

# Text Structure Awareness among International Students

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate students' awareness on text structure. The text structures in focus are compare/contrast and cause/effect expository texts via responses to a 14 items questionnaire. Sixty six intermediate and advance level Iranian international students at a Malaysian university were assigned to respond to the questionnaire. Results from the analysis indicate that both groups demonstrated an average level of text structure awareness. Although there are not huge differences between advanced and intermediate students in their text structure awareness, the advanced students indicated preferences in reading specific text structure and demonstrated more awareness on text structure. Findings of this study could provide significant insights for both teachers and students to identify how different reading texts can be organized in terms of level of difficulty.

**Keywords:** Text Structure, Awareness, International Students

## Introduction

The most comprehensive research in text structure was carried out by Meyer (1975). The researcher investigated the structures of expository text and specified the logical connections in text. According to Meyer (1975), text structure provides organizational patterns that help reader identify and link together the most indispensable related propositions, and specifies the subordination of some ideas to others. Meyer's classification system provided the basic organizational structures for authors of expository text. The categories of the system comprise attribution (description), sequence (collection), adversative comparison, and response (problem/solution) and covariance (cause/effect). Meyer postulated that various semantic and syntactic techniques signal the relationships of these top-level structures to the reader. For example, temporal indicators such as "first," "second," "then," and "finally," syntactically signal the sequence structure whereas the comparison structure is conveyed through indicators such as "in contrast to," "like," and "similarly."

Previous studies indicated that students display different sensitivity to various text structures. For instance, in the study conducted by Meyer and Freedle (1984), the adult participants were presented with passages representing four text structures (covariance, adversative, response, and attribution). The written recall protocols produced by the participants after reading indicated better performance in adversative and covariance than attribution passages. In another study, Amiri et al. (2012) investigated two groups of Iranian students' performance on

two types of text structures texts: compare/contrast and cause/effect. The results illustrated that Iranian students performed better in compare/contrast than in cause/effect text structure.

Saadatnia et al (2016) compared students' literal and inferential comprehension of descriptive and enumerative expository. It was also revealed that the participants' performance was meaningfully superior on the descriptive texts at both levels of literal and inferential comprehension. The results also indicated that literal comprehension considerably outweighed inferential comprehension in both text structures of description and enumeration.

Hiebert et. al (1983) acknowledged the importance of knowledge of text structure particularly among university students since they are required to do extensive amount of reading materials, term papers and examinations which are produced in expository test. The authors claimed that knowledge of text structure enhanced students' performance in their writings by controlling the construction of sentences consistent with the given topics and text structures. To this end, investigating international students' awareness of text structure is a critical step in assisting them toward thesis writing. A number of studies on text structures and students' comprehension of them have been carried out. This study aims to contribute to the body literature on the text structure by comparing the awareness of two participants' variable; advanced and intermediate students.

### **Methodology**

This paper is part of a larger research work on the effect of text structure on readers' reading comprehension.

### **Participants**

The respondents of the study were 68 Iranian international students at a public university in Malaysia. The research applied purposive sampling whereby the researcher selected the subjects based on specific variable which suggested that this group of students fulfilled the criteria of the study; i) postgraduate students who were either Masters or PhD candidates, ii) students undergoing the preparatory English course. The first group refers to those Iranian postgraduates who have IELTS band score of 6 and above which are called advanced level. The second group refers those attending preparatory English courses (one English module); these students are called intermediate level. 34 of them were identified as advanced English language learners while the remaining were at the intermediate level. The criteria for this study include two groups of Iranian origin studying in masters or PhD levels. They would provide the required data for the researcher (Frankel, Wallen, Hyun, 2012).

### **Research Instrument**

The questionnaire is designed to elicit students' awareness on the following; (i) whether the students are aware of the compare/contrast text structure (items 4, 7, 12, 13), (ii) whether the students are aware of the cause/effect text structure (items 3, 9, 14), (iii) whether the students have general awareness of text structure (items 1, 5, 10), and (iv) whether the students have

awareness of text structure with content (items 2, 6, 8, 11). The questionnaire is administered in English and participants first language in order to minimize any ambiguity and misunderstanding of the variables. It is validated via a pilot study.

In order to assess the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study which involved 13 students from advanced and intermediate levels were carried out. First, they answered the provided tests in compare/contrast and cause/effect text structures for initial exposure on the variables in the questionnaire. Then, they completed the 14 item questionnaire. For the analysis, the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient is implemented. Cronbach's Alpha measures how well a set of items (or variables) measure a single unidimensional latent construct (Coakes and Steed, 2003). Cronbach's Alpha is not a statistical test, rather it is a coefficient of reliability (or consistency), and the reliability coefficient of 0.7 or higher is considered "acceptable" in most social science research situations (Coakes and Steed, 2003). Cronbach's Alpha of the pilot study is .774 which is considered satisfactory.

## **Research Finding**

### **Awareness of Text Structures**

The advanced and intermediate subjects' responses to a 14 item questionnaire regarding text structure awareness were analyzed in order to identify the differences between advanced and intermediate students in their text structure awareness.

The components of awareness elicited from the students' in this study were designed to discover the following; (i) whether the students are aware of the compare/contrast text structure, (ii) whether the students are aware of the cause/effect text structure, (iii) whether the students have general awareness of text structure, and (iv) whether the students have awareness of text structure with content. The responses obtained from these items were tabulated using T-test and results as explained through descriptive statistics using mean score and standard deviation. Scores for the negative worded items (4, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 14) are reversed during the analysis. Items such as Q4\_R in the table indicate reverse-score.

Table 1 illustrates the results of items 4, 7, 11, 13 regarding awareness of compare/contrast text structures for the advanced and intermediate proficiency students. The result for item 4 '*I am confused when I read a text in compare/contrast structure*' shows that the mean score for intermediate group was 3.0574 (s.d. 1.13611) and for advanced group is 2.9583 (s.d. 1.04170). Higher values in the mean score indicated more awareness on text structure. This indicates that the advanced group faced less difficulty than their intermediate counterparts when reading compare/contrast text structure. In item 7, '*I am aware of the organization of the compare/contrast text structure*' the mean score was 3.3429 (s.d. .83817) for the intermediate group, whereas the mean score was 3.7500 (s.d. .67566) for the advanced group. Both groups have an average awareness of compare/contrast text structure as they meet the value of 3 which is regarded as a desirable level of measurement in statistics. As for item 11, '*I prefer to*

*read text in compare/contrast text structure'* the mean score for the intermediate level was 3.4286 (s.d. .91670) and the mean score for the advanced group was 3.5833 (s.d. .82970). It shows that there are not much differences between advanced and intermediate groups in their preference for reading in compare/contrast text structure and both groups represented desirable value for this item. The result for item 13, '*I rate the compare/contrast reading passage as a difficult text*' highlighted that the intermediate group viewed the compare/contrast reading passage as a difficult text comparative to the advanced group.

Table 1: Awareness of Compare/Contrast Text Structure

Questionnaire Item	Level	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q4_R I am confused when I read text in compare/contrast structure	Intermediate	3.0574	1.13611
	Advanced	2.9583	1.04170
Q7 I am aware of the organization of the compare/contrast text structure	Intermediate	3.3429	.83817
	Advanced	3.7500	.67566
Q11 I prefer to read a text in compare/contrast text structure	Intermediate	3.4286	.91670
	Advanced	3.5833	.82970
Q13_R I rate the compare/contrast reading passage as a difficult text	Intermediate	3.2571	1.09391
	Advanced	3.3750	1.20911

The above results indicated that both the advanced and intermediate groups have a desirable level of awareness of the respective text structure. However, the advanced group slightly indicated higher value on their awareness on compare/contrast text structure, preference for reading such type of text structure, viewed the compare/contrast text as a difficult text structure and indicated less confusion when reading text structure of compare/contrast.

Table 2 presents the data analysis for items 3, 12 and 14. Item 3 '*I prefer to read a text in cause/effect text structure*' recorded the intermediate level mean score of 3.48 (s.d. .98134) and the advanced level mean score of 3.58 (s.d. 1.28255). Both groups demonstrated a desirable value for this item and there was no significant difference in the subjects' preference in reading the cause/effect text structure. Item 12, '*I am aware of the organization of the cause/effect text structure*', both groups indicated a desirable value. In item 14, '*I rate the cause/effect reading passage as a difficult text*' the mean score for the intermediate level was 3.00, (s.d. 1.02899) and the mean score for the advanced level was 3.58 (s.d. .88055). This item

has demonstrated that the advanced group regarded the cause/effect text structure as more difficult compared to the intermediate group.

Table2: Awareness of Cause/Effect Text Structure

Questionnaire Item	Level	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Q3</b> I prefer to read a text in the cause/effect text structure	Intermediate	3.4857	.98134
	Advanced	3.5833	1.28255
<b>Q12</b> I am aware of the organization of the cause/effect text structure	Intermediate	3.4000	.91394
	Advanced	3.7917	.83297
<b>Q14_R</b> I rate the cause/effect reading passage as a difficult text.	Intermediate	3.0000	1.02899
	Advanced	3.5833	.88055

The analysis of the cause/effect text structure shows that both the advanced and intermediate groups have an average level of awareness of cause/effect text structure. However, the advanced group viewed the cause/effect text as a difficult text comparative to the intermediate group.

Table 3 represents the results of the general awareness of text structure in items 1, 5 and 9. Item 1, '*I am aware of the organization of the text structure*' highlighted the advanced group significantly represented higher value compared to their intermediate counterparts regarding awareness on text structure organization. The score for item 5 '*I prefer to read text with organized text structure*' substantiated that the advanced group tend to keep their stand around the desirable level of the measurement while the advanced group indicated high preference for reading text in an organized structure. Similar trend was recorded for item 9, '*I am not sure of the text structure type when I read a text*' where the advanced group confessed that they are often unsure of the text structure when reading a text.

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Table 3: General Awareness of Text Structure

	<b>Questionnaire Item</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Q1</b>	I am aware of the organization of the text structure	Intermediate	3.3429	1.10992
		Advanced	4.3750	.64690
<b>Q5</b>	I prefer to read a text with organized text structure	Intermediate	3.9143	1.12122
		Advanced	4.4167	.50361
<b>Q9_R</b>	I am not sure of the text structure type when I read a text	Intermediate	3.3143	.86675
		Advanced	4.0000	.72232

The results from the general awareness of text structure illustrated that the advanced group scored higher value on the following three items: a) awareness of organization of text structure, b) preference to read in organized text structure, and c) uncertainty of text structure type. The intermediate group, on the other hand, indicated similar view on all the four items.

Table 4 represents the analysis of items on the awareness of the organization of ideas in items 2, 6, 8, and 10. The results for item 2 '*I am alert of the organization of main ideas in the text*' revealed that advanced group has higher awareness on the organization of main ideas than the intermediate group. Item 6, '*I am sure of the organization of detailed ideas in the text*' recorded the mean score of 2.97 (s.d. 1.01419) for the intermediate group and the mean score of 3.33 (s.d. .76139) for the advanced group. The results show that both groups have difficulties in recognizing the detailed ideas and find it very challenging task when reading. Item 8, '*I am not alert of organization of main Ideas in the text*' recorded above the average value for both groups. However, the advanced group indicated a higher value of their lack of awareness on the organization of main ideas. Item 10, '*I am confused with the organization of detailed ideas in the text*' highlighted the less score obtained by the intermediate group. This endorsed the confusion experienced identifying detailed ideas in the text which contradicts their value represented in item 6 which is related to the same issue.

Table 4: Awareness on Organization of Ideas

	Questionnaire Item	Level	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q2	I am alert of the organization of main ideas in the text	Intermediate	3.5429	1.03875
		Advanced	4.0833	.71728
Q6	I am sure of the organization of detailed ideas in the text	Intermediate	2.9714	1.01419
		Advanced	3.3333	.76139
Q8_R	I am not alert of the organization of main Ideas in the text	Intermediate	3.4286	1.00837
		Advanced	3.9583	.80645
Q10_R	I am confused with the organization of detailed ideas in the text	Intermediate	2.9429	1.10992
		Advanced	3.2917	.99909

The results from Table 4 show that the advanced group indicated the higher scores on awareness of the main and detailed ideas in the text than the intermediate group. However, the intermediate group indicated confusion with the detailed ideas in the text compared with the advanced counterparts.

### Discussion

The purpose of the paper is to identify the differences between advanced and intermediate students in their text structure awareness. Results from the analysis (Tables 1 to 4) indicate that both groups demonstrated an average level of text structure awareness. Although there is not much difference between advanced and intermediate students' awareness on text structure, the advanced level demonstrated slightly more awareness on text structure and more preferences in reading specific text structures.

The advanced level awareness of text structure can be explained by their reading comprehension test. For example, item 14, '*I rate the cause/effect reading passage as a difficult text*' recorded that the values scored by the advanced group are considerably higher than the values scored by the intermediate group. Hence, it can be concluded that they are aware of text structure difficulty and consequently are careful in answering the questionnaire items that require their views on text structure.

The intermediate group, on the other hand, indicated similar value for almost all items. In addition, there is a contradiction between their questionnaire item responses and text performance. For example, they scored higher value for item 13, '*I rate the compare/contrast reading passage as a difficult text*', with the mean of 3.25 compared to item 14, '*I rate the cause/effect reading passage as a difficult text*', with the mean of 3.00. Obviously they

performed better in compare/contrast than cause/effect text structure. When students are less aware of the text structure, it is more difficult for them to decide on the level of text difficulty.

In relation to the constructivist theory it can be noted that item 5 '*I prefer to read text with organized text structure*' refers to the facilitative role of the cues and connectives that relate the different ideas, phrases, clauses, and the paragraphs in organized manner. These cues and connectives help the readers to better remember and connect the ideas to understand the intended meaning. Moreover, item 10, '*I am confused with the organization of detailed ideas in the text*' may indicate that the length and complexity of the sentence may cause confusion to the readers. The case for the cause/effect text in this study justifies that reading deficiency and poor awareness of text structure especially reflected in the intermediate group may lead to failure in constructing the meaning.

This finding is in line with the results of studies carried out by Carrell (2006) and Williams (2017) who postulated that good readers are more aware of text structure compared to poor readers. However, it contradicts the result of Ghaith and Harkouss (2003) that stated there is no significant difference between proficient and less proficient readers in their text structure awareness.

In view of the results of the present study, differences in awareness of text structures may merit more attention in the second/foreign language reading classroom. As suggested by Zhou and Siriyothin (2011) providing students with adequate exposure to various texts structures and explicit instruction is an effective way to sensitize students and raise their awareness on different text structures thus ease their read with better understanding.

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