

L1 Transfer in Chinese EFL Learners' Use of Thematic Progression in English Argumentative Writing

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Abstract—This study addresses L1 transfer in Chinese EFL learners' use of thematic progression in English argumentative writing. Through a series of statistical analyses of the data collected from argumentative essays written by Chinese and American university students, the study finds that the overuse of thematic progression patterns in English writing is under the influence of Chinese EFL learners' native language both linguistically and conceptually. Tests of potential effects of intra-group homogeneity and intra-L1-group congruity provide convincing evidence for the identification of L1 transfer. In addition, the study further explores the underlying causes of L1 transfer both at linguistic and conceptual levels.

Index Terms—L1 transfer, thematic progression, Chinese EFL learners, argumentative writing

I. INTRODUCTION

First language (L1) transfer plays an inevitable and crucial part in the process of second language (L2) learning, especially in writing. Many scholars, including Lado (1957), consider L1 transfer to be a major cause of lack of success in second language learning. Thus, studies on L1 transfer are essential for both second language theory and pedagogy. L1 transfer has been mainly studied from the approaches of contrastive analysis, error analysis, interlanguage analysis, and contrastive rhetoric. Though L1 transfer has been extensively studied, there are still some limitations among previous studies, such as more focus on deviation between a learner's native language and target language than the influence of L1 transfer, the lack of a methodological basis to identify L1 transfer, or more general explanations for the causes of L1 transfer. In light of this, the present study has conducted an empirical study on L1 transfer in Chinese EFL students' use of thematic progression in English argumentative writing, aiming to provide statistical evidence for L1 transfer and present an in-depth explanation for the underlying causes of L1 transfer.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theme and Thematic Progression

The "Theme" is the starting point of a message "which the clause is about" (Halliday, 2000, p. 37). The Theme is followed by the "Rheme," which is "part of the assembly of the new information that the text offers" (Cummings, 2003, p. 133). As the text unfolds, each new Theme connects to the Themes and Rhemes of preceding clauses in various ways, gathering or repeating the important concepts and developing them further. These connections form patterns of thematic progression (TP) which make a significant contribution to the cohesion and coherence of a text. TP is viewed by Danes (1974) as "the skeleton of the plot" (p. 114).

Scholars have postulated different patterns of TP (Danes, 1974; Huang, 1985; McCabe, 1999; Zhu, 1995); a number of these patterns refer to the same types of Theme-Rheme connection but use different terms. Based on previous studies, and for the purposes of the current research, five TP patterns which have, so far, been recognized by most scholars are summarized and presented in Table 1 below. These five TP patterns include linear progression, constant progression, summative progression, split progression, and sprung progression.

TABLE 1
FIVE THEMATIC PROGRESSION PATTERNS

TP type	Description	Diagram
Linear progression	The Rheme of each clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause.	$ \begin{array}{c} T1 - R1 \\ \downarrow \\ T2 (= R1) - R2 \\ \downarrow \\ T3 (= R2) - R3 \end{array} $
Constant progression	Successive clauses share the same Theme.	$ \begin{array}{c} T1 - R1 \\ \downarrow \\ T2 (= T1) - R2 \\ \downarrow \\ T3 (= T1) - R3 \end{array} $
Summative progression	The Theme of the subsequent clause is a summary of the preceding content.	$ \begin{array}{c} T1 - R1 \\ \downarrow \\ T2 (= T1 + R1) - R2 \end{array} $
Split progression	A Theme/Rheme contains more than one idea, and these ideas are developed in different subsequent clauses.	$ \begin{array}{c} T1 (= T2 + T3) - R1 \\ \downarrow \quad \downarrow \\ T2 - R2 \quad T3 - R3 \\ \\ T1 - R1 (= R2 + R3) \\ \downarrow \quad \downarrow \\ T2 - R2 \quad T3 - R3 \end{array} $
Sprung progression	The connection between Themes or Rhemes is interrupted. One or more main links are omitted in the progression process, which need to be supplemented in context or situation.	$ \begin{array}{c} T1 - R1 \\ \vdots \\ T2 - R2 \end{array} $

B. TP in EFL Learners' Writing

According to Hyland (2004), learners of English as a foreign language are yet to learn what kind of information to place in the Theme position. These learners are unaware of how to continually grasp the information which is already in the text and repeat it in a way to ensure that the reader is consistently aware of the key concepts and how these concepts are being developed. Studies have shown that appropriate use of Theme and TP contributes to coherence in learners' English writing. Ma (2001) found that coherent English writing which used different types of thematic progression tended to provide learners with higher scores. Wang (2010) also pointed out that the use of effective thematic progression patterns could make English writing more coherent. According to Cheng (2002), the major reasons for the lack of coherence in Chinese students' English writing involve inappropriate thematic choices, Themes that were not connected either to preceding Themes or succeeding Themes, and unidentified thematic progression.

One important research line of studies on TP focuses on the investigation of TP deviation between EFL learners and English native speakers in writing. EFL learners that were investigated came from a number of different native language backgrounds, such as Chinese, Dutch, Finnish, German, Iranian, Norwegian, Polish, and Swedish (Jing, 2014). Research findings showed that the thematic patterns adopted by EFL learners in their writing were not typical of English texts (Ventola, 1994). Statistically significant differences were found in the use of thematic progression patterns between English learners and native-speakers (Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012; Medve & Takac, 2013; Rørvik, 2012). Yang and Wang (2017) noted that the sprung type and the constant type prevailed in Chinese learners' writing, while the linear type was dominant in British native speakers' writing.

C. L1 Transfer in Chinese EFL Learners' Writing

Selinker (1983) proposed two major types of language transfer: positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the processes whereby L1 knowledge facilitates the acquisition of a L2. Negative transfer is the processes through which L1 knowledge interferes with and, thus, negatively impacts L2 acquisition. According to Odlin (1989), negative transfer may occur when the L1 language forms used in L2 production is not a part of the L2 norm.

Language transfer is also categorized into linguistic transfer and conceptual transfer. Linguistic transfer refers to the transfer influence at the level of language, such as pronunciation, lexis, grammar, and discourse etc. Conceptual transfer is "characterized as the hypothesis that certain instances of crosslinguistic influence in a person's use of one language originate from the conceptual knowledge and patterns of thought that the person has acquired as a speaker of another language" (Jarvis, 2007, p. 44).

Previous studies have explored the influence of L1 transfer in Chinese EFL learners' writing. Cai (1998) investigated the language errors in English essays written by Chinese college students in a quantitative approach and found that more than 20% of the errors resulted from L1 transfer. Scholars also attempted to further reveal the underlying causes of L1 transfer. Wang and Wen (2004) focused on the effects of L1 literacy levels on the L2 writing ability of Chinese EFL learners and found that the three L1 literacy variables of Chinese vocabulary, Chinese writing, and Chinese discourse could account for about 71.8% of the variance of L2 writing. Yang and Wang (2017) attributed the deviation of TP patterns to conceptual transfer and attempted to account for the deviation from the different ways of thinking and dissecting the world between the Chinese and English languages. They proposed that such deviation as the transfer of spatiality of the Chinese language onto the temporality in the English language. However, their study includes no statistical analysis or empirical data to support their claims.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To conduct a transfer study of TP patterns in EFL learners' writing, the present research aims to (i) identify and test

L1 transfer of TP on a methodological basis; (ii) describe and explain the process of L1 transfer of TP; and (iii) explore the underlying causes of L1 transfer of TP.

To achieve the three research objectives above, the study is concerned with the following three research questions:

1. How much of Chinese EFL learners' use of TP patterns can be attributed to L1 influence?
2. What type of L1 transfer can be discerned?
3. What are the underlying causes of the L1 transfer?

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Methodological Basis

Jarvis (2000) proposed a unified framework for L1 transfer studies: "L1 influence refers to any instance of learner data where a statistically significant correlation (or probability-based relation) is shown to exist between some features of learners' interlanguage (IL) performance and their L1 background" (p. 252). As for necessary and sufficient evidence for L1 influence, Jarvis (2000) held that the presence of two effects of L1 influence was convincing and the presence of three effects was more convincing.

Three potential effects of L1 influence put forward by Jarvis include the following: intra-L1-group homogeneity in learners' IL performance, inter-L1-group heterogeneity in learners' IL performance, and intra-L1-group congruity between learner's L1 and IL performance. The first effect shows that learners who speak the same L1 behave as a group with respect to a specific L2 feature. The second effect shows comparable learners of a common L2 who speak different L1s diverge in their IL performance. The third effect demonstrates that learners' use of some L2 features can be shown to parallel their use of corresponding L1 features.

Jarvis (2000) also listed nine outside variables to control, including age; personality, motivation, and language aptitude; social, educational, and cultural background; language background (all previous L1s and L2s); type and amount of target language exposure; target language proficiency; language distance between the L1 and target language; task type and area of language use; prototypicality and markedness of the linguistic feature.

B. Participants

The study involves 28 Chinese second-year non-English-major students from a Chinese university located in South China. These student participants have an intermediate level of English proficiency. Variables such as age and background are controlled. The participants are of similar ages, ranging from 17 years old to 18 years old. They are from the same social, educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. They have received the same type and amount of English language exposure, which is about ten years' English learning experience at school.

C. Data Collection

The research consists of two sets of data, which include the argumentative essays of Chinese EFL learners and English native speakers. The first set of data contains 28 English argumentative essays and 28 Chinese argumentative essays, which were both written by the Chinese participants. The second set of data includes 28 English argumentative essays written by American university students within the age range from 18 to 21. These writings were collected from the LOCNESS corpus.

To collect the first set of writing data, the 28 participants were asked to write an English argumentative essay of at least 250 words within 40 minutes on the following topic: "Some people believe the aim of university education is to help graduates get better jobs, while others believe there are much wider benefits of university education for both individuals and society." One month later, the participants were required to write a Chinese argumentative essay of at least 250 characters within 40 minutes on the same topic.

D. Data Coding and Analysis Procedures

The data coding and analysis procedures involved three steps. Step one was to identify TP patterns and L1 transfer influence. The analysis of TP patterns was based on T-units (Wang & Feng, 2017). Relative frequencies of TP patterns were calculated. Native speakers' writing was used as the research baseline. Step two was to test transfer effects on Chinese EFL learners' use of TP. An independent samples T-test was adopted to test the effect of intra-L1-group similarities, and a paired-samples T-test was used to test the effect of L1-IL performance similarities. Step three was to discern the L1 linguistic transfer and conceptual transfer in Chinese EFL learners' use of TP.

V. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. TP in Chinese EFL Learners' English and Chinese Writing

The distribution of TP patterns in Chinese EFL learners' English and Chinese writing is presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 reveals that the five TP patterns, namely linear progression, constant progression, summative progression, split progression, and sprung progression, were all used in both the learners' English and Chinese writing with different relative frequencies for each TP pattern. A one-way ANOVA was applied to further test whether these differences were statistically significant.

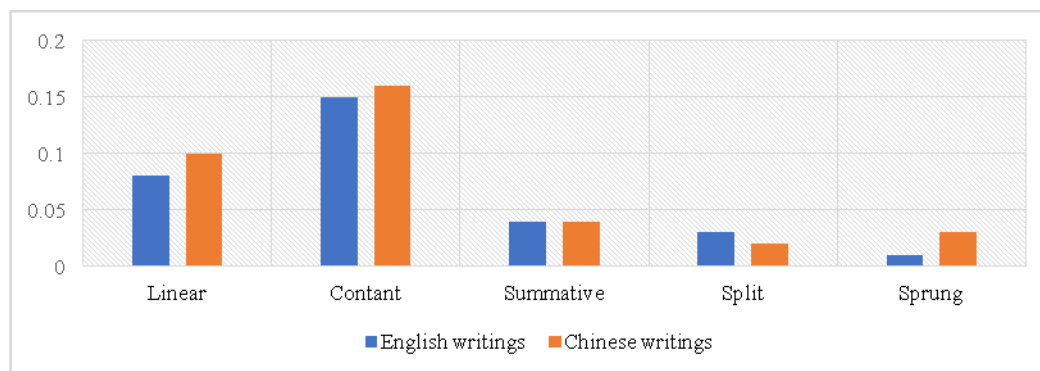


Figure 1. TP Patterns in EFL learners' English and Chinese Argumentative Writing

The one-way ANOVA test and Post Hoc test results among TP patterns in Chinese EFL learners' English and Chinese writing are shown in Table 2 and Table 3. Statistical analysis results show that there were substantial differences among the uses of the five TP patterns in EFL learners' English and Chinese writing. Linear progression and constant progression patterns were dominant patterns adopted by Chinese EFL learners in both their Chinese and English argumentative writing. The constant progression pattern was used substantially more frequently than the linear progression pattern by Chinese EFL learners in their Chinese and English argumentative writing. Since linear progression and constant progression patterns account for the majority of TP patterns used by EFL learners, we compared the differences of TP in writing between EFL learners and American native speakers in terms of these two progression patterns.

TABLE 2
ONE-WAY ANAOVA TEST AND POST HOC TESTS OF TP PATTERNS IN CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' ENGLISH WRITING

ANOVA		Post Hoc Tests (Dunnett T3)			
F	Sig.	(I) TP types	(J) TP types	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
32.782	.000	Linear	Constant	-.05929*	.040
			Summative	.04723*	.041
			Split	.05893*	.004
			Sprung	.07893*	.000
		Constant	Linear	.05929*	.040
			Summative	.10651*	.000
			Split	.11821*	.000
			Sprung	.13821*	.000

Notes: N = 28 * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

TABLE 3
ONE-WAY ANAOVA TEST AND POST HOC TESTS OF TP PATTERNS IN CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' CHINESE WRITING

ANOVA		Post Hoc Tests (Dunnett T3)			
F	Sig.	(I) TP types	(J) TP types	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
32.782	.000	Linear	Constant	-.06750*	.036
			Summative	.05929*	.003
			Split	.08607*	.000
			Sprung	.07893*	.000
		Constant	Linear	.06750*	.036
			Summative	.12679*	.000
			Split	.15357*	.000
			Sprung	.14643*	.000

Notes: N = 28 * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

B. Contrast of TP Between Chinese EFL Learners' and American Native Speakers' Writing

Figure 2 shows the descriptive data analysis results of linear progression and constant progression patterns in the English writing of Chinese EFL learners and American native speakers. Figure 2 reveals that Chinese EFL learners demonstrated different preferences than native English speakers for the use of linear progression and constant progression patterns.

A closer look at the ratios of linear progression to constant progression patterns reveals that the ratio in Chinese EFL learner's writing (53.33%) was far less than that in the American native speakers' writing (200%). According to argumentative essay writing norms, the bigger the ratio of linear progression to constant progression, the better the essay (Danes, 1974; McCabe, 1999; North, 2005). Therefore, the comparison of the ratios of linear progression to constant progression patterns reveals the discrepancy in quality of writing between Chinese EFL learners and American native speakers.

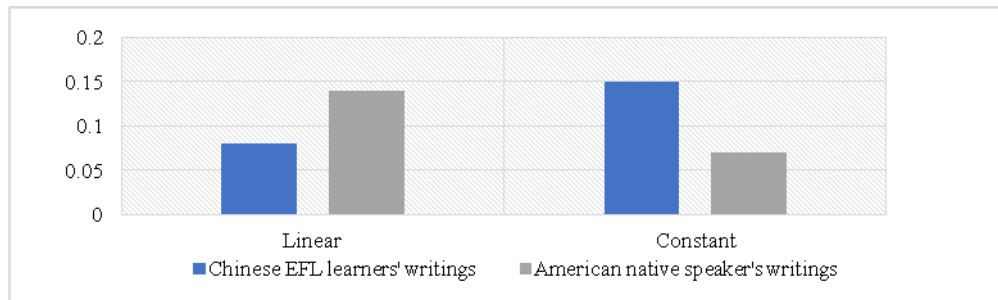


Figure 2. Linear Progression and Constant Progression Patterns in EFL learners' and American Native Speakers' Writing

The independent samples T-test results in Table 4 show that no significant difference was found in terms of linear progression patterns between the Chinese EFL learners and American native speakers, whereas the constant progression pattern was used more frequently by the Chinese EFL learners than their American native speaker counterparts. The paired samples T-test results in Table 5 show that American native speakers used the linear progression pattern more frequently than the constant progression pattern, while Chinese EFL learners used the constant progression pattern more frequently than the linear progression pattern. Furthermore, the results show that constant progression was overused by Chinese EFL learners.

TABLE 4
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)
Linear	Equal variances assumed	.001	.973	-3.541	54	.001
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.541	53.687	.001
Constant	Equal variances assumed	5.311*	.025	4.244	54	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			4.244	45.056	.000

Notes: N = 28 Group 1: EFL learners, Group 2: Native speakers * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

TABLE 5
PAIRED SAMPLES T-TEST RESULTS

		Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)
Pair 1	EFL_Linear - EFL_Constant	-.06071	.11.972	-2.684	27	.012
Pair 2	NS_Linear - NS_Constant	.06786*	.07052	45.092	27	.000

Notes: N = 28 * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

C. Evidence for L1 Transfer in Chinese EFL Learners' Use of TP

In order to identify the L1 transfer, we tested the effects of intra-L1-group homogeneity in Chinese EFL learners' IL performance and intra-L1-group congruity between Chinese EFL learner's L1 and IL performance. Table 6 lists the results of the independent samples T-test between the linear progression pattern and the constant progression pattern in EFL learners' English writing. No significant difference in linear progression and constant progression between EFL learners' English writing was shown. Thus, intra-group homogeneity in learners' interlanguage performance has been tested. Paired samples T-tests between EFL learners' English and Chinese writing on the use of linear progression and constant progression were conducted. Results listed in Table 7 show that there was no significant difference in linear progression and constant progression between L1 and IL. Therefore, intra-L1-group congruity has also been tested. Both test results provide sufficient evidence on the L1 transfer in Chinese EFL learners' use of TP in their English writing.

TABLE 6
TEST RESULTS OF INTRA-L1-GROUP HOMOGENEITY IN LEARNERS' IL PERFORMANCE

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	sig.(2-tailed)
EFL_Linear	Equal variances assumed	.141	.710	-.373	26	.712
	Equal variances not assumed			-.375	24.108	.711
EFL_Constant	Equal variances assumed	1.706	.203	-.539	26	.594
	Equal variances not assumed			-.529	21.964	.602

Notes: N1 = 16, N2 = 12

TABLE 7
TEST RESULTS OF INTRA-L1-GROUP CONGRUITY BETWEEN LEARNER'S L1 AND IL PERFORMANCE

		Std.		t	df	sig.(2-tailed)
		Mean	Deviation			
Pair 1	EFL_Linear_C – EFL_Linear_E	.01929	.09080	-2.684	27	.271
Pair 2	EFL_Consant_C - EFL_Constant_E	.02179	.11649	45.092	27	.331

Notes: N = 28

D. Underlying Reasons of L1 Transfer in Chinese EFL Learners' Use of TP

It has been identified that the L1 influence on Chinese EFL learners' writing is the overuse of the constant progression pattern, which can be regarded as a negative transfer, since the ratio of linear progression to constant progression affects the quality of their English writing. Subsequently, the influence of linguistic transfer and conceptual transfer will be explored.

With respect to linguistic transfer, this study has found that constant progression patterns in Chinese EFL learners' English writing corresponded to constant progression patterns in their Chinese writing. As shown in the following three examples of their Chinese and English writing, Chinese EFL learners resorted particularly to the rhetorical device of parallel construction in their native language and expressed similar constructions in English. In this sense, transfer was considered by the EFL learners as a strategy or as a means to convey their meaning in the target language.

Example 1

你会发现，这个世界竟是如此。/ 你的视野拓宽了，/ 你的见识多了，/ 你对世界的认知也加深了。(Ni hui fa xian, zhe ge shi jie jing shi ru ci. / Ni de shi ye kuo kuan le, / ni de jian shi duo le, / ni dui shi jie de ren zhi ye jia shen le.)

In university, **you** have more opportunities to perceive the world. / **You** can know what happened, what is happening and what will happen. / So **university** can broaden our horizon, / and thus **it** can deepen our understanding of the world. /

Example 2

大学后，你会遇到来自五湖四海、天南地北的人。/ 你会发现，你们的想法、价值观也许截然不同。/ 你们来自不同的家庭，成长于不同地区，接受不同的教育。/ 有些人的家族地位显赫，/ 有些人来自边远闭塞贫困地区。(Da xue hou, ni hui yu dao lai zi wu hu si hai, tian nan di bei de ren. / Ni hui fa xian, ni men de xiang fa, jia zhi guan ye xu jie ran bu tong. / Ni men lai zi bu tong de jia ting, cheng zhang yu bu tong di qu, jie shou bu tong de jiao yu. / You xie ren de jia zu di wei xian he, / you xie ren lai zi pian yuan bi se pin kun di qu.)

After **you** enter into university, you will meet many people from different places. / **You** will have totally different values and beliefs, because you were born in different families, you grow up in different places, and you received education in different schools. / Maybe **someone** is from a rich family, / but **someone** is from a remote village. / Maybe **someone** studies hard /but **someone** skips classes.

Example 3

大学提供了我们锻炼自我能力的好机会，/ 大学也培养和确立了我们的人生三观。/ (Da xue ti gong le wo men duan lian zi wo neng li de hao ji hui, / da xue pei yang he que li le wo men de ren sheng san guan.)

University education benefits us a lot. / **It** not only gives us the chance to find a better job, but makes us more cultivated and competitive as well. /

Interviews with the participants found that when they wrote in English or Chinese, they paid high attention to cohesive devices by using signal words such as “first,” “second,” “however,” and “moreover,” but they had no awareness of thematic progression in texts. They regarded parallel construction as more expressive and more forceful and thought parallel construction would contribute to the coherence of discourse both in the Chinese and English languages.

As for conceptual transfer, the overuse of constant progression in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing can be attributed to different thinking modes between Chinese and English cultures, which are reflected in the two different languages. According to Wang (2013, 2016, 2017), the English language is temporality-prominent, whereas the Chinese language is spatiality-prominent. As the English language focuses on temporality, it encodes elements from a temporal perspective when organizing language structure, and it focuses on observing temporal characteristics from the movement and change of elements. Continuity, connectedness and irreversibility are featured in the English language. In contrast, the Chinese language focuses on spatiality; therefore, it prioritizes images. It expresses and describes spatial entities with chunky and discrete language units. On this basis, the Chinese language is characterized by discreteness, chunkiness and reversibility. As shown in Table 1, the diagram of linear progression demonstrates the characteristics of temporality, continuity, connectedness, and irreversibility, whereas the diagram of constant progression shows the features of spatiality, discreteness, chunkiness, and reversibility. This can explain why constant progression is preferred by the Chinese EFL learners in both their English and Chinese writing.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study has explored the L1 transfer of TP patterns in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing. After a series of statistical analyses and discussions, the three research questions have been answered to achieve the three research objectives. First, the tests of two potential effects of L1 transfer have provided convincing evidence to identify the L1 transfer in Chinese EFL learners' use of TP patterns in their English writing. Second, comparative statistical analysis results have revealed that the overuse of constant progression patterns is an influence of L1 transfer on Chinese EFL learner's English writing, which can be considered as a negative transfer as the high ratio of linear progression to constant progression makes their writing inferior in quality to those of American native speakers. At a linguistic level, L1 transfer is regarded by the EFL learners as a strategy or as a means to convey their meaning in the target language. At a conceptual level, the overuse of constant progression patterns demonstrates the transfer of discrete and chunky characteristics from the Chinese language onto the English language due to the different preferences for spatiality and temporality held by Chinese and English people in their ways of thinking.

Research results of the present study may provide some implications for EFL writing instruction. Chinese EFL teachers should note that L1 transfer caused by different ways of thinking between English and Chinese cultures, besides lexis choices, syntactic patterns, and generic structures, is an important factor to be considered when facilitating learners to produce effective writing.

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