Chapter IX
Exploring the Concept of Emergent Coherence in a Corpus of Korean ESL Texts

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ABSTRACT

One central task faced by those interested in the corpus analysis of second language writing is how to measure ESL textual sophistication. While many applied linguists have focused on the notion of lexical richness, Robert de Beaugrande has provided the outlines of an approach that highlights the importance of textual efficiency. In his book, Text, Discourse, and Process (1980), Beaugrande defines the well-written text as an efficient self-regulating system. If Beaugrande’s definition is accepted, it follows that the majority of ESL texts are inefficient acts of textual communication. In this chapter, the author will explore textual inefficiency by means of the concept of emergent coherence in a corpus of Korean ESL texts. Within the framework of Hallidayan functional linguistics, emergent coherence will be explained in terms of seven principles of textual efficiency: the SPOCA Principle, the Principle of Natural Hierarchy, the Principle of End Weight, the Principle of End Focus, the Principle of Textual Economy, the Principle of Unified Elaborations, and the Principle of Genuine Extensions.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the late twentieth century, second language writing studies has been concerned with the issue of how to measure the sophistication of the English-as-a-Second-Language or ESL text. To date, most applied linguists have argued that an adequate explanation of textual sophistication implies a focus on the text’s lexical richness (Laufner and Nation, 1998; Shaw and Liu, 1998; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim, 1998; Meara, 2005; Laufner, 2005). Over the years,
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however, a few researchers have continued to stress the central importance of cohesion and coherence in assessing textual sophistication (Reid 1992; Murphy 2001; Kang 2006; Murphy 2008). Proponents of the second view are committed to some form of the view that ESL texts are best understood as inefficiently self-regulating systems. Well-written texts, composed in the appropriate register, offer information to the reader in efficiently packaged chunks that are easy to understand. They provide directives that allow for the probing of textual or cohesive relations in a consistent manner, without the appearance of unexpected discrepancies, ambiguities, or contradictions (Iser, 1978; Beaugrande, 1980; Murphy, 2005). In contrast, ESL texts represent a special subset of the poorly written text. For readers with little previous exposure, the experience of reading these texts is often one of confusion and frustration. Among other reasons, this is because the ESL text uses a narrow or fixed set of key lexical phrases and deploys cohesive ties that bind the text incorrectly—or omits such ties altogether (Murphy 2001; Murphy 2008). The cognitive psychological concept of automatization can serve to explain the reason why the ESL text-maker creates texts that confuse and frustrate. According to Sternberg (2006), automatization may be described in the following manner:

*During the course of practice, implementation of the various steps becomes more efficient. The individual gradually combines individual effortful steps into integrated components. These components then are further integrated. Eventually the entire process is a single highly integrated procedure, rather than an assemblage of individual steps* (p. 69)

ESL texts represent a range of levels in the gradual process of skill and strategy automatization necessary for efficient text production. It would appear, for example, that low-level ESL text-makers assemble their texts mostly through an individual-step process at the level of the word group or individual sentence. The individual-step character of these texts explains why the cohesive ties between individual sentences remain tenuous or non-existent. What often appears to be going on is that the text-maker selects unmarked language items when marked ones are actually demanded, particularly in the transitions between sentences. At a more advanced level, the text-maker’s growing mastery of the individual steps involved in text production results in the emergence of limited forms of procedural integration. At this intermediate stage, the ESL text-maker is able to produce unified text segments efficiently, and the concept of emergent coherence as a tool of analysis becomes appropriate.

Coherence in writing refers to the ability of the text-maker to produce linear and sequential sequences that are connected to underlying forms of conceptual planning. At the intermediate ESL level, however, the text-maker has only a limited form of control over these writing resources. On occasion, the text-maker will still produce texts that result in reader dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction can occur, for example, when the text-maker utilizes marked information sequencing when unmarked sequencing is demanded. The intermediate ESL text-maker, in other words, exercises an average rather than superior conceptual understanding of how to organize language items effectively.

In this chapter, it will be argued that the ESL text-maker’s limited ability to utilize a single highly integrated writing procedure results in the production of inefficient texts. Without informed pedagogical intervention, the text-maker has great trouble perceiving the superiority of highly efficient texts over those he or she is capable of producing. The central ESL concept of emergent coherence that underlies the argument will be elaborated in terms of the SPOCA Principle and six other principles of efficient textuality: those of end focus, end weight, textual economy, natural hierarchy, unified elaborations and