

WRITING GENERATOR: A STUDY ON THE USE OF TRANSITIONAL MARKERS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

Coherence and cohesion is often considered an abstract and difficult area in the teaching of writing. The present study attempt to identify the categories of transitional markers (TM) used by students who have been taught using the Cycle 1 Writing Generator Beta 1.0 developed by the researchers in a writing class, and whether students are able to retain the skills of using TMs effectively in later writing. The Writing Generator is a Microsoft word tool that prompt student to choose from a list the formulaic phrases and expressions when they write expository essays. Using descriptive statistics, it was revealed that transitional markers were used by these students in their pre-test, post-test and also delayed post-test. The findings show a significant difference in the frequency of TMs used in the pre-test and post-test ($p=.000$). Though students failed to retain aspects of TMs in delayed post-test without the use of Writing Generator, the t-test found no significant difference between the post-test and delayed post-test ($p=.302$). The result indicates that the Writing Generator is able to condition students to choose TMs that bring about unity in their writing even they do not use the tool. The study indicates that the Cycle 1 Writing Generator Beta 1.0 could be developed further with extra features for Cycle 2 Beta 2.0 that could facilitate students' uptake of academic writing skills more effectively among students.

Keywords: *Transitional markers (TM), Academic writing, Formulaic expression, Writing generator*

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Introduction

Transitional markers are linking words or phrases that connect ideas and add cohesion to writing. They signpost or indicate to the reader the relationships between sentences and between paragraphs, making it easier for the reader to understand ideas (Poudel, 2018). We use a variety of transition signals to fulfill a number of functions. Some of these functions include: to show the order or sequence of events; to indicate that a new idea or an example will follow; to show that a contrasting idea will be presented; or to signal a summary or a conclusion.

In writing, the use of transitional markers not only makes it easier for the reader to follow the writers' ideas but also creates powerful links between sentences and paragraphs to improve the flow of information across the whole text. The result is that the writing is smoother. Transitional markers also help to carry over a thought from one sentence to another, from one idea to another or from one paragraph to another (Poudel, 2018).

At the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), there are three major reasons why students need writing support in diploma courses. Firstly, due to large enrolments, there is limited lecturer-student individual contact time both in and out of class time. Secondly, students have limited practice and are mostly unfamiliar with the use of transitional markers in essay writing.

Finally, the availability of self-learning support is limited. Therefore, students could benefit from a self-access learning and examples of transitional markers and phrases suitable for their essay writing.

Although coherence is crucial to effective writing, students at UiTM often find it to be abstract, elusive, and controversial concept that is difficult to grasp. In their study Yunus, Nor, and Haris, (2014) found that students often misuse, overuse or advance use of discourse markers in essay writing, in addition to having students who focus almost exclusively on words and sentence levels and failing to recognize features that contribute to coherence and cohesion in essay writing (Poudel, 2018). Jones, (2007) claims that students even experience poor performance and failure in their academic subjects as a result of their poor writing skills within the genres of academic writing. Given the situation, it is important that students are taught the use of transitional markers to bring about unity in essays.

In a more recent research, Hammond (2018), developed an assignment-specific academic phrase-bank, which provides examples of open-slot, formulaic frames grouped according to the process required to complete narrative essay and found that a formulaic frame phrase-bank facilitate the teaching and increase students' uptake of support for development of academic writing for large classes. Very much related to tools that aid writing Abdulkarim (2017) used the document review technique to investigate the relationship between students' ability to use the tools of cohesion and to form a coherent text.

In a related study Mansoor and Badeleh, (2013) compared the distributions of the Transitional Markers articles that were written are native speakers of English and Persian academic writers. The study revealed that the TM belonging to the categories of contrast and purpose were mostly used by native writers while, the TM belonging to the categories of addition, time, result, place, example and summary and emphasis were more used in articles written by Persian writers. This shows that the use of TM may differ according to the culture writers come from to indicate importance or politeness.

It is also worth mentioning that Briesmaster and Etchegara (2017) identified the impact of a metacognition-based intervention on the coherence and cohesion of EFL students' writing. The study found that by taking part in EFL lessons focused on how to think about productive activities, students could improve coherence and cohesion of their written production.

In another relevant study, Noorian and Reza (2017), found that the differences in the use of TM is not just driven by the extent writers knew a language but also its culture. Therefore, it is important to establish connections and the use of TM in context by which the TMs are used. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the views of Kuhl and Masumeh (2011), that a particular TM used does not always permit a single, clear logical interpretation.

Methods

Considering the students' learning context and importance of transitional markers in academic writing, the researchers developed a writing template called the Writing Generator to provide structure for the introduction, content and conclusion of an expository essay. The template provides specific moves and steps required to complete expository essays. The length of the essay can vary depending on the course requirement. The homepage of the Writing Generator is shown in Figure. 1.



Figure 1. The Home page of the Writing Generator

The corpus of this study was 45 essays written by students. These 45 essays comprised 15 written by students before they were introduced to the use of Writing Generator (pre-test), 15 after the use of the Writing Generator (post-test) and another 15 a month later without using the Writing Generator (delayed post-test). The essays were based on three similar titles from an English writing class. This similarity was our first criterion for the selection of the essays. All essays were produced in classes taught by the same teacher. The instrumentation of the study is based on Harris's (2013) and Dafouz-Milne (2008) classification of transitional markers. Then they were put into nine categories, namely the categories of addition, comparison & similarity, contrast, time, purpose, result, place, example and summary & emphasis (see Table 1). Lastly, the essays were examined to determine the frequency of the TMs. An attempt to analyse the differences between the uses of TMs in the pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test is then made. Thus, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which categories of TMs are used most by students in the Writing Generator in their essays?
2. Is there a significant difference between the frequency of TMs used in the essays written by students before and after the use of Writing Generator?
3. Are the students able to retain the categories of TMs that they used in the Writing Generator?

Data Analysis Procedure

In order to satisfy the goal of the study, the full essay of each student which includes the introduction, the content and the conclusion were analysed. The essays were all written by undergraduate students taking the ELC230 – a course that is designed teaching academic writing skills at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The essays were examined for the frequency of the TMs at the sentence, paragraph and between paragraphs levels.

It was not difficult to determine the use of TMs by the students as they undergo a study unit of ELC230 on the use of transitional markers in essays. In the analysis, the functions of TMs were examined qualitatively in direct relation to their occurrence in the context of the essays. For example, the word "this" expresses a kind of physical meaning in the real world, but in an essay, it could refer to an anaphoric or a cataphoric reference to navigate the readers as they go through the text. Additionally, though the TM 'although' could be used to signal alternatives, it could also be used to draw comparisons. In order to reduce ambiguity, inter-rater reliability was done with another lecturer

teaching the similar course and the inter-rater reliability agreement by two independent raters was at 96%. The data obtained were summarized using descriptive statistics and presented through frequency tables.

Result and Discussion

Table 1. Comparison of TMs Used in Pre-Test and Post-Test Essays

Categories	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	N	%	N	%
To Mark Time	14	15.56	76	84.44
To Summarize/Restate	35	28.93	86	71.07
To Relate Cause and Effect or Result	25	19.53	103	80.47
To Add, Amplify or List	140	33.10	283	66.90
To Compare	16	15.09	90	84.91
To Concede	22	15.38	121	84.62
To Contrast	7	23.33	23	76.67
To Indicate Purpose	1	6.25	15	93.75
To Express Condition	34	28.81	84	71.19
To Give Examples or Specify	10	18.18	45	81.82
To Qualify	2	6.45	29	93.55
To Emphasize	27	29.35	65	70.65
To Conclude Paragraph	38	45.78	45	54.22
To establish connection with the repetition of key words, phrases, synonyms, pronouns and demonstratives	25	13.16	165	86.84
Total	396	24.35	1230	75.65

The results of this study revealed that TMs are both used by students in the pre-test and the post test. This is mainly due to the fact that these students are taught the use of transitional markers and coherence devices in schools and in other English courses at UiTM. Nevertheless, the frequency of use is obviously different with the use of the Writing Generator. In the pre-test, the study found that students mostly use the transitional markers in the categories of to add, list or amplify ideas. This is also the case in the post-test. As for the other categories of TMs, the frequency of using them is rather low in the pre-test but high in the post-test. Such a difference in the findings shows that although the students in the pre-test have the skills of using transitional markers, they lack the mastery of the conventions in academic writing.

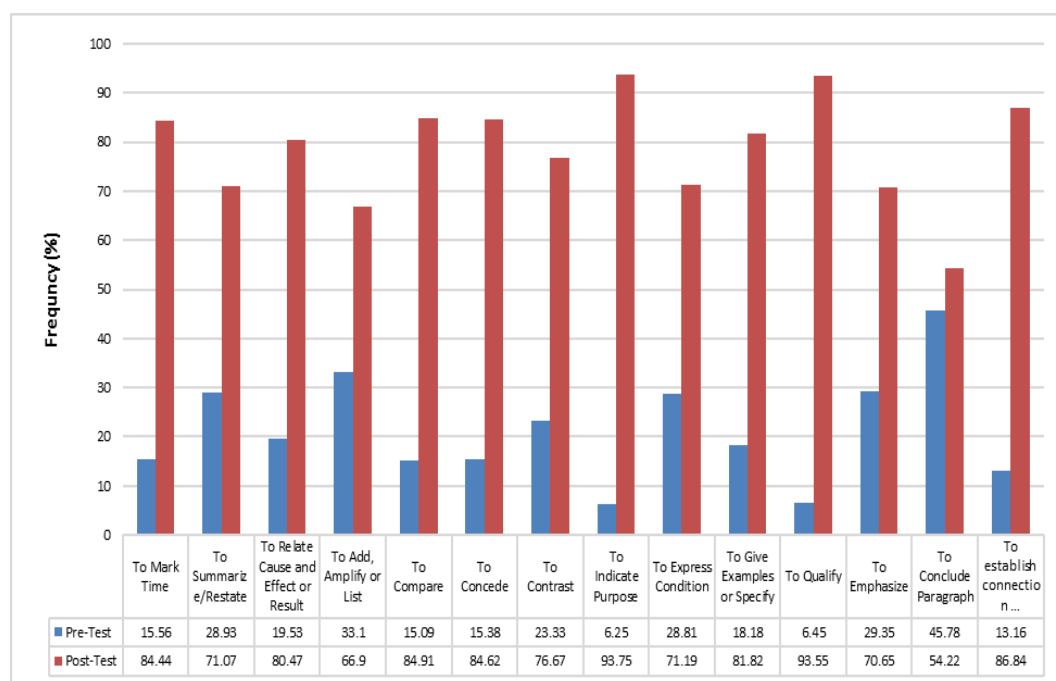


Figure 2. Comparison of TMs Used in Pre-Test and Post-Test

Figure 2 shows the data of Table 1 in graphical form. It is clear that the exposure to Writing Generator has enabled students to use more TMs in their writing. The two categories of TMs that have shown marked increase in their usage are to indicate purpose and to qualify; and except for the category of to conclude paragraph, all the other categories show at least a 100% increase in their frequency of use.

The result of Paired Sample T-Test between the Post-Test and Pre-Test is shown in Table 2. The result indicates that there is a significant difference in the frequency of TMs used in the pre-test and post-test ($p=.000$).

Table 2. Paired Sample T-Test between Post-Test and Pre-Test

	<i>Post-Test</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>
Mean	87.85714	28.28571429
Variance	4822.901	1176.373626
Observations	14	14
Pearson Correlation	0.862575	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	13	
t Stat	5.126943	
P(T<=t) one-tail	9.72E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.770933	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000194	
t Critical two-tail	2.160369	

** $p<0.05$; N=15

Table 3 shows the frequency of the TMs used in the post-test and delayed post-test. The category of to add, amplify or list is the most frequently used TM both in the post-test and delayed post-test. This is followed by to establish connection with the repetition of key words, phrases, synonyms, pronouns and demonstratives. TM to indicate purpose seems to be least frequently used in the written essays of the students.

Table 1. Frequencies of TMs Used in Post-Test and Delayed Post-Test Essays

Categories	Post-Test		Delayed Post-Test	
	N	%	N	%
To Mark Time	76	60.32	50	39.68
To Summarize/Restate	86	53.09	76	46.91
To Relate Cause and Effect or Result	103	51.24	98	48.76
To Add, Amplify or List	283	62.47	170	37.53
To Compare	90	50.56	88	49.44
To Concede	121	57.62	89	42.38
To Contrast	23	51.11	22	48.89
To Indicate Purpose	15	60.00	10	40.00
To Express Condition	84	52.50	76	47.50
To Give Examples or Specify	45	33.83	88	66.17
To Qualify	29	46.77	33	53.23
To Emphasize	65	53.72	56	46.28
To Conclude Paragraph	45	37.19	76	62.81
To establish connection with the repetition of key words, phrases, synonyms, pronouns and demonstratives	165	51.40	156	48.60
Total	1230	53.06	1088	46.94

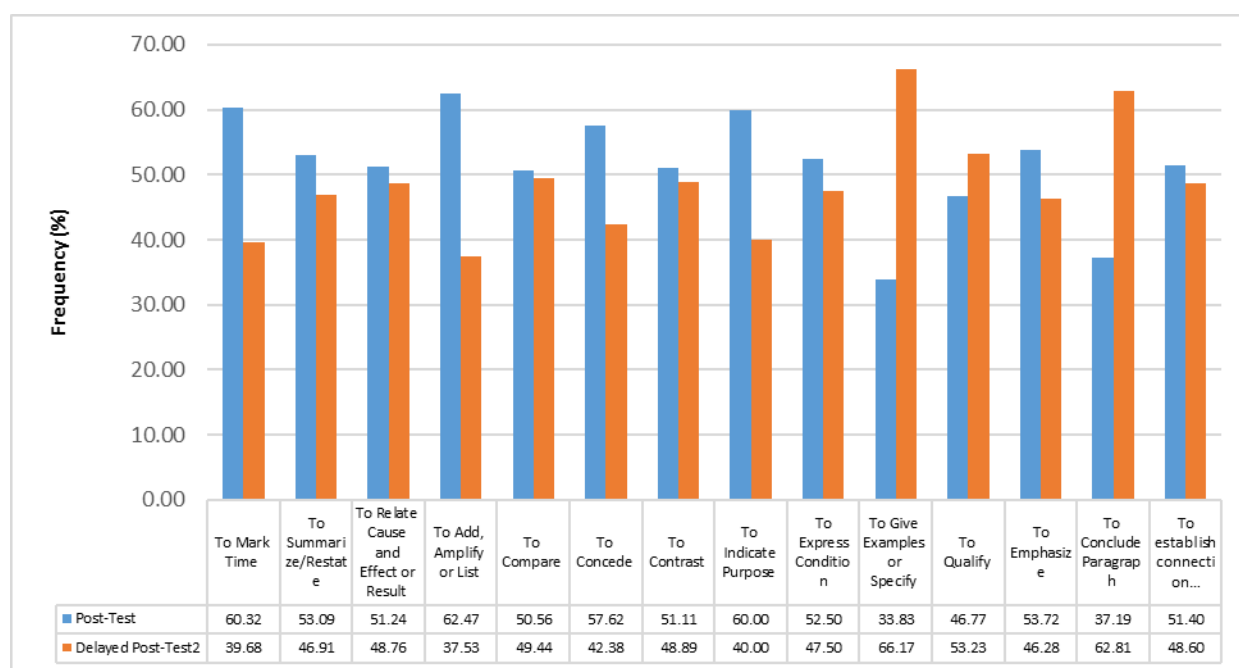


Figure 1. Frequencies of TMs Used in Post-Test and Delayed Post-Test

Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the data in Table 3. Except for the categories to give examples or specify, to qualify, and to conclude paragraph, the frequency of the TMs used in the

delayed post-test seems to have dropped. This indirectly means that, in general, students used fewer TMs when they do not use the Writing Generator.

As seen in Table 4, although there is a drop in the frequencies of TMs used in the delayed post-test, the t-test result between post-test and delayed post-test shows that there is no significant difference between those frequencies ($p=.302$).

Table 2. Paired Sample T-Test between Post-Test and Delayed Post-Test

	<i>Post-Test</i>	<i>Delayed Post-Test</i>
Mean	87.85714	77.71428571
Variance	4822.901	2025.604396
Observations	14	14
Pearson Correlation	0.895769	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	13	
t Stat	1.073891	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.1512	
t Critical one-tail	1.770933	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.302401	
t Critical two-tail	2.160369	

** $p<0.05$; N=15

Table 5 shows the results of the paired sample t-test between the delayed post-test and pre-test. The p value obtained ($p=.000062$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the two. This means that the students were able to use TMs more frequently in the delayed post-test in comparison to the pre-test.

Table 3. Paired Sample T-Test between Delayed Post-Test and Pre-Test

	<i>Delayed Post-Test</i>	<i>Pre-Test</i>
Mean	77.71429	28.28571429
Variance	2025.604	1176.373626
Observations	14	14
Pearson Correlation	0.70737	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	13	
t Stat	5.796218	
P(T<=t) one-tail	3.11E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.770933	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000062	
t Critical two-tail	2.160369	

** $p<0.05$; N=15

Conclusion

The study shows that students using the Writing Generator use TMs mostly to add, amplify or list their line of statements in their essays followed by to establish connections using repetition of key words, phrases, synonyms, pronouns and demonstratives. This is partly because these students could be most familiar with these types of TMs as they are exposed to writing classes at UiTM and at schools prior to attending UiTM. Additionally, these are simple forms of TMs which are easily taught and learnt in classrooms.

To determine whether there is a significant difference between the frequency of TMs used in the essays written by students before and after the use of Writing Generator, a paired sample t-test was conducted. The results show that there is a significant difference in the frequency ($p < 0.05$). This means that students are able to use TMs more effectively in their essay writing after they are introduced to Writing Generator.

In order to determine whether students are able to retain the frequency of TMs used, a delayed post-test was conducted. The results obtained were compared to those from the pre-test and post-test. The t-test between the delayed post-test and pre-test shows that there is a significant difference between them, while that between the delayed post-test and post-test shows the contrary. The plausible conclusion to these results is after the use of Writing Generator, the students were able to use TMs more frequently and they were able to maintain the frequency in subsequent writing.

This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Noorian & Reza (2017) which revealed that there are meaningful differences between two groups concerning the use of TMs. It is worth mentioning that students should be sensitized to the use of TMs in academic writing as to address certain discourse community. When students are not exposed to product-oriented approaches as in the use of Writing Generator, they cannot be expected to write cohesively according to a certain genre. This is particularly important especially for post graduate students who are required to produce their term papers, dissertations or thesis.

The study also has some implications for Malaysian students writing for academic purposes. Therefore, the best way of teaching students to write according to the linguistic and rhetorical features of in academic writing for students is by investigating authentic texts and practices of academic writing. Given the skills of using TMs effectively we provide students with knowledge they can apply and refine in new areas they encounter. Nevertheless, making such generalizations can be dangerous as there is no writing skills that students learn can be transferred to all writing situations. The Writing Generator is just one of the ways of teaching the conventions of academic writing that vary across academic disciplines. Along with this suggestion, the present study indicates that material developers for teaching of academic writing skills and syllabus designers should consider incorporating product-based approach into the current process-oriented approach in writing.

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