



Syntactic structures of feature articles in newspapers

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Abstract

This study analyzed the sentence structures of selected feature articles printed in the local and national newspapers. The study employed the qualitative research method in analyzing the discourse structures of the feature articles. It focused on the textual and interpretative analysis of the data. The texts were analyzed to get the most common sentence structures. It is revealed that the most dominant was the structure of modification, followed by coordination, predication, and complementation. The preponderance of the structure of modification would suggest that English language teachers have a major role in providing activities, exercises or materials which focus on this structure, however other structures should also be given equal importance.

Keywords: syntactic structures, feature articles, newspapers

1. Introduction

The convergence of media and technology has in many ways benefited the educational system of the Philippines. In terms of materials used in aiding teaching techniques and providing language-learning situations, the media have tremendously contributed to the system. According to Heinich (1996), there is an array of media format and quality materials available to the teachers and the number is increasing dramatically. The teacher must be prepared to choose the best tools for the students, who are in diverse situations and pursuing different sources of learning goals.

Newspapers and magazines are print materials of mass readership in the country. In the Philippines, there are a good number of national papers, local dailies and weeklies that are circulating and that majority of these papers are in English. Moreover, news writing and feature writing are two major topics in the study of journalism. Feature writing in particular encompasses a wide variety of scope, treatment and purpose. So the articles in these papers are often used as samples for journalism and writing classes to supplement the study of writing news, opinions, and features.

The common observation among journalism teachers and advisers of school papers indicates that the inclination of student writers is more on writing features than news or editorials. This can be attributed to the fact that most of these students want to express what they think without the hassles of using journalese or the technical terms used by journalists as in the case of news writing.

The research assumes that this inclination to feature writing among students has a significant implication to language teaching. It is making the student writer recognize the responsibility of providing the readers a venue for understanding the text and even beyond it. As Brown (in Ramirez, 1989) points out, the difficulty of print media lies in making the information instantly comprehensible to a large number of people. He claims that the purpose of writing is not simply to delight with clever phrases, to charm with mellifluous flow of language, or to transport the readers beyond the real world to an imagined one but to transmit pieces of information in a clean and systematic way

of presenting the stories.

However, there are prevailing problems confronting the use of English in the Philippines. The quality of the spoken and written English in the country does not satisfy the needs of the time. Sibayan (1996) ^[18] observes that English has deteriorated and that many job opportunities are denied or are beyond the reach of the great majority. This is also an observation in schools and even in the universities, where college students are found to be deficient of the English language skills. It is not surprising anymore to find English major students who write incoherent and ungrammatical essays.

Cebu Normal University, a premier teacher training institution is also confronted by this problem. The English curriculum for both general education and the field of specialization has been realigned to answer the knowledge and skill requirements of the world of work. As a state university, it needs to broaden its curricular offerings that should be relevant to the changing needs of society. Similarly, school publication advisers are also confronted with the problems of ungrammatical sentences of the articles submitted by student staff writers and contributors to the school paper. For them, it becomes a frustrating job to edit these works before they are ready to be printed. They also complain about incoherent and unorganized thoughts of the writers.

This is quite an unpleasant scenario for a country where English dominates all-important domains of society. English is the language of government, law, church, school, business, and media. This means that it is used for internal communication aside from being official language in the curriculum and also as international language of business, finance, and technology.

This research assumes that one preparation to become skillful in communication, one must be well prepared with knowledge and skills, which is in this context, writing. In this study of discourse analysis, which is a way of describing and understanding how language functions in specific situations, practical insights can be offered to language instructors in developing the writing skills of their

students.

The study is anchored on the different theories, opinions and ideas of profound linguistic authorities and writing experts. Over the years linguists have approached the study of English from different points of view. Some have lived to account for formal aspects of the grammar of language largely divorced by meanings. For Halliday (in Bloor, 1995), the only approach to the constructions of grammars that is likely to be successful will be the one that recognizes meaning and use as central features of language and tackles the grammar from this point of view. It follows that Halliday's grammar is semantic (concerned with meaning) and functional (concerned with how the language is used). Halliday's explanation of how language works involves the idea that a language consists of a set of system, each of which offers the speaker (or writer) a choice of ways of expressing meaning.

Another equally important feature of Halliday's theory is language in use. It purports that when people use language to express meaning they do so on specific situations, and the form of language that they use is influenced by the complex elements of these situations. It can be inferred then that situations affect the expression of meaning in the written language. An essay using narration on memorable personal experience is likely different from an essay narrating horrible personal experience. The same is true to a business letter requesting payment of a debt from a client and a letter on a similar topic written to an old friend who owes the correspondent some money. The situation affects not only the choice of words but also the grammar that is used. A grammar is basically an analysis and description of a language so that its major structures and functions, its guiding principles and fundamental concepts, are made more understandable. The emphasis in a grammar has traditionally been on then arrangement or syntax of words and other units and phrases and sentences. A well-constructed grammar can be well expected to tell how to break sentences down into their component parts as well as how to join words together to build up a sentence.

Grammar should be taken as purposeful and meaningful. Spinelli (1994) believes that grammar terminology is frequently meaningless for students but when related to linguistic functions the meaning is more evident. Pesirla (2000) ^[15] supports this claim in his article for the graduate school manual, declaring that the study of grammar can be very mechanical and meaningless if it is not taught with a communicative dimension through an authentic text to provide a socio-linguistic context. An authentic text, heads, is a humanistic context through which grammar items are taught. This is in line with the idea of Krashen and Terrell (1983) ^[12] who observe that all human beings could acquire languages if they feel that need to acquire language and the opportunity to use the language for communication purposes. Since the present study deals with feature articles published in newspaper supplements, the authenticity of the materials will provide meaningful context to the learners.

To be communicatively competent, one should master all language skills, namely: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Hymes, 1972). In the same vein, Canale and Swain (1983) in their integrative theory claim that there are four different components or sub-categories of communicative competence namely: *grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competencies*. In the case of discourse competence, one should know the similarities and

differences of the spoken and written discourses

Pesirla (1999) summarizes Francis's description of the four syntactic structures in English with exemplification. They are as follows: Structure of Modification which refers to the phrase which is made up of a head and a modifier. (Hungry people/ home town/ easily superior/ dances gracefully), Structure of Predication which is made up of a subject, which is the doer or the topic and a predicate, which is the action. (She walked. /Anna is sleeping.), Structure of Complementation which includes a verbal element and a complement. (spoke the truth/ are happy/ gave him a zero) and Structure of Coordination which is composed of a coordinator, which is a content word. (pins and needles/ at the church/ small but terrible)

The aforementioned views support the idea that good language learning must start at the initial stage of understanding the underlying principles of a language. Rubin (1975) enhances the idea by emphasizing that in addition to focusing on communications, good learning must also attend to the linguistic structures and patterns of the language.

Writing is a communication activity and so is carried out in accordance with certain principles which underlie the use of language in communication (Rionda, 1996). The students are confronted with the task of expressing themselves at a far more precise level of grammatical accuracy and rhetorical organization in written language. Most of them get overwhelmed and later frustrated because they feel they cannot simply cope with the task. Cumming (1990) enumerates three specific kinds of learning that students may wish to derive from their writing and they are the following: 1.) assessing and seeking out improved uses of language; for example, engaging in word searches in order to produce the best phrasing, 2.) testing functional hypothesis about appropriate language usage while writing 3.) attempting to match their expressions to target language norms for producing grammatical structure in writing, 4.) comparing cross – linguistic equivalents using writing as a way to try out haunches about the ways that native language words and phrases are requested in target language.

Hedge (1995) ^[12] suggested that in order to write effectively, a writer should accomplish a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning, the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and eventual readers. Cumming (1990) held similar views in his explanation, ready for assessments, the issue is of what to assess. Evaluation can be a real challenge in that there are numerous things that could logically be evaluated, such as: content (the depth and breadth of coverage); rhetorical structure (clarity and unity of the thesis); organization (sense of pattern for the development of ideas); register (appropriateness of the level of formality), style (sense of control and grace); economy (efficiency of language use); accuracy of meaning (selection and use of the vocabulary); appropriateness of language conventions (grammar, spelling, punctuations); reader's understanding (inclusion of sufficient information to allow meaning to be conveyed); reader's acceptance (effort made in the text to solicit the reader's agreement, if so desired).

Greenberg and Roindone (1994) emphasized five important

qualities of good writing: focus, which requires the writer to establish a clear main point or topic sentence; development, in which each paragraph should support the main point with enough specific details; unity, which refers to paragraph sticking together to the main point; coherence, which determines the logical organization of sentences and paragraphs to maintain a smooth flow of ideas; and correctness, which requires every write up to be error free in punctuation, spelling, and grammatical usages. This is affirmed by Aquino and Nocono (2001) who cited the importance of unity in paragraphs. A paragraph that has sentences that do not relate to or discuss the controlling ideas lacks unity.

The writing of feature articles is one of the most important lessons in Journalism. Features are very varied in scope, treatment and purpose. They may supplement the news, entertain, explain, amuse, invoke sympathy, or inform. Considered the “jewel” of feature materials is the feature article, often called simply feature (Pangilinan, 1998). There are many kinds of feature articles, namely: feature story, human interest story, interview articles, interpretative feature, informative article, practical guidance article, seasonal or holiday feature, entertainment article, travelogue, historical feature, personal experience or accomplishment story and personality sketch.

There exist a good number of studies that are closely related to the present study. All of them deal with the analysis of discourse structures of the written language. Abiabi (2001) [1] analyzes representative literary genres in order to produce language instructional models. Caturza’s dissertation (2002) [4] focuses on the lexicon and the syntax of variant English in Cebu-based newspapers while Dumam-ag (2000) examines the discourse of the news stories of the representative papers in Cebu. Similarly, Pilapil (1998) uses editorials in major English newspapers as the authentic texts for discourse analysis. He analyzes the surface and deep structures of these texts stating that the teaching of language would become meaningful through these editorials. Cobile (1998) [7] and Sajulan (1999) [17] analyze the linguistic structures of textbooks used in different courses, the former on the common Science textbook used by paramedical students while the latter on the Commerce and Computer Science textbooks. Galleon (2004) [10], on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of concordance by analyzing the discourse of DepEd memoranda for proposed guidelines in making a memorandum.

Although these are all discourse analyses of language, the present study is not a duplication to any of those since this is focused on the syntactic structures of six different types of feature articles that are published in local and national papers.

2. Method

This study employed the qualitative research method in analyzing the discourse structure of feature articles. This requires an intensive analysis of the structure used in the articles. The representative features analyzed in this study would exemplify the different types of feature articles in local and national newspapers. Specifically, these stories were those printed in the weekend issues of the newspapers. The national papers were *The Philippine Daily Inquirer* and

The Manila Bulletin while the local sources were *The Sunstar Daily* and *The Freeman*. The features represent the six different types namely; human interest story, travelogue, personality sketch, entertainment article, informative articles, and practical guideline article. The feature articles in this study are as follows: *Playing Santa and other Causes*, a human interest story from *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*; *Hakuna Matata, the Southern Coast of Brighton*, a travelogue from *The Freeman*; *Will and Grace*, a personality sketch from *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*; *they Love Cecile*, an entertainment article from *The Manila Bulletin*; *Tea Drinkers May have Lower Skin Cancer Risk*, an informative article from the *Sunstar Daily*; and *Preparing for School*, a practical guidance article from *The Freeman*.

In the process of selecting the authentic texts, all weekend issues of the four newspapers were gathered and the stories were classified as to type. In order to narrow down the choices, a particular month was randomly paired to a type of feature. All the titles were classified representing each month per newspaper. These features were reviewed by faculty members of the university who are teaching in the English Studies and Other Languages Department and are experts in the field of writing and discourse analysis. Finally the six articles for analysis were chosen. The text of every chosen feature was analyzed to get the most frequently used sentence structure, which focused on modification, predication, complementation, and coordination. Francis’s model of using the boxes was utilized. Then the frequency of their occurrences were tallied and ranked. The textual descriptions and exemplifications followed.

As to the syntactic analysis, these basic structures according to Francis (1958) [9] are anchored on two main principles: (1) English syntax is a many-layered organization of relatively few types of basic units;(2) every structure may be divided into its immediate constituents, almost always two, each if which may in term be divided and subdivided until the immediate constituents are reached. The following graphical representation shows the constituents enclosed in boxes as they increasingly become complex in structure:

- a.) Structure of modification is indicated by an → arrow pointing from the modifier to the head

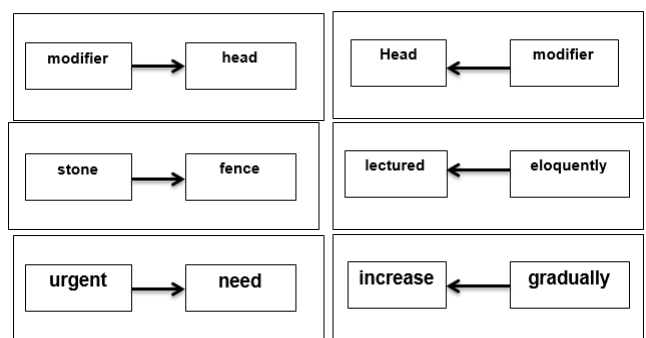


Fig 1

- b.) of predication is indicated by a capital P with the back to the subject and its front facing the predicate but in some sentences where the subject follows the predicate, the P should be reversed.

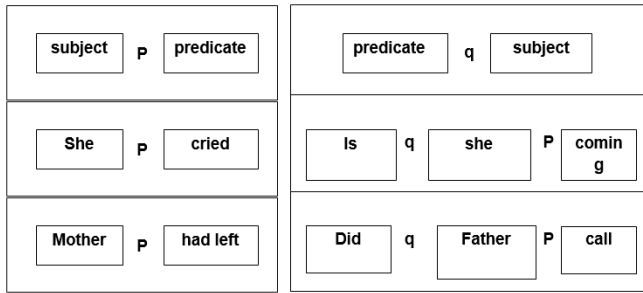


Fig 2

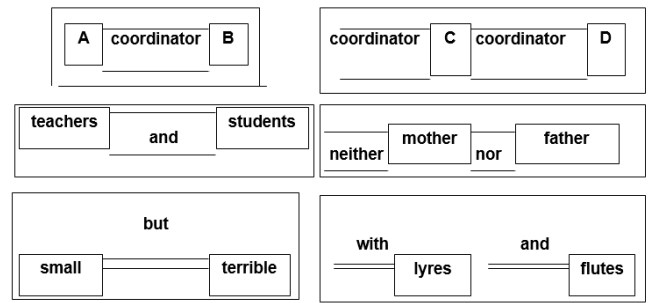


Fig 4

c.) Structure of complementation is similarly marked with capital C with its back to the verbal element.

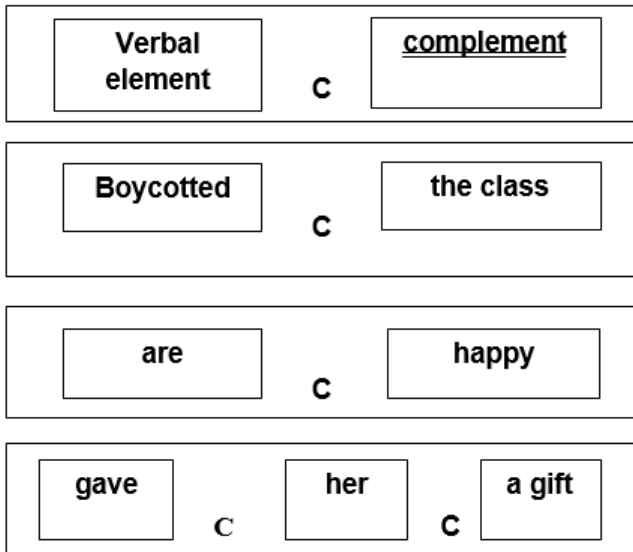


Fig 3

d.) The structures of coordination uses parallel lines to connect the constituents.

If a function word is present, it is placed between two parallel lines.

3. Results and Discussion

The sentence structures were identified utilizing the four syntactic structures of English by Francis. These were ranked according to frequency of occurrences in tables. A summary table reflecting the most dominant structure followed. The analyses of the sentence structures of the six feature articles yield the dominance of certain discourse categories.

Syntactic Structures

Of the four sentence structures, the structure of modification consistently ranks first. All paragraphs predominantly employ the structure of modification. This pattern is followed by the structures of coordination, predication and complementation. The *Human Interest story* has the most frequent structures of modification, followed by coordination, complementation, and predication. This is also of the same pattern as the *Travelogue*, the *Personality Sketch*, the *Entertainment article*, the *Informative* and the *Practical Guidance* articles.

It is also noted that there is a slight disparity between the number of structures of predication and complementation among the six feature articles. A summary table is presented below:

Table 1

Structures	Human Interest Story	Travelogue	Personality Sketch	Entertainment	Informative	Practical Guidance	Total	Rank
Modification	95	143	102	159	65	75	639	st
Coordination	82	133	82	144	44	61	546	2nd
Complementation	43	65	33	74	17	36	268	3rd
Predication	42	50	32	73	16	35	248	4th

Table 1 shows that the structure of modification is the most frequently used structure of all. The entertainment feature has the highest number of this structure and the travelogue follows. This may be due to the fact that in all essays, description and exposition are the most common methods of development used. In every discussion of each topic, the structure of modification is used to describe, narrate, explain, and illustrate the points made by the writer. In the language-teaching scenario, more meaningful situations and materials are needed in order to master the structure of

modification which is composed of word, phrase and clause modifiers. Generally, the structure of modification primarily contributes to the clarity of meaning in the sentences and paragraphs. Thus, it can be that completeness of the message which is a characteristic of communicative competence can be achieved through this structure.

This is evidenced by just one sentence taken from the human interest story being analyzed as exemplified by the following diagram:

“He has *no big belly, no big white beard* and doesn’t even wear the *white trimmed red suit.*”

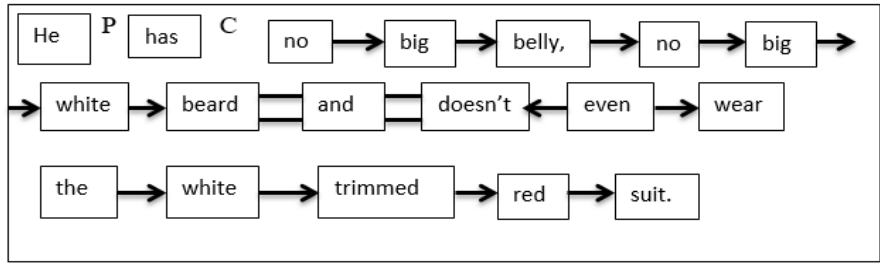


Fig 5

The arrows signify the structures of modification as the dominant structure in the sentence. This human interest story has eight paragraphs with a total of 30 sentences. There are 95 words, phrase and clause modifiers which means that the structure of modification is the highest in rank among other syntactic structures. The following sentences are samples from the other types of feature articles under the study which show the dominance of the structure of modification in all articles..

“Aside from *her spectacular cheekbones, professional work ethic and aero body fat, Grace’s solid credit sense* makes her *the perfect image model for the country’s leading bank.*”

“People *who unwind with a cup of tea every night* may have a *lower risk of two common forms of skin cancer.*”

The second most frequent structure in the articles is the structure of coordination. There are long compound and complex sentences in the majority of the sentences in each paragraph. For example in paragraph two of the Travelogue, eight occurrences of conjunctions and prepositions are reflected. The following sentences have the structures of coordination:

“The famous *Tower of London and London Bridge* have played hosts *to his 48 hours of self-imposed abstinences for a cause.*”

“*But it was on his first visit to the Philippines with his wife Tarcie, a nurse he met in London* that he was shocked *to see pure poverty.*”

The structure of coordination is second in rank. In the Informative article, this structure occurs 44 times. In Sentence 4 of the passage, it has the most number of coordination in the form of preposition and conjunctions.

“The effect was even stronger *among study participants who had been tea fans for decades as well as those who regularly had at least two cups a day according to findings published in the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology.*”

In the sentence of this passage, the most common coordinators are the prepositions of, to and at and the conjunction and.

On the third slot is the structure of complementation. These complements function as direct and indirect objects, object complements, predicate adjectives, and object of prepositions. Here are some examples from the Human Interest story

“Irishman Patrick Murray *does not look like Santa Claus.*”

“His benevolence *has not gone unnoticed.*”

“Murray has been *a real Santa for the past 15 years.*”

“I *am interested in the doers not the talkers.*”

“His selfless sacrifices in helping others *have made him live the true Christmas spirit all year round.*”

Moreover, in the article Will and Grace, there are long sentences with verbal elements categorized into transitive, intransitive, copulative or linking verbs. These verbs complete the meanings of the sentences. Some of these structures are the following:

“...*Grace modeling career consist of a series of smart decisions made with the opportunities presented her.*”

“...*Her most recent purchase she says, was lamp.*”

“...*Her first pay check she recalls went to her future home.*”

“*These days, not even shoes can distract Grace and new husband Ernest from using...*”

The sentences above illustrate the different kinds of verbs according to their usages in the sentences. The first one is used as an intransitive verb, the second as a linking verb, the third is an intransitive verb, and the fourth is a transitive verb.

The fourth in rank is the structure of predication. These are the direct objects, subject complements, indirect objects, object complement, and objects of prepositions. They are illustrated by the following.

“*He succeeded in getting donations for the surgery of Ellen Raming.*”

“*Aside from the usual bed – push Murray also fast.*”

There are also sentences that are long but have simple subjects. Linking, transitive, and intransitive verbs in single and verbal phrases are employed to complete the ideas expressed. Here are some examples to these:

“*Tea consumption was linked to a lower skin cancer risk, even with factors such as age, skin type, and history of severe burns considered.*”

“*The researchers found no evidence that tea drinking lowered skin risk in people who had accumulated painful sunburns in the past.*”

“*People who unwind with a cup of tea every night may have a lower risk of two common forms of skin cancer, new research suggests.*”

All in all, the feature articles have dominantly used the structures of modification and coordination. It can be implied that modifiers should be given emphasis in language teaching since most of the sentences are highly dependent on this structure in providing accurate meaning to expressions. In the teaching of writing, teachers should be more focused on the accuracy in the usage of formal written expressions and this can only be achieved if students have a rich source of word, phrase and clause modifiers and that, they can them appropriately in relation to the topic and the purpose of writing. For example in the human interest story, in order to evoke the emotional reaction about the subject's character and the events surrounding the story the writer should employ evocative modifiers to sustain this interest.

4. Findings

The analyses of the sentence structures of the six feature articles yield the dominance of certain discourse categories. Of the four sentence structures, the structure of modification consistently ranks first. All paragraphs predominantly employ the structure of modification. This pattern is followed by the structures of coordination, predication and complementation. It is also noted that there is a slight disparity between the number of structures of predication and complementation among the six feature articles.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The theory that language can be described using a system called syntax, is proven true in this study. Anything significant about the meaning of a sentence cannot be explained unless the basic syntactic structure of English have been identified and described. Thus, any objective definition about a sentence – such as that it expresses a complete thought can be opinionated and unsystematic without describing the sentence structure first. Through this discourse analysis of sentence structure, it is evident that the term “sentence” must be composed of one or more of these structures in some sort of combination. It can be gleaned that the building blocks of these sentences are the four sentence structures. It is implied that learning about this structure in an English language classroom is a basic requirement in developing the language skills not only in writing but also in other composite skills such as listening, reading, and speaking. Furthermore, the preponderance of the structure of modification would also suggest that English language teachers have a major role in providing activities, exercises or materials which focus on this structure. This does not mean though that the other structures such as coordination, predication, and complementation are not given equal importance.

This discourse study leads to a conclusion that authentic texts such as newspapers and magazines with the appropriate selection processes can be possible sources of materials as text examples in language classrooms to study grammar and techniques in writing essays. Finally, it implies that writing skills can be developed and even mastered by constant practice, right instructions, and appropriate evaluation.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are offered:

1. English teachers may consider using feature articles from newspapers as a reading matter and springboard in

teaching grammar, since there is a repertoire of syntactic and rhetorical structures in these texts.

2. The Communication Arts students and English majors should consider reading feature articles as supplemental sources not only for information and entertainment but also as a guide to achieve a meaningful learning in the study of English language description.
3. Publication companies providing books, journals and newspapers should monitor grammar lapses in their published texts since their products are considered to be guides and even models for teaching learning experiences.

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