

Investigating Ideational Thematic Content in Korean University Student Essay Writing

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This study aims to investigate Korean university students' ways of distributing information in written English discourse, by examining lexico-semantic properties of themes in their English essay writing, in close reference to those in their Australian counterparts' writing. To that end, it analyzed 35 texts (20 texts by Korean university students and 15 by Australian university students), using a systemic functional linguistic concept of theme, in particular 'ideational theme'. The results of the study have shown that most of all, Korean EFL university students tend to strongly personalize their essay writing, frequently employing 'interactional' (Brown & Yule, 1983) and/or narrative discourse features in initial thematic position. They were also found to have a tendency to develop ideas rather narrowly, often focusing on a few selected major text participants. These results show that Korean university students lack experience and training in conceptualizing ideas in the formal written mode, strongly suggesting the need to teach them explicitly to use appropriate discourse features in various modes and genres of writing. The findings are expected to help Korean EFL university students understand and learn some characteristic discourse features of formal English essay writing and produce extended writing in formal English appropriately in internationalized tertiary contexts.

I. INTRODUCTION

In line with the increasing internationalization of higher education, written English has greatly extended its significance as a central medium of communication in colleges and universities worldwide. Despite the growing prominence of English writing in increasingly internationalized tertiary contexts in Korea, however, relatively little research has been conducted on Korean university students' English writing (see e.g. Dongho Kang, 2006 and Ortega, 2004). English language teaching (ELT) in Korean universities also still tends to prioritize speaking over writing, with the notion of communicative competence often simply

regarded as competence in speaking alone. In brief, though some interest now seems to be emerging in tertiary English writing research and instruction in Korea, Korean ELT scholars and practitioners have not yet fully recognized the urgent need to research and teach English writing explicitly and systematically as an essential form of communication.

As a way of bridging this apparent gap between the increasing importance of English essay writing in internationalized Korean universities and the relative lack of English writing research and instruction in Korea, the current study attempts to examine and diagnose Korean university students' English writing abilities, in reference to those of Australian university students of English as a native language (ENL). Korean university students, who study English as a foreign language (EFL), rarely produce extended writing in English for authentic communication purposes; the majority of them are thus likely to be significantly limited in English essay writing skills of the kind required at tertiary level. Among a number of key elements relating to the construction of essay writing, this study will focus on examining Korean university students' writing strategies to distribute information in a text. In so doing, it will pay particular attention to lexico-semantic properties found in initial position in the 't-unit', or a 'minimally terminable unit' defined as 'an independent clause plus any subordinate clause(s) attached to it' (Hunt, 1965). The effective distribution of information is an essential aspect of cohesive and coherent 'discourse structure and flow', which has been considered a major requisite for a successful written discourse construction (Crème & Lea, 2003; Gilbert, 2004; Hewings, 2004). The findings of this study are expected to help Korean EFL university students to understand and learn some characteristic discourse features occurring in English essay writing, and further to produce extended writing in formal English appropriately.

II. THEME AND ITS IDEATIONAL CONTENT

It has been well researched and documented by systemic functional linguists (e.g. Berry, 1995; Fries, 1995, 2002; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2003; Mauranen, 1996; North, 2005, to name just a few), most notably by Halliday (1967, 1994), that initial position in a clause or sentence plays a significant role in the distribution and development of ideas in the text. From the textual point of view, according to Halliday (1994), the clause is characterized "as a message, a quantum of information" (p. 34) to be conveyed to the hearer. In the construction of a clausal message in English (and in many other languages, too), initial position realizes the function of 'theme' that serves as the starting point for the message and which functions to situate the message within the context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 64). The theme is then developed in the rest of the clause called 'rheme'.

Since Halliday's conceptualization of clause-level theme, which owed a great deal to Prague School linguists' work on theme, a large number of systemic functional theme researchers (e.g. Francis, 1989; Fries, 1983, 1995, 2002; Ghadessy & Gao, 2000; Halliday, 1998; Hasselgard, 2004; North, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2003; McCabe, 1999 to name just a few) have sought to investigate the role of theme from a discourse perspective. In particular, Fries (1983, 1995) first made a systematic empirical attempt to demonstrate that clause/sentence-level thematic selections can contribute in various ways to the overall coherent text development and organization. Ideational or referential thematic content, it has been suggested, has a particularly significant function from a discourse organization perspective, reflecting different ways of developing ideas in different genres.

Based on his examination of thematic choice in some carefully chosen paragraphs, Fries (1983; see also Caffarel, 2000) found that the experiential content of the themes in the paragraphs correlated with different rhetorical strategies such as 'description' and 'comparison'. In a paragraph describing a scene, for example, Fries demonstrated that references to relative position of the scene occurred regularly in initial thematic position in the paragraph. Examining various text types (five obituaries, one program note, three narratives, and one expository text), Fries (1995) further showed that ideational thematic content varied in different genres, reflecting different methods of text development. In narrative texts, the rhetorical purpose of which is to amuse people, for example, references to people typically occurred in thematic position, with references to location likely to play a focal role in rhematic position. Similarly, Vande Kopple (1991) showed that in guidebooks and travel brochures, locative references tended to occupy initial thematic position, with various information about them typically presented in rhematic position.

Correlations have also been found between semantic types of ideational thematic content and different newspaper genres. Francis (1989, 1990) found that lexical and semantic features of ideational themes were clearly different between 'news reports,' 'editorials' and 'letters of complaint.' For instance, 'people' and 'concrete things' were far more common as themes in news reports than in editorials and letters of complaint, which, instead, employed many more abstractions in initial thematic position. Francis's finding that different genres employ different semantic types of theme is supported by Taylor's (1983) finding. In her theme analysis of high school textbooks on history and on science, Taylor (1983) found that 'things,' as the matter of science, were likely to be employed as themes in science textbooks, while 'people,' as the matter of history, tended to be thematized in history textbooks.

The findings above do not suggest, however, that themes in a well-written paragraph or text should regularly refer to one or two certain limited semantic fields. What the writer chooses to make thematic in a text tends to vary depending on the overall field of information and the rhetorical purpose of the text. Even if the themes may come from

various complex semantic fields, however, they still can serve to show the reader how the writer's local concerns change and progress throughout the text. To sum up, selections of ideational thematic content in a naturally occurring text, however complex they are, are not arbitrary or at random; rather, they are patterned in one way or another according to the rhetorical purpose that the writer has in mind.

III. METHODS

1. The Texts Analyzed¹

To examine how Korean university students distribute information by using initial thematic position, this study first analyzed 20 essays written by Year 2 Korean EFL undergraduates specializing in English education at a Korean university. The study also then analyzed ENL writing produced by Australian university students, in order to delineate Korean university students' writing strategies more systematically in frequent reference to their ENL counterparts' strategies. The ENL corpus consisted of 15 essays by Year 1 Australian ENL undergraduates specializing in Education at a highly internationalized Australian university.

Both the EFL and the ENL texts were subdivided into three ranking groups, i.e. high-rated, middle-rated and low-rated essays, in order to examine within-group differences systematically. The division of the EFL texts was based on the assessment by an experienced tertiary-level ESL teacher in Australia, who used a simplified holistic scoring system covering a wide range of aspects: 'structure', 'cohesion', 'content', 'vocabulary and spelling', and 'grammar'. The ENL texts were assessed and marked by the tutors in charge on the basis of four criteria: 'organization', 'style' (including grammar and vocabulary), 'content', 'argument and analysis'.

The texts can all be considered 'naturally occurring authentic texts', in the sense that they were all produced for course completion in the participants' normal course of study, without explicit help from others, rather than being elicited specifically for the purposes of this study. The EFL texts were produced as written assignments for a regular university credit course that the Korean EFL participants were studying at the time. The writing topic for the Korean EFL participants was chosen from one of the key educational issues that they studied in the course. The EFL essay writing topic was: 'Discuss TEE (Teaching English in English) for Korean secondary school students in the current Korean EFL

¹ The *raw* data analyzed in this study is the same as those used in the current author's paper, entitled "Connectors as Textual Orienting Themes in Korean and Australian Student Essay Writing", which was published in *English Teaching*, Vol. 62 (1), 2007.

context'. The Korean participants were requested to 'typewrite at least 500 words, with their professor as the audience.' Similarly, the ENL essays were the Australian ENL participants' mid-term written assignments of about 1000 words on a topic that they studied in the semester. The ENL essay topic was: 'Discuss the instructional implications of any area or areas of either human cognitive architecture or the development of cognitive structures.'

Though, as seen here, the EFL and the ENL essay writing topic are clearly different in nature, which might likely affect the analysis results, tertiary student essay writing is mostly, if not always, considered 'formal' regardless of the writing topics given. It should also be recalled here that, as stated above, the main focus of this study is on examining the EFL texts, with the ENL texts analyzed merely as reference sources. The texts were all analyzed in as rigorous and objective a way as possible, employing a functional linguistic concept of theme, to be specific, 'ideational theme', which will be dealt with in the next section.

2. Analytical Methods

For analysis, all the texts collected were first segmented into t-units, which are conceived in this study as 'local messages'. Each of the t-units, was then divided into theme and rheme, with the former always coming first. As seen in Section II, in English the textual function of theme is realized in initial position, meaning that the theme is the first constituent of the t-unit; this initial approximation, however, should be cautiously taken. The theme should serve, as Halliday puts, as "an anchorage in the realm of (world) experience" (1994, p. 53). This means that the theme should be an ideational (specifically, experiential) element referring to real world experience. The theme should thus always include the first ideational or referential constituent of the t-unit, plus any non-referential element(s) preceding it. In this study, the obligatory ideational constituent is called 'ideational theme (IT)'; and a non-referential element(s) occurring before IT, such as *but* and *probably*, is termed 'orienting theme (OT)', which subsumes Halliday's textual and interpersonal themes (e.g., Halliday, 1994, pp. 52-54). The OT, as used in this study, however, encompasses not only non-referential t-unit constituents in initial position, but also all other types of 'metadiscourse features' (e.g., Hyland, 2004) in initial position, including both interpersonal and textual 'grammatical metaphors' (e.g., Halliday, 1994), such as *it is probable*. The divisions of the t-unit into theme and rheme, and of theme into IT and OT are illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Examples of Theme Analysis

Orienting Theme (OT)	Ideational Theme (IT)	Rheme
But unfortunately	TEE	is not easy to carry out in Korea at this stage
Probably / I believe that	TEE	is not easy to carry out in Korea at this stage
People say / It is said that	TEE	is not easy to carry out in Korea at this stage
We all know that certainly	TEE	is not easy to carry out in Korea at this stage
As discussed, however,	in Korea	TEE is currently <i>certainly</i> uneasy to carry out

Of various features relating to theme, lexical and semantic features of ITs are the main focus of the current study. For analysis of ideational thematic content, this study adapted Francis's (1990) semantic categories, which have been adopted by a number of systemic functional theme researchers (e.g., Fries, 1995; Ghadessy & Gao, 2000) with some modifications. Her semantic categories are (1) 'people / groups / institutions', i.e. all humans individually and collectively, (2) 'concrete things' (e.g., *aeroplane*), (3) 'abstractions', including nominalized processes, (4) 'time expressions', and (5) 'others' consisting of processes or non-lexical themes (Francis, 1990, p. 55).

Based on the examination of features used in initial thematic position in the EFL texts, this study has decided to examine the following lexico-semantic features of IT:

- i) the first/second person (e.g., *I, we, you*) as major text participants;
- ii) animate (e.g., *students*) and inanimate text participants (e.g., *desks, ideas*);
- iii) global theme, meaning 'the most central referent, often manifested in the writing topic' (e.g., *Teaching English in English* for the EFL texts; *human cognitive architecture* for the ENL texts);
- iv) abstractions (e.g., *concepts*) vs. concrete things (e.g., *blackboards*);
- v) 'anaphoric nominalizations' (e.g., *this suggestion*), which encapsulate a portion of preceding discourse (Francis, 1989);
- vi) text reference (i.e., *this idea*), which refers to a certain portion of text, rather than a specific participant(s);
- vii) locative circumstances (e.g., *in 1980; there*), including both 'time' and 'place'.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents results from a detailed quantitative linguistic analysis of lexico-semantic properties of the ideational themes in the Korean EFL and the Australian

ENL texts. Tables 2 and 3 below first show the frequencies of the first and the second person pronouns employed as Head of IT, and then present the frequencies of the animate text participants, global themes, abstract concepts and text references found in thematic position. Lastly, the tables also present frequencies of the two most common types of circumstantial information of marked themes (circumstantial adjuncts and dependent clauses occurring before the subject, as illustrated in the last example in Table 1 above). The percentages were all calculated in proportion to the numbers of the t-units examined.

TABLE 2
Lexico-Semantic Properties of Theme (and Rheme) in the EFL Texts

	Korean EFL Texts			
	High (n=5) (161 t-units)	Middle (n=10) (305 t-units)	Low (n=5) (179 t-units)	Total (n=20) (645 t-units)
Interactional Aspects of Discourse: Writer & Reader				
1 st P. Sing. <i>as</i> Head of IT	3 (1.86%)	11 (3.61%)	10 (5.59%)	24 (3.72%)
1 st P. Plur. <i>as</i> Head of IT	5 (3.11%)	27 (8.85%)	2 (1.12%)	34 (5.27%)
2 nd Person <i>as</i> Head of IT	1 (0.62%)	1 (0.33%)	5 (2.79%)	7 (1.09%)
Writer & Reader <i>as</i> IT	9 (5.59%)	39 (12.79%)	17 (9.50%)	65 (10.08%)
Animate & Inanimate Text Participants				
Animate Par. <i>as</i> Head of IT	56 (34.78%)	121 (39.67%)	75 (41.90%)	252 (39.07%)
G-Theme <i>as</i> Head of IT	36 (22.36%)	54 (17.70%)	21 (11.73%)	111 (17.29%)
Abstract Concept <i>as</i> IT	27 (16.77%)	43 (14.10%)	20 (11.17%)	90 (13.95%)
<i>inc.</i> Anaphoric Nom. in IT	3 (1.86%)	3 (0.98%)	0 (0.00%)	6 (0.93%)
Text Reference <i>in</i> Theme	8 (4.97%)	11 (3.60%)	9 (5.03%)	28 (4.34%)
Circumstantial Information (Circumstantial Adjuncts + Dependent Clauses)				
Spatio-Temporal	12 (7.45%)	24 (7.87%)	18 (10.06%)	54 (8.37%)
Condition & Concession	13 (8.07%)	23 (7.54%)	10 (5.59%)	46 (7.13%)

TABLE 3
Lexico-Semantic Properties of Theme (and Rheme) in the ENL Texts

	Australian ENL Texts			
	High (n=5) (287 t-units)	Mid. (n=5) (320 t-units)	Low (n=5) (313 t-units)	Total (n=15) (920 t-units)
Interactional Aspects of Discourse: Writer & Reader				
1 st P. Sing. <i>as</i> Head of IT	3 (1.05%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (0.33%)
1 st P. Plur. <i>as</i> Head of IT	1 (0.35%)	7 (2.19%)	9 (2.88%)	17 (1.85%)
2 nd Person <i>as</i> Head of IT	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	5 (1.60%)	5 (0.54%)
Writer & Reader <i>as</i> IT	4 (1.39%)	7 (2.19%)	14 (4.47%)	25 (2.72%)
Animate & Inanimate Text Participants				
Animate Par. <i>as</i> Head of IT	74 (25.78%)	53 (16.56%)	75 (23.96%)	202 (21.96%)
G-Theme <i>as</i> Head of IT	33 (11.50%)	38 (11.88%)	50 (15.97%)	121 (13.15%)
Abstract Concept <i>as</i> IT	105 (36.59%)	147 (45.94%)	102 (32.59%)	354 (38.48%)
<i>inc.</i> Anaphoric Nom. <i>in</i> IT	16 (5.57%)	14 (4.38%)	7 (2.44%)	37 (4.02%)
Text Reference <i>in</i> Theme	22 (7.67%)	20 (6.25%)	21 (6.71%)	63 (6.85%)
Circumstantial Information (Circumstantial Adjuncts + Dependent Clauses)				
Spatio-Temporal	21 (7.32%)	31 (9.69%)	31 (9.90%)	83 (9.02%)
Condition & Concession	15 (5.23%)	10 (3.13%)	14 (4.47%)	39 (4.24%)

The figures in Tables 2 and 3 above show clear frequency differences in experiential thematic content of the ITs between the Korean EFL and the Australian ENL university students' essays. First of all, the first and the second person are in general far more frequently chosen as ITs in the EFL than in the ENL texts. Secondly, Korean EFL writers also strongly prefer to thematize animate text participants and, to a lesser extent, global Themes, while their Australian ENL counterparts tend to thematize abstract concepts most frequently, with animate text participants relatively infrequently thematized. In particular, in the ENL texts, unlike in the EFL texts, many of the abstract concepts are found to be nominalised concepts functioning to refer backward to part of the text. Lastly, the frequencies of thematized circumstantial information of condition and concession are in general considerably higher in the EFL texts than in the ENL texts though spatio-temporal circumstances are slightly more frequently thematized in the ENL texts. In what follows, each of these differences will be discussed in detail, with frequent reference to some previous corpus-based studies on similar linguistic features to those examined in this study.

1. The Explicit Presence of The Writer (and Reader)

As shown in Table 2 above, the first and the second person pronouns account for over 10 percent of the ITs found in the EFL corpus, with the frequency being nearly four times higher in the EFL texts (10.08% of the t-units) than in the ENL texts (2.72%). The large frequency difference in the first/second person as IT between the corpora is further enhanced by the Korean EFL writers' considerably more frequent use of the first and second person pronouns as displaced subject themes (25 instances–3.88%) than their ENL counterparts (14 instances–1.52%). (Displaced subject themes refer to grammatical subjects which are displaced from its original initial position, with non-subject elements such as circumstantial elements functioning as marked themes, as in *in Korea, TEE is certainly difficult to adopt in Korea.*) In addition, it should also be noted that the EFL writers have a strong tendency to employ the first person pronouns as part of non-ideational OTs functioning to 'orient' their readers to the main propositional or ideational content, as in *I think it will work well in Korea*, while there is no such OT found in the ENL texts.

Table 4 presents the frequencies of the first and the second person pronouns in both thematic and rhematic position as a way of examining Korean EFL and Australian ENL university student writers' general tendency to make explicit their presence and direct involvement in their writing.

TABLE 4
Frequencies of the First/Second Person Pronouns in the EFL and the ENL Texts

	EFL Essays (n=20)				ENL Essays (n=15)			
	High	Mid.	Low	Total	High	Mid.	Low	Total
Th.	34	110	48	192	11	25	43	79
	21.11%	36.07%	26.82%	29.77%	3.83%	7.81%	13.74%	8.59%
Rh.	2	7	7	16	3	27	53	83
	1.24%	2.30%	3.91%	2.48%	1.05%	8.44%	16.93%	9.02%
Total	36	117	55	208	14	52	96	162
	22.36%	38.36%	30.73%	32.25%	4.88%	16.25%	30.67%	17.61%

Table 4 shows that the Korean EFL writers employ the first/second person pronouns in initial thematic position nearly three and a half times more frequently than their Australian ENL counterparts. Interestingly, however, the Korean EFL writers' frequent use of the first/second person pronouns in thematic position is in marked contrast to their rare use in rhematic position. In the Australian ENL texts, on the other hand, more instances of the first/second person are found in rhematic position than in thematic position.

The clear frequency difference in thematic and rhematic instances of the first/second person between the EFL and the ENL corpus needs to be taken into further account. Of the 15 ENL texts, one low-rated text alone accounts for over 35 percent of all the first/second person pronouns found in the ENL corpus (35.80% – 58 out of 162 instances), and another four texts (2 middle-rated and 2 low-rated ENL texts) for over 50 percent (50.61% – 82 instances). This means that in the majority of the ENL texts (10 out of 15 texts: 5 high-rated, 3 middle-rated and two low-rated ENL texts), the first/second person pronouns are found only minimally, with the frequency ranging from zero to about nine percent of the t-units examined in the texts concerned. In the EFL corpus, on the other hand, though there are also some variations across individual texts, all the twenty EFL texts, without any single exception, include the first/second person pronouns in over 10 percent of the t-units examined. Table 5 summarizes the distributions of the frequency rates of the first/second person pronouns in both the EFL and the ENL texts, with the percentages calculated in proportion to the numbers of the t-units examined, and the figures showing the numbers of the texts.

TABLE 5
Distributions of the Frequencies of the First/Second Person in the EFL and the ENL Texts

	0-10%	10-20%	20-30%	30-40%	40-50%	50-60%	60-70%	70-80%	Mean
EFL	0	4	7	2	4	1	2	0	32.25%
ENL	10	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	17.65%

The figures above clearly suggest that the majority of the Australian ENL writers are in general very reluctant to use the first/second person in their essay writing while most of the

Korean EFL writers tend to overuse them and thus personalize their argument. The personalizing effect of the first/second person pronouns on text tones, according to Martin (1986, p. 30), becomes particularly noticeable when they are employed as unmarked themes, i.e. themes conflated with grammatical subjects, as in *I have read an article on TEE written by an English teacher*. This is because the thematization of the first/second person as unmarked IT reflects the writer's/reader's direct involvement as a text participant in the discourse.

Research has suggested that the use of the first/second person in initial thematic position, which represents the 'interactional aspect' of the discourse (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 143), is typical of speech rather than writing (Thompson, 2004, p. 372). In her study of telephone conversation, for example, Backlund (1992, cited in Fries, 1995, p. 331) found that over half of the t-units examined (419 t-units, in total) employed the first and/or the second person as Theme. Fries (1995), on the other hand, found that the first/second person pronouns were rarely employed in initial thematic position in various written genres (5 obituaries, 1 program note, 4 narratives and 1 expository text), except for some narrative texts.

It should be noted, however, that, as pointed out by a number of researchers (e.g. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Chang & Swales, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Ivanic, 1998; Tang & John, 1999), academic writing, including formal essay writing produced by student writers, does not necessarily have to be completely impersonal, or devoid of the writer's explicit presence. Chang and Swales (1999), for example, noted a trend for the increasing employment of the first person pronouns, in particular its plural form, i.e. *we*, in formal academic writing in some disciplines such as philosophy and linguistics. In their corpus studies of four different registers, i.e. 'conversation', 'fiction', 'news', and 'academic writing', Biber et al. (1999, pp. 333-335) also found that though the first and the second person pronouns are least common in academic writing, the frequency of them is considered relatively higher than is generally assumed (approximately 7,000 instances per million words). It may therefore be suggested that in formal writing, the presence of the first/second person itself should not be considered simply infelicitous or wrong; instead, the frequency rates of the first/second person should thus be considered in conjunction with the genre and register of the text.

In both the EFL and the ENL corpus, except for a few low-rated texts (1 low-rated EFL and 2 low-rated ENL texts), the second person, it has been found, is uncommon. Of particular concern here is therefore the use of the first person in the corpora, i.e. the direct involvement of the writer himself/herself in the text. Table 6 shows the overall frequencies of the first person pronouns in the corpora:

TABLE 6**Frequencies of the 1st Person Pronouns in Theme and Rheme in the EFL and the ENL Texts**

	EFL Essays (n=20)				ENL Essays (n=15)			
	High	Middle	Low	Total	High	Middle	Low	Total
Theme	30	106	40	176	9	22	19	40
	18.63%	34.75%	22.35%	27.29%	3.14%	6.88%	6.07%	4.35%
Rheme	1	7	5	13	3	26	32	61
	0.62%	2.30%	2.79%	2.02%	1.05%	8.13%	10.22%	6.63%
Total	31	113	45	189	12	48	51	101
	19.25%	37.05%	25.14%	29.30%	4.18%	15.00%	16.29%	10.98%

When compared to findings of some previous studies (Biber et al., 1999; Chang & Swales, 1999; Hinkel, 2002), the frequency of the first person pronouns in the EFL texts, almost all of which are used in thematic position, is considered excessively high for essay writing. Biber et al. (1999), for example, found approximately 6,000 instances of the first person per million words in ‘academic writing’, 10,000 instances in ‘news’, 25,000 instances in ‘fiction’, and 50,000 instances in ‘conversation’. In comparison to these frequencies, the frequency of the first person in the EFL texts (*189 instances in 10,337 words*) is, proportionally, rather close to that in Biber et al.’s corpus of fiction, i.e. narrative writing, and over three times higher than the frequency in academic writing. On the other hand, the frequency of the first person in the ENL texts (*101 instances in 16,665 words*) is almost the same as that in Biber et al.’s academic writing corpus. The close similarity in the frequency between Biber et al.’s academic writing corpus and the ENL corpus may indicate the Australian ENL writers’ successful approximation and familiarization of academic writing conventions relating to the use of the first person.

It should be noted that some clear frequency variations are found in use of the first person across the ranking groups within the ENL corpus: in the high-rated ENL texts, the frequency is about three times lower than in the middle-rated and the low-rated texts. Similarly, in the EFL corpus, though the frequency of the first person seems excessively high in comparison to that in the ENL corpus, in the high-rated EFL texts, first person pronouns are found far less commonly than in the middle-rated and the low-rated EFL texts. The results here suggest that in university student essay writing, the frequent use of the first person is generally not recommended or valued by the assessors.

The relatively infrequent use of the first person in the high ability groups may be partly explained by Martin’s (1986; see also Berry, 1995 and Williams, 1997) suggestion that experientially oriented thematization is necessary for the success of informative writing such as essay writing. Compare the following two texts in (1) and (2). (1) is taken from one middle-rated EFL text; (2) modifies the text in (1) by trying to eliminate thematically occurring first person pronouns, without correcting grammatical errors or awkward expressions. (The themes, including displaced subject themes, are underlined, with the first

person pronouns in boldface; and in (2), the changed parts are in bold italics. ‘Unit’ stands for t-unit.)

(1) (extracted from the 1st Paragraph of a middle-rated EFL text)

(Unit1:T1+R1) For effective teaching in communicative language teaching, **we** need new way of teaching English. (Unit2:T2+R2) In this situation, **there** is a discussion on TEE (Teaching English in English)... (Unit3:T3+R3) Nowadays lots of **people from children to adults** go abroad to study English. (Unit4:T4+R4) That says to **us** that **we** can learn English most proficiently in native-like circumstance. (Unit5:T5+R5) That’s **why we** should teach English in English.

(2)

(Unit1:T1+R1) For effective teaching in communicative language teaching, **it is necessary** to adopt new way of teaching English... (Unit2:T2+R2) In this situation, **there** is a discussion on TEE (teaching English in English)... (Unit3:T3+R3) Nowadays lots of **people from children to adults** go abroad to study English. (Unit4:T4+R4) **This suggests that students** can learn English most effectively in English-speaking circumstances. (Unit5:T5+R5) **That is why English** should be taught in English in Korea.

In (1), three t-units out of five employ the first person plural in thematic position, which may give the reader some impression that the text is about the writer himself, and which may thus contribute to making the text sound rather personal. In (2), on the other hand, most themes are now related to some of the main text participants relating to the writing topic, i.e. ‘teaching English in English (TEE)’. It may thus be said that the text in (2) is “[better] oriented to a reader looking for information” (Martin, 1986, pp. 39-40).

It should also be necessary to examine use of the first person pronouns in conjunction with the surrounding context (co-text, to be more precise) in which they are employed. Williams (1990, pp. 40-41) pointed out that in academic writing, the first person pronouns are likely to occur in the rhetorical sections of Introduction and Conclusion, in particular together with metadiscourse verbs such as *discuss* and *summarize*. Some, if not many, instances of the first person in the ENL texts show such uses, as shown in (3):

(3) (extracted from the 1st paragraph of a high-rated ENL text)

The beginning of educational psychology can be traced back many centuries... **I will discuss** the instructional implications of cognitive architecture. Specifically, **I will discuss** how teachers can help their students improve learning and remembering...

In the EFL texts, on the other hand, as anticipated from the EFL writers' overuse of explicitly subjective grammatical metaphors noted above (e.g., *I think* and *I would say*), many of the first person pronouns are used to express the writers' own opinions or attitudes towards the ideational content. In addition, in the EFL corpus, in the low-rated and the middle-rated texts in particular, the first person pronouns tend to be employed across the whole text. This extensive use of the first person in the EFL texts seems to be partly due to the EFL writers' tendency to present anecdotal evidence in essay writing through recounting their own personal experiences as teacher trainees specializing in English education. It is thus not surprising to see that Korean EFL writers often present themselves as main text participants, i.e. teachers and/or students in the discourse. (4) shows a typical example of the points made here: (The first person pronouns in thematic position, including those used as displaced subject themes, are in boldface, with the rhematic ones in bold italics.)

(4) (extracted from the 2nd to 4th Paragraph of K2M6)

...Considering our past and present English teaching-learning (definitely not 'Teaching English in English') including **my** own experiences, **we** can say that most of the Korean students are apt to feel that they will have to practice their listening and speaking skills... But fortunately, **our** Korean students do not seem to have negative feeling toward TEE... Actually, about a month ago, **I** had a chance to see some English teachers in middle and high schools conducting their English classes partially in English... **I** received a very strong impression of those English classes and **I** came to change **my** attitude toward TEE from negative to positive. But as **I** mentioned above, **we** should not put TEE into practice in all English classrooms in Korea right now...

In (4), the first person pronouns are employed, often as the main text participant, throughout the whole text. This kind of extensive use of the first person is also found in the ENL corpus, but only exceptionally in a few texts (two low-rated and one middle-rated texts). To sum up, in the EFL texts, unlike in the majority of the ENL texts, the first person tends to be both overused, in particular in thematic position, inappropriately for argumentative essay writing, and, though to a lesser extent, misused. The Korean EFL writers' overuse, over-thematization, and misuse of the first person seem to signal their inexperience and insufficient training in the construction of formal written English discourse, and accordingly, their lack of knowledge about English essay writing conventions.

2. Animate Text Participants vs. Abstract Concepts in Theme

It has been noted above that Korean EFL writers tend to use first person pronouns in thematic position excessively frequently, thus making explicit their subjective attitude towards the ideational content, while the majority of their ENL counterparts do not. This section now turns to discussing how frequently the two groups of writers thematize major text participants and abstract concepts relating to the ideational or propositional content. The frequencies of thematically occurring animate text participants and abstract concepts in the corpora, which have been presented in Tables 2 and 3 above, are re-presented in Table 7 below for ease of discussion. The categories used in the table are adapted mostly from those provided by Francis (1990, p. 55). In the table below, the figures show raw frequencies of the features functioning as ITs, with the percentages in parentheses calculated in proportion to the numbers of the t-units examined.

TABLE 7
Frequencies of Animate / Inanimate Text Participants as ITs in the EFL and the ENL Texts

	EFL Essays (n=20)				ENL Essays (n=15)			
	High	Middle	Low	Total	High	Middle	Low	Total
Animate Par. (used as IT)	56 34.78%	121 39.67%	75 41.90%	252 39.07%	74 25.78%	53 16.56%	75 23.96%	202 21.96%
G-Theme (used as IT)	36 22.36%	54 17.70%	21 11.73%	111 17.29%	33 11.50%	38 11.88%	50 15.97%	121 13.15%
Abstract C. (used as IT)	27 16.77%	43 14.10%	20 11.17%	90 13.95%	105 36.59%	147 45.94%	102 32.59%	354 38.48%
Ana. Nom. (in theme)	3 1.86%	3 0.98%	0 0.00%	6 0.93%	16 5.57%	14 4.38%	7 2.44%	37 4.02%
Text R. (in theme)	8 4.97%	11 3.60%	9 5.03%	28 4.34%	22 7.67%	20 6.25%	21 6.71%	63 6.85%

According to Table 7 above, ‘animate text participants’ are by far the single most common thematic choice in the EFL texts, with the frequency being nearly twice as high in the EFL as in the ENL texts. Animate text participants refer to major human participants (*inc.* institutions, if rare in the corpora) involved in the main propositional or ideational content in the text (e.g. *Many Korean students seem to study English only for examinations*). They include the first/second person acting as text participants directly involved in the primary discourse (e.g. *You can't extend your working memory*), but not those relating to metadiscourse (e.g. *I think it will work well in Korea; I will discuss the instructional implications...*); hence, some instances of the first/second person are also counted as animate text participants.

In the EFL texts, animate text participants, almost all of which are (groups of) students and/or teachers, account for nearly forty percent of the ITs found in the corpora; and if

displaced subject themes contributing to thematic development are taken into account, they are found in nearly half of the t-units examined (59 and 77 instances of displaced subject themes in the EFL and the ENL texts respectively). In other words, the EFL writers tend to employ ‘students’ and/or ‘teachers’ as their starting points of individual messages; in the EFL texts, borrowing Martin and Rose’s (2003, p. 178) words, they are most frequently recurrent ‘hooks round which the writers spin new information in the text’. This shows that the EFL writers are likely to limit their perspectives to one or two major text participants directly relating to the writing topic itself. This tendency seems to be consistent with the EFL writers’ relatively frequent thematization of the global Theme referring to the central referent(s) manifested or suggested in the writing topic (e.g. *Teaching English in English is worth introducing...*). To sum up, the EFL writers’ frequent thematization of a limited number of major human text participants reflects their narrow concerns with only some very familiar aspects which they can take easily from the writing topic.

In the ENL texts, on the other hand, ‘abstract concepts’ are the most preferred thematic choice, while they are relatively uncommon in the EFL texts: as shown in Table 7 above, the frequency of abstract concepts is nearly three times higher in the ENL than in the EFL texts. Abstract concepts, as used in this study (for example, after Francis, 1990), refer to abstractions in a broad sense, including all non-concrete participants or things (e.g. *Concepts are generally defined as the mental structures...*). Unlike major human text participants, they are thus of various kinds, without being necessarily limited in number. They do not come directly from the writing topic, but serve as representing various aspects relating to the topic, for example, by extending or specifying the global theme referring to the key element of the writing topic. Compare (5) and (6): (The themes are underlined, and the global themes are in boldface.)

(5) (extracted from a high-rated ENL text)

[Unit1: T1+R1] The development of **cognitive structures** change as the individual interacts ... [Unit2: T2+R2] This change occurs as a result of new experiences conflicting with old...structures. [Unit3: T3+R3] The issue then arises as [to] whether to assimilate... or accommodate...

(6) (extracted from a high-rated Korean text)

[Unit1: T1+R1] **Teaching English in English** or **TEE** here means teaching English to Korean secondary school students in English by ordinary Korean...teachers. [Unit2: T2+R2] It is not yet carried out in most of [the] schools; [Unit2⁺²: T2⁺²+R2⁺²] as a matter of fact, it’s carried out only in [a] few special schools...

In (5) above, taken from the ENL corpus, the three underlined Themes are all abstract concepts. The global theme, i.e. ‘cognitive structures’ is presented in thematic position in the first t-unit, but only as part of the post-modifier, with the IT representing one specific aspect of the global theme. The following two thematic abstract concepts contribute to developing the argument step by step in a logical way. In (6), taken from the EFL corpus, on the other hand, the global theme (i.e. *teaching English in English*) itself is directly employed and repeated as ITs in the three consecutive t-units. The repetition of the global theme as unmarked ITs gives some impression that the writer is mainly concerned with making some comments on the global theme itself, and as such, makes the writing sound rather static, or even boring.

Another important difference between the corpora comes from the two groups of writers’ use of what this study calls, for lack of a better term, ‘anaphoric nominalization’ (abbreviated in Table 7 above as ‘Ana. Nom.’, and presented as a subcategory of ‘abstract concepts’), which is in general deemed characteristic of written English discourse. Anaphoric nominalizations refer to nominalized processes (congruently realized by verbs) or properties (congruently realized by adjectives) of which the identity can be retrieved directly or indirectly from the preceding discourse (see Examples 8 and 9 below). They often function both locally (i.e. within immediately related t-units) and globally (i.e. at or above the paragraph level) to package or ‘encapsulate’ (Francis, 1989, 1994) in thematic position (part of) the information presented in a stretch of extended discourse.

Table 7 above shows a clear difference in the frequency of the thematic anaphoric nominalizations between the EFL and the ENL texts, with the frequency being over four times higher in the ENL than in the EFL texts. Apart from the clear frequency difference, all the fifteen ENL texts, without any single exception, employ anaphoric nominalization in thematic position, while there are only six instances found in five out of 20 EFL texts. Also importantly, all the instances in the EFL texts function locally within a few immediately connected t-units, as shown in (7): (The Themes are underlined, with thematic anaphoric nominalizations shown in boldface.)

(7) (extracted from a high-rated EFL text)

[Unit1:T1+R1] One is “Is TEE effective?” [Unit2:T2+R2] and the other is “Is TEE possible?”. [Unit3:T3+R3] **The effectiveness** is related to the goal of English teaching, [Unit4:T4+R4] **and the possibility** is to the practicality.

In the ENL texts, though most instances are found to function locally, many instances are also found to function globally at the paragraph level, and even across paragraphs. Consider the following extracts:

(8) (extracted from a middle-rated ENL text)

[Unit1: T1+R1] Teachers also need to ensure that students activated their current... knowledge...

[Unit2: T2+R2] **Knowledge activation** provides stronger links to the current knowledge...

(9) (extracted from a high-rated ENL text)

[1st Unit of P3] Piaget's first period of cognitive development is the sensorimotor...

[Last Unit of P3] **Piaget's suggestions for furthering cognitive development in this stage** are to provide multiple objects of various sizes, shapes...

(10) (extracted from a middle-rated ENL text)

[1st Unit of P2] Sensory memory refers to the initial perceptual processing...

[1st Unit of P3] The auditory register has processes with *different* results...

[1st Unit of P4] **The difference between these two** needs to be understood ...

In (8) above, the nominalized process (i.e., *activation*) functioning as Head of the IT of t-unit 2 wraps up the proposition presented in the rheme of the immediately preceding t-unit. In (9), the thematic nominalized process (i.e., *suggestions*) in boldface, together with its pre- and post-modifiers, serves a rather global function to sum up the information presented in the whole paragraph concerned. In (10), in which the three t-units are the opening units of three adjacent paragraphs, the IT of the '1st t-unit of P4' (i.e., *The difference between these two*) encapsulates the preceding two paragraphs, with the nominalized property (i.e. *difference*) referring back to the italicised transitional word (i.e., *different*) in rheme of the second t-unit in the example.

As discussed above, in the ENL texts, unlike in the EFL texts, thematic anaphoric nominalizations serve as an important textual resource to develop ideas in the text by 'packing' a proposition(s) previously presented in a stretch of discourse. In the ENL texts, it is also not uncommon to find some instances of nominalized processes or properties that are 'unpacked' later in the text. Consider (11) taken from the ENL corpus: (Anaphoric nominalization in Themes are underlined in boldface, with the congruent form of nominalizations in bold italics.)

(11) (extract from a high-rated ENL text)

[Unit1:T1+R1] **Assimilation** is the process by which we interpret the world using our current schemas. [Unit2:T2+R2] In the process of **accommodation**, our schemas are changed by our observations of the world. [Unit3:T3+R3] Children will ***assimilate*** information for as long as they are able, but will ***accommodate*** when their cognitive

structures are inadequate to explain their observations of the world. [Unit4:T4+R4] To describe this interplay between **assimilation** and **accommodation**, Piaget used the term equilibration.

In (11), the two nominalized processes functioning as (part of) the ITs of t-units 1 and 2 (i.e., *Assimilation* and *accommodation*) are ‘unpacked’ or reworded congruently as verbs (i.e., *assimilate... but... accommodate...*) in rhematic position of t-unit 3, with new elaborating information added to each. Then, the propositions associated with these verbs are again nominalized, or ‘packed’ into a nominal form in thematic position in t-unit 4.

As shown in Table 7, some clear variations are also found in the frequency of thematic anaphoric nominalizations across the different ranking groups. In the ENL texts, the frequency in the high-rated texts is considerably higher than in both the middle-rated and low-rated texts; in particular, the frequency is well over twice as high in the high-rated texts as in the low-rated ones. It is also found that though, as noted above, the overall frequency of anaphoric nominalizations is extremely low in the EFL texts, the frequency is the highest in the high-rated texts, with no instance found in the low-rated ones. This suggests that anaphoric nominalization, as an important textual resource for organizing ideas, in particular in formal expository writing, may be highly valued in the assessment of university student essay writing.

The higher frequency of anaphoric nominalizations in the ENL texts than in the EFL texts is consistent with the ENL writers’ more frequent use of ‘retrospective text references’ (Fries, 1995) such as *this* and *that* than the EFL writers, as shown in Table 7 above. Similarly to anaphoric nominalizations, text references, either alone or together with what Francis (1985) calls ‘anaphoric nouns (A-nouns)’, also serve an important organizational function to refer back to a stretch of discourse, in particular in formal registers (Thompson, 2004, p. 182). Apart from the overall frequency difference in retrospective text references between the corpora, it has also been found that in the EFL texts, the majority of the instances occur as part of textual OT, while in the ENL texts many instances are used as part of IT, in particular together with anaphoric nominalizations, as illustrated in (12) and (13):

(12) (extracted from a low-rated EFL text)

Teacher regards TEE as unnecessary... because they lack confidence in speaking English... Maybe **that is because they** didn’t learn English in that way.

(13) (extracted from a low-rated ENL text)

Piaget suggests ages for each stage and believes the sequence of transitions into each stage are invariant... **This suggestion** is most beneficial to educational teachers...

3. Circumstances in Thematic Position

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the semantic properties of marked themes realized by circumstantial adjuncts and dependent clauses. Table 8 below presents frequencies of various types of circumstantial information in thematic position, with the category of ‘Others’ including ‘accompaniment’, ‘role’, ‘matter’ and ‘angle’. The two figures combined with the plus sign (i.e. +) in each block represent the raw frequencies of, first, circumstantial Adjuncts, and then dependent clauses in Theme. The percentages, which are calculated in proportion to the numbers of the t-units examined, are presented for the sum of the two figures, not for each, since the focus of discussion here is on their circumstantial meaning rather than on their grammatical properties.

TABLE 8
Frequencies of Circumstantial Adjuncts and Dependent Clauses as ITs in the Corpora

	EFL Texts				ENL Texts			
	High	Middle	Low	Total	High	Middle	Low	Total
Place & Time	11+1 7.45%	18+6 7.87%	11+7 10.06%	40+14 8.37%	16+5 7.32%	9+22 9.69%	20+11 9.90%	45+38 9.02%
Condition & Concession	0+13 8.07%	0+23 7.54%	0+10 5.59%	0+46 7.13%	0+15 5.23%	0+10 3.13%	3+11 4.47%	3+36 4.24%
Cause	1+1	4+7	1+1	6+9	1+7	4+5	1+7	6+19
Manner	1+2	5+3	2+4	8+9	2+4	1+3	2+6	5+13
Others	3+1	1+0	3+0	7+1	3+3	2+0	3+1	8+4
Total	34 21.12%	67 21.97%	39 21.79%	140 21.71%	56 19.51%	56 17.50%	65 20.77%	177 19.24%

Table 8 above shows that in both corpora, references to ‘spatio-temporal location’ are the most frequent type of circumstantial information, followed by meanings of ‘contingency’ (subdivided into ‘condition’ and ‘concession’ – no instance of ‘default’ found), ‘cause’ and ‘manner’. It is found, however, that in both corpora, with some occasional exceptions, none of the circumstantial meanings, including those of spatio-temporal location and contingency, appear consistently in thematic position throughout the text. Instead, in both corpora, circumstantial information tends to be found in non-thematic position. The discussion below is limited to the two most frequent types of circumstantial information found in theme: ‘spatio-temporality’ and ‘contingency’.

The relatively frequent use of ‘spatio-temporal’ references to ‘location’ and ‘extent’ in the corpora suggests that both the EFL and the ENL texts may include some features of narration. A number of the EFL texts show some instances of thematic spatio-temporal location at and near the beginning of the text as a way of setting up the time and place before presenting their arguments, as often found in narrative texts. Many of the

spatio-temporal references in the EFL texts are also found to be associated with the EFL writers' recounting of their past experiences as teachers and/or students (see Example 15 below). This result is consistent with Korean EFL writers' tendency to overuse the first person as a main text participant and present anecdotes as supporting details in their writing as discussed above. Consider the following extracts: (Spatio-temporal references in initial thematic position are in boldface.)

(14) (extracted from a middle-rated EFL text)

These days in Korea there is a high demand for communicative language teaching – teaching English for the ultimate goal of communication with native English speakers.

(15) (extracted from a middle-rated EFL text)

TEE in Korea can be a successful way in English teaching-learning. Actually, about a month ago I had a chance to see some English teachers in middle and high schools conducting their classes partially in English.

In the ENL texts, on the other hand, many instances of spatio-temporal references are found to be connected with the recounting of previous researchers' work, as exemplified below:

(16) (extracted from a middle-rated ENL text)

The limitation of working memory can be seen from the experiment by Peterson and Peterson (1995)... **In this experiment**, a group of people were asked to remember three unrelated letters: x a m. They were then asked to count backward from 100 in threes... .. **after 3 seconds of counting backwards**, half of the information was lost... However, after 18 seconds of counting, nearly all letters were forgotten.

Another clear difference in use of spatio-temporal references between the EFL and the ENL texts is that most instances in the ENL texts represent spatio-temporal meanings in an abstract sense (e.g. *Yet, in education the material is novel...*); the majority in the EFL texts represent rather concrete time and place (e.g. *In the current Korean context like that, TEE can help students...*).

Circumstantial information of 'contingency' (Halliday, 1994), which is subdivided into 'condition' and 'concession' (no instance of 'default' found), is also relatively commonly found in thematic position in both the EFL and the ENL texts. As Halliday (1994, p. 156) noted, the semantic relations of contingency are typically inter-clausal relations: in the corpora, all the instances of contingency but three are realized clausally. The relatively frequent use of circumstances of condition and concession in thematic position in both

corpora is not unexpected since in argumentative and expository writing, hypothetical propositions, or conditional statements are not uncommon in developing arguments.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It has been found that the Korean EFL writers tend to employ inappropriate written discourse features in initial thematic position, thus often constructing individual messages with rather awkward starting points. Firstly, the Korean EFL writers tend to overuse the first person as ITs, and this tendency is further corroborated by the EFL writers' relatively frequent use of the first person as (part of) OTs and displaced subject themes. In addition, in many EFL texts, as in narrative texts, the first person tends to be employed as one of the main text participants found in the text. Some clear variations have also been found in the frequency of the first person across the ranking groups in both the EFL and the ENL texts: the less proficient the writers are in English, the more likely they are to employ the first person as ITs. This suggests that experientially, rather than interpersonally, oriented thematization is valued in the assessment of tertiary student essay writing. Secondly, the Korean EFL writers tend to thematize animate text participants far more frequently than abstract concepts, which are in general deemed most frequent in formal argumentative and expository writing (see e.g. Ghadessy, 1998; Fries, 1995). It has also been found that in the EFL texts, the majority of the animate text participants are taken directly from the writing topic given, i.e. *teachers* and *students*. This tendency is consistent with the EFL writers' relatively frequent use of the global theme, i.e. the central referent in the writing topic, as IT. The Australian ENL writers, on the other hand, are found to thematize abstract concepts most frequently, and many of the abstract concepts in the ENL texts are found to be anaphoric nominalizations, which are relatively rare in the EFL texts. Lastly, though references to spatio-temporal location are relatively frequent in thematic position in both corpora, in the EFL texts, many instances tend to be related to the writers' recounting of their past experience while in the ENL texts, many are connected with the presentation of other researchers' work.

These findings clearly show that Korean EFL university students are likely to face strong challenges in producing the kind of English writing required in internationalized higher educational contexts. In particular, Korean EFL writers' strong tendency to employ the first person, a few selected major text participants and the central referent in initial thematic position seems to be particularly problematic, suggesting that they lack control over different modes and genres. Due to the rather narrow focus on the small number of final texts, this study is only suggestive, and it is hard to generalize the findings here. It however concludes that tertiary ELT in Korea pay more attention to the teaching of writing

to help Korean university students develop their English communicative competence fully in a balanced way. Specifically, Korean university students need to be explicitly taught to conceptualize and develop their ideas in essay writing in an impersonalized and abstract way by adopting appropriate textual resources.

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Applicable levels: tertiary students

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