



Assessment by Thai academic English writing teachers of the flow of given to new topic information within academic writing

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Abstract

Adhering to a structured process of the flow of given to new topic information within academic written discourse is a significant challenge for most tertiary-level non-native EFL students. The progression of given to new topic information in written academic text is equally difficult for many non-native academic English writing teachers to distinguish, much less assess. This research seeks to determine if given to new information progression can be significantly identified, and explore the possibility of such topic progression being utilized as a practical form of academic writing assessment by experienced Thai tertiary teachers of academic English. Multiple Linear Regression was employed to determine the relationship between the Thai writing teachers' identification of the flow of given to new topic information and a preliminary analysis of topic information flow by a qualified native English writing teacher. The insights gained from this study show that the Thai academic English writing teachers could not significantly detect the presence of given to new topic information progression within the academic texts. The implication of this research suggests that at this time, the practical utilization of a given to new progression analysis may not be a feasible evaluative measure in written assessments for Thai academic English writing teachers.

Keywords: academic English teachers; given to new progression; information flow; written assessment

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Introduction

Traditionally, evaluating the writing ability of tertiary students has always been one of the more daunting tasks taken on by English as a foreign language (EFL) writing teachers. Research has shown that writing teachers dedicate countless hours examining, judging, and allocating more grade weighting toward the substantial aspects of an EFL students' academic writing, e.g., content, grammar, organization, punctuation, spelling, style, and vocabulary (Alshakhi, 2018; Beck et al., 2018; Cohen, 1994; Downing, 2015; Veloo et al., 2018). However, not all aspects in academic written discourse are equally important (Barkaoui, 2011). For instance, consider the flow of referential given to new topic information in academic writing, which is seldom assessed within academic written discourse (Arabi & Ali, 2015; Fitriati & Yonata, 2017; He, 2020; Jones, 2015; Loock, 2013; Petch-Tyson, 2014).

Over the past three decades, extensive literature has been published regarding academic writing assessment as being a crucially important stage in the EFL student's writing process (Koura & Zahran, 2017; Normah, 2014; Toba et al., 2019). In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature stating that the primary purpose of the writing assessment should be to inform both the EFL teacher and the student of the student's writing progress (Smit et al., 2017). Unfortunately, non-native English speaker (NNES) teachers of English often use writing assessment to highlight an EFL student's inability to abide by the imposed native English speaker (NES) rules or structures of English grammar (Connor & Farmer, 1990; Secolsky & Denison, 2017; Truscott, 1996).

This skewed agenda of the NNES writing teacher to traditionally analyze the syntactic structure of English usage in academic writing rather than evaluating the students' intelligible communicative competence skills suggests that the NNES teacher focuses on limited evaluation aspects when assessing

academic writing (Mason, 2019; Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). This manner of analysis, which prematurely focuses on 'superior' NES accuracy, often impedes the EFL students' creative progress (Truscott, 1996). Non-native English writing teachers should focus more on assisting EFL students in developing fluent English writing skills and presenting appropriate texts for a variety of communicative purposes by accurately assessing and providing continuous and positive comprehensive feedback (Koura & Zahran, 2017; Secolsky & Denison, 2017; Toba et al., 2019). A writing assessment must likewise indicate if the academic text maintains a given to new topic information flow, is coherent and well organized, uses a variety of vocabulary, and, yes, to a certain extent, follows syntactic structure and grammar patterns (Branthwaite et al., 1981). However, adhering to a structured process of the flow of given to new topic information within written discourse is a significant challenge for most tertiary-level non-native EFL students.

An in-depth analysis was undertaken by Arabi and Ali (2015), where they found that tertiary-level EFL students are unable to recognizably distinguish between given and new topic information within written text (Petch-Tyson, 2014; Sung & Kim, 2016), and that they demonstrate weakness in achieving coherent flow of topic information within academic text (Fitriati & Yonata, 2017). Studies have also found that tertiary-level EFL students have difficulty using certain connective discourse markers to continue given to new topic information flow within academic writing (Farnia & Barati, 2017; Nguyen Thi Thuy, 2018; Prasithratsint, 2015; Sato, 2019).

The progression of given to new topic information in written academic text is equally difficult for many non-native English writing teachers to distinguish. This inability to significantly identify the flow of given to new topic information within written text leads to a deficiency in assessment ability. Many attempts have been made to embed assessing the flow of topic information in academic writing into teaching practice. Yet, despite all efforts, effective and applicable incorporation of given to new topic information flow into tertiary-level writing instruction is still scarce (He, 2020). Accordingly, training NNES writing teachers to identify and assess the flow of given to new topic information in academic writing, and having them adjust the grade weighting associated with given to new topic information flow, can assist in focusing on the intelligibility of communicative competence skills within writing assessments (Al-Zubeiry, 2019; Arabi & Ali, 2015; Fitriati & Yonata, 2017; Jones, 2015; Strauss & Feiz, 2013).

In the early days, written discourse analysis was thought to be somewhat limited in scope compared to spoken discourse analysis, which was principally

focused on studying language in use through evaluating the 'structure' of written discourse (Kuppevelt, 1995). This dominant structure characterization of written discourse analysis has led to heated debates among EFL writing teachers regarding the weighting of various grading aspects of evaluation for essay writing tasks (Normah, 2014; Smit et al., 2017). Some teachers believe that more grade weighting should be given to substantial errors that concentrate on accuracy in the form of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary (Gadd & Parr, 2017; Jung et al., 2019), while other teachers stress the importance of focusing on fluency or intelligibility in the form of communicative competence as the primary weighting in evaluating academic writing tasks in English (Beck et al., 2018; Berge et al., 2019; Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017; Sukandi & Syafar, 2018). In considering this dichotomy, a relatively simple, more objective criteria for redistributing grade weighting of discourse analysis for academic writing, with an equal weighting towards written elements topic information organization and coherence, utilizing given to new topic information progression should be proposed.

The first criterion which should be considered when designing such an objective process of written discourse analysis is the percentage of total grade weighting usually given to particular elements when assessing academic writing (Haines, 2004; Paltridge, 2021; Smit et al., 2017). To satisfy the need of the first criterion, several common rubrics utilized for writing assessment by academic writing teachers were examined. It was found that topic information elements within all rubrics accounted for less than 20%, with over half of the reviewed rubrics at 0%-10% (Vaezi & Rezaei, 2019). The second criterion that should be considered is that the academic writing analysis must consider the amount of time and energy writing teachers already expend on assessing academic writing tasks (Alshakhi, 2018; Jung et al., 2019; Paltridge, 2021). Ultimately, the examination must be relatively brief and efficient without additional time or sacrificing reliability and should retain evaluative quality by accurately measuring the EFL students' writing ability (Cook et al., 2021; Schneider & Connor, 1990). Regardless of the previously mentioned harmful elements associated with assessing academic writing, and the writing teachers often being the only assessor of the writing task, academic essays still tend to be the chosen instruments for evaluating student writing (Cohen, 1994; Haines, 2004). The third criterion that should be considered is the writing teachers' familiarity with the currently proposed academic writing analysis (Normah, 2014). Incorporating a given to new topic information progression analysis as an additional or replacement step in writing task analysis to better identify written elements recognition and discourse topic identification (Chafe, 1976;

Clark & Haviland, 1977; Prince, 1981) may violate the second criterion. Therefore, in order to simplify the identification of given to new topic information flow, writing teachers should be appropriately trained in identifying referential topic information flow and recognizing topic maintenance in EFL student writing without sacrificing their evaluation of accepted academic writing conventions, e.g., clearly stated thesis statement, supporting sentences, and closing sentences (Grimes, 1984).

Early groundbreaking work by Chafe (1976) in their theory of information flow, and seminal work by Clark and Haviland (1977) and Prince (1981) into a 'given to new' strategy in spoken discourse, found that for effective communication to take place; a relationship should easily be able to be established between information that a listener already knows (given) and information that is novel or becomes familiar and is easily comprehended (new). They found that the 'given to new contract' within information flow was fulfilled when the speaker followed what they referred to as appropriateness, uniqueness, and computability requirements. Appropriateness designates that the 'given' part of the sentence should convey 'known,' old, or recognizable information, and the 'new' part of the sentence should convey new or unknown information. Uniqueness designates that the speaker's given information must enable the listener to determine antecedents, the information in spoken and written discourse that existed before or logically precedes other information, that is unique. Computability, considered the most fundamental of all the mentioned requirements, designates that the listener must be assumed to have sufficient knowledge and skill to determine the intended antecedent unequivocally. The authors further found that if any of these requirements are disregarded, the listener will judge the communication as awkward, unacceptable, or even incomprehensible in context.

In the same way, the given information, in both spoken and written discourse, is known information, even when omitted (ellipted) or substituted, that the speaker or writer presents, which can be extracted from the known information of the listener or reader. Whereas the new information is unknown information that is presented which cannot be extracted (Chafe, 1976; Clark & Haviland, 1977; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Prince, 1981; Renkema & Schubert, 2018; Strauss & Feiz, 2013; Todd, 2016). In a more modern interpretation, the development of such given to new information flow is often referred to as given to new progression (GNP), where the dissemination of topic information contained within the initial position and within the final position of the sentence clause into given and new information, respectively, for both spoken (see Downing, 2015) and written discourse (see Todd, 2016).

Table 1. Given to new progression dissemination

Type of GNP	Dissemination
Parallel given progression (PGP)	Given information in Sentence 1 to the given information in Sentence 2
Sequential given progression (SGP)	New information in Sentence 1 to the given information in Sentence 2
Extended parallel given progression (EPGP)	Given information in Sentence 1 to the given information in a later Sentence; but not Sentence 2
Extended sequential given progression (ESGP)	New information in Sentence 1 to the given information in a later Sentence; but not Sentence 2
Coherence break (CB)	All new information in the sentence

As displayed in Table 1, the topics of the sentences build meaning. Given to new progression disseminates such topic information throughout the text either by parallel given progression (PGP), sequential given progression (SGP), extended parallel given progression (EPGP), extended sequential given progression (ESGP), or coherence break (CB) (Todd, 2016, p. 102). In parallel given progression (PGP), the given information in the immediately preceding sentence and the given information in the immediately following sentence is analogous (i.e., given information in Sentence 1 to the given information in Sentence 2), together with a purposeful reiteration of the topic, and is intended to reinforce the idea that existed before in the reader's mind. In sequential given progression (SGP), contribution to the text's soundness is typically derived from the new information mentioned in the previous sentence, which is then associated with the given information in the following sentence (i.e., new information in Sentence 1 to the given information in Sentence 2). This type of given to new information progression regularly adds details to the topic information of the sentences. In extended parallel given progression (EPGP), (i.e., given information in Sentence 1 to the given information in a later Sentence; but not Sentence 2), as well as in extended sequential given progression (ESGP), (i.e., new information in Sentence 1 to given information in a later Sentence; but not Sentence 2), a topic is returned to the information that was mentioned earlier in the text. In so doing, these extended types of given to new progression are intended to reinforce the essential topic information and provide closure of a topic when it occurs at the end of a text, yet frequently causing the reader to engage in additional cognitive processing or cognitive loading (Hakala & O'Brien, 1995). In coherence break (CB), there is all new information in the sentence, along with a lack of apparent connection to any antecedent within the text, which causes the reader to engage in additional cognitive processing or cognitive loading (Hakala & O'Brien, 1995). In

summary, the discourse topic or topic information is regarded as what the texts are about, while given to new progression refers to the progression or flow of topic information of the sentence that is extended from sentence to sentence, sentence to paragraph, paragraph to paragraph, and finally throughout the entire text (Todd, 2016).

Although a considerable amount of literature has been published on the progression of given to new topic information in spoken discourse, limited in-depth studies regarding referential given to new information flow within academic written discourse by tertiary-level non-native EFL students and the practicability of using such information flow detection for academic writing assessment by non-native academic English writing teachers has been undertaken. In answer to the above research gap, this analysis sought to determine if the progression of given to new topic information in written academic text can be significantly identified by Thai academic English writing teachers, and explore the possibility of feasibility employing the identification of given to new topic progression as a practical form of academic writing assessment by the same teachers.

Method

Research design

This quantitative study employs a correlational design. For this study, the identification of various types of given to new information progression and the possibility of such information progression being utilized as a practical form of academic writing assessment will be evaluated.

Participants

The texts analyzed in this study were academic essays written by twelve (ten females and two males) Thai EFL undergraduate students (21-23 years of age) in their fourth year of study at a mid-sized private university in Thailand (Table 2). The Thai students had recently participated in a four-month study abroad program at a similar international university in Malaysia. The students were asked to write 500-word academic essays detailing their expectations and why or how these expectations were vital as they began their semester overseas. The Thai EFL students were first asked to reflect on any expectations they had of their host family or culture before their study abroad program. Next, they were

asked to reflect on their expectations of how their host community will view them and what the host community may expect or assume about them. Finally, the students were asked to reflect on any expectations they had for their personal growth during their time overseas.

Table 2. Demographics of participants

Participants	Gender	Age
1	Male	21
2	Female	21
3	Female	21
4	Male	22
5	Female	23
6	Female	22
7	Female	22
8	Female	21
9	Female	22
10	Female	22
11	Female	21
12	Female	21

Data preparation and procedures

The twelve essays were prepared for both topic organization and coherence analysis and given to new information progression evaluation. The sentences were initially numbered to provide a more valid basis of both given to new topic organization and coherence, and given and new information identification (Todd, 2016). The use of t-units as the unit of analysis was unnecessary at this point, for there was no need to distinguish between simple sentences and compound sentences (Schneider & Connor, 1990). Additionally, the omitted or ellipted information in the essays was identified. Ellipted information in this study was introductory details on the three previously described topics, which was perceived by the students to be readily available by the reader, but which was not clearly stated in the sentences (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Todd et al., 2004).

Although the above-cited research by Todd (2016) related to given to new progression in spoken discourse, the developed guidelines could be equally adopted and adapted to be utilized in the original coding of the sample text according to parallel given progression (PGP), sequential given progression (SGP), extended parallel given progression (EPGP), extended sequential given progression (ESGP), or coherence break (CB) in this study. In order to

distinguish if Thai academic English writing teachers can significantly identify given to new progression, each type of given to new progression was identified and coded within each academic essay by a qualified NES academic English writing teacher. To establish intra-rater reliability, each academic essay was randomly coded twice in different order by the same NES writing teacher (Azen & Walker, 2021). Cohen's Kappa indicated a 0.90 agreement ($\kappa=0.90$).

Data collection

Following the guidelines of topic progression previously set by Clark and Haviland (1977), five experienced Thai academic English writing teachers who taught university-level academic English writing and had at least five years of experience assessing academic English writing tasks were asked to rate and code the twelve academic essays. Copies of the twelve academic essays were distributed to the five Thai academic English writing teachers. The Thai teachers were asked to rate and code the academic essays and then return the essays and the supporting files within one week. It was expected that the experienced Thai academic English writing teachers should be able to perceive a generalized configuration of given to new topic information organization and coherence since the topic information was about known actions, consequences, expectations, events, persons, places, and times, and the language was not verbose (Kuppevelt, 1995). It was clearly expressed in writing to the Thai academic English writing teachers that they were being asked to participate as markers in this study and that their participation as a marker was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from this study at any time.

Data analysis

For analysis, the Thai academic English writing teachers were asked to read the twelve essays as they usually would if there were routinely assessing the essays for topic organization and coherence, and after reading to give a holistic score based on a ten-point scale for each essay, with 1 being the least and 10 being the most. Finally, the Thai academic English writing teachers were instructed to mark no more than two or three essays per day to limit marker fatigue.

Standard Deviation was used to examine the differences between the Mean overall scores assigned by the Thai academic English writing teachers for each academic essay. Finally, multiple linear regression (Azen & Walker, 2021) was

used to determine the relationship between the Mean essay scores provided by the Thai academic English writing teachers mentioned above and each type of given to new progression from the preliminary analyses by the NES academic English writing teacher. A distinct advantage of using regression analysis is that the determined relationship between the results from the given to new progression analyses and the all-inclusive marks provided by the teachers could also indicate the validity of the analysis (Todd et al., 2004). These results from the SD and the multiple linear regression values would be considered statistically significant at a level higher than 0.05 (> 0.05) (Azen & Walker, 2021).

Findings

Identification of given to new progression

This analysis initially sought to determine if the progression of given to new topic information in written academic text can be significantly identified by the Thai academic English writing teachers. To begin with, the progression of given to new information was twice scrutinized within each essay by a qualified NES academic English writing teacher. Developed guidelines were adopted to code the sample text by applying Todd's (2016, p. 103) standards relating to types of given to new progression. Deciding between competing types of progression involved extensive decision-making; therefore, a preferred sequence for identifying progression types was determined (Todd, 2016). The prioritized sequence of types of given-new progression, which were coded in the essays, was sequential given progression (SGP) → parallel given progression (PGP) → extended sequential given progression (ESGP) → extended parallel given progression (EPGP) → coherence break (CB). The aggregate percentage of each type of given to new progression in each academic essay is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Aggregate percentage of types of given to new progression in each academic essay

Types of GNP	Student essays											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
SGP	.35	.38	.28	.21	.19	.33	.21	.23	.22	.23	.35	.21
PGP	.19	.27	.21	.18	.34	.24	.28	.19	.26	.30	.23	.31
ESGP	.16	.23	.21	.25	.19	.15	.23	.19	.26	.23	.23	.21
EPGP	.26	.12	.26	.29	.16	.21	.14	.27	.22	.20	.19	.21
CB	.03	.00	.03	.07	.13	.06	.14	.12	.04	.03	.00	.07
Total	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Differentiation of given to new progression

Next, this analysis explored the possibility of such given to new topic progression being utilized as a practical form of academic writing assessment by experienced Thai tertiary teachers of academic English. The Mean composite scores from all Thai academic English writing teachers for each academic essay were calculated, as shown in Table 4. The Standard Deviation was 1.16, greater than 0.05 (> 0.05), therefore indicating that the results are not significantly different between the Thai academic English writing teachers' scoring for the academic essays (Azen & Walker, 2021).

Table 4. Composite scores for topic information organization of each academic essay

Student essays												
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	SD
5.8	6.2	7.4	5.6	5.8	8.4	7.4	7.0	5.8	7.8	9.2	7.4	1.16

Ultimately, advanced multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between the mean composite academic essay scores provided by the Thai academic English writing teachers in response to the assessment variable, and the total percentage of each type of given to new progression determined within the academic essays. As shown in Table 5, the findings presented a weak relationship or correlation between the two variables. An R-squared value $0.3 < r^2 < 0.5$ ($r = .333$) is generally considered a small effect size, thus indicating that the results are not statistically significant (Azen & Walker, 2021).

Table 5. Relationship between mean scores and total percentage of types of GNP

R-Square	Types of given-new progression				
	SGP	PGP	ESGP	EPGP	CB
.333	0.61	0.61	0.53	0.59	0.50

Discussion

This analysis sought to determine if the progression of given to new topic information in written academic text can be significantly identified by Thai academic English writing teachers (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Renkema & Schubert, 2018; Strauss & Feiz, 2013), and if so, then what is the feasibility of employing the identification of given to new topic progression as a form of

practical academic writing assessment by the same teachers (Berge et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Schneider & Connor, 1990; Smit et al., 2017).

This analysis concentrated on whether the proportion of given to new progression could be perceived by experienced Thai academic English writing teachers when providing overall holistic scoring for topic information development and maintenance, as well as topic information organization and coherence, within written discourse assessment (Gadd & Parr, 2017; Normah, 2014). It has been shown from the above constructed statistical data set that the multiple linear regression analysis did not establish any significant relationship between the overall scores and the Thai academic English writing teachers' perception of given to new topic organization in each academic essay. The insights gained from this study show that, although the literature has demonstrated that academic written discourse with a higher proportion of sequential given progression (SGP) is perceived to have a higher measure of given to new topic organization and coherence (Todd, 2016; Todd et al., 2004), the proportions of the different types of given to new progression of topic information is not an influential factor in the detection of topic organization and coherence within the academic essays by experienced Thai academic English writing teachers (Clark & Haviland, 1977; Downing, 2015; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Watson Todd, 2016).

This research earlier suggested that various instructional written assessment methods could be developed and introduced with a criterion based mostly on the substantial aspects to measure the quality of given to new topic progression within EFL student academic writing tasks (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Haines, 2004; Secolsky & Denison, 2017; Veloo et al., 2018). It is now possible to state that even though it was believed that allocating more grade weighting towards topic information development, maintenance, and organization, and coherence in assessing written academic discourse by Thai academic English writing teachers would be advantageous (Barkaoui, 2011; Connor & Farmer, 1990; Smit et al., 2017), the findings of this study do not indicate feasibility for such. According to the findings, the Thai academic English writing teachers were not able to significantly distinguish the progression of given to new topic information in written academic text, therefore, given to new information progression may not be a feasible source of writing quality assessment at this time (Alshakhi, 2018; Connor & Farmer, 1990; Todd, 2016).

Conclusion

This analysis sought to determine if the progression of given to new topic information in written academic text can be significantly identified by Thai academic English writing teachers. This study also sought to explore the possibility of employing the identification of given to new topic progression as a practical form of academic writing assessment by the same teachers. The findings showed that the Thai academic English writing teachers are unable to significantly identify given to new information progression within academic writing. At this time, the practical implication of this research demonstrates that utilizing a given to new progression analysis may not be the practical evaluative measure of topic information progression in written assessments by Thai academic English writing teachers. Consequently, extensive training may be needed for such teachers to gain a greater awareness of given to new topic information flow, development, and maintenance required for such an evaluation.

The generalizability of these results also has some limitations, such as the limited number of academic essays, and the lack of training for the Thai academic English writing teachers to gain the awareness of given to new topic information development and maintenance required for such an evaluation. Similarly, to further substantiate the findings of this study, additional research should be considered which incorporates equal size groups of both experienced non-native and native English academic writing teachers.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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