argued to be discourse properties. It has widely been reported in the relevant literature that they are to the written discourse as the suprasegmental sounds are to the spoken discourse. Thus, they can be argued to have shape-giving and organizing functions in handling a piece of written discourse. Apparently, such understanding does not seem to apply to the data in column (4) in the table above. For it has just been shown that the basic data is grammatical in nature. It is natural, therefore,

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to reason that these mechanical errors have been approached accordingly, viz. as components of individual sentences.

As to Karadawi's (1949) "bad handwriting" category, it cannot be taken seriously. For the best way to account for handwriting is in aesthetic terms so that what may be good-looking to some reader may not be of the same value to another. The same is true for handwriting readability- it has nothing to do with good or bad, and readers differ as to the ease with which a text can be read. Above all such conclusion could not validated statistically.

Turning to the studies that show discourse-like features, attention can be paid to Karardawi (1994) and Mohammed (1999). The only reason why these studies are so classified stems from their inclusion of such concepts as "paragraphing" and "cohesion" -as these are concepts that frequently appear in the discourse literature. Yet the problem with both is that they were not discussed as such in these two studies. In other words, the theoretical framework of each study was entirely irrelevant to the discourse literature. What was said about "paragraphing" and "cohesion" in both studies was close to the theory of "current -traditional rhetoric" - an approach to writing that characterized the 1960s. Central to this approach were the paragraph components. Particularly, emphasis was on the topic sentence, supporting sentences, conclusion, transition, and methods of development (Silva 1990:14).

All the studies overlooked the Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis (henceforth CRH). This is a theory that has been proposed to account for

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second language writing. According to Kaplan (1983: 150), CRH is concerned with the "notion that the speakers of different languages use different devices to present information, to establish the relationship among ideas...". This proposal, Kaplan maintains, has been reinforced by investigations carried out in the Spanish of Puerto Rico, the French of Eastern Canada, the Arabic of Cairo and the Mandarin of Taiwan. Results, he reports, have shown that these languages have different expository methods (ibid).

Connor (1996) reports a number of contrastive text-linguistic studies that further substantiate CRH. Where speakers of Arabic as Ll are concerned, Kaplan (1980:402) proposes that Arabic language is characterized by a series of parallel constructions which are connected by coordination. On the basis of this observation, Ostler (1987) carried out a study in which he compared English essays written by Saudis and English paragraphs selected randomly from books. The results have shown that the essays written by the Saudis had more coordinated sentences.

Although there is evidence to the contrary, (cf. Mohan and Lo 1990, Friendlander 1990), CRH still remains a valid framework to account for the difficulties experienced by EFL/ESL student- writers. It was as if the researchers reported above were under the impact of critics of the contrastive analysis hypothesis, which has been argued by the advocates of CRH to be relevant to their theory (cf. Connor 1996). However, reading between the lines of the studies in the table above does

not show awareness of CRH premises, which could have been an important factor in diagnosing learners' writing problems.

3. Conclusion

Course design, teaching and research can be argued to form an educational hierarchy whose prime objective is to provide optimal learning opportunities. It can further be argued that research occupies the top position on this hierarchy. This claim stems from the fact that EFL/ESL research is carried out to achieve certain goals related to the teaching and learning processes. On the basis of the research findings certain procedures are recommended to be considered by teachers and/or learners. The same findings most likely stimulate the need to reconsider the available language syllabus.

It is unfortunate that the research findings reported in (3) above do not seem to benefit the writing pedagogy. It is true that the examination of the students' written discourse has manifested horrible grammatical and mechanical errors, but these remain local errors that take place at the sentence level. None of these researchers has proved statistically that a relationship exists between subjects' grammatical errors and their poor writing quality. In fact, it is doubtful that such a relationship can be established all the time. For there are a number of grammatical errors, e.g. subject-verb disagreement, that can be tolerated since they do not detract from the communicative value of their texts. Therefore, if these researchers had addressed themselves to the study of the grammatical and mechanical problems in the students' writing, there could have been

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consistency in their research problems, methods and findings. However, what they did was that they committed themselves to study the learners' writing problems but ended up discussing grammatical and mechanical errors, which have nothing to do with the learner' discourse competence.

In the light of the claims made in (I), (2) and (3) above, it would be legitimate to argue that the Sudanese writing research could not stand the ideal position on the above-proposed educational hierarchy. Therefore, it is high time that Sudanese course designers, teachers and researchers got on with the latest developments in linguistics as this would-be the only way to update their careers.

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