Chapter XXVI
The Texture of Inefficiently Self-Regulating ESL Systems

Terence Patrick Murphy
Yonsei University, Korea

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the question of how to measure the student’s English as a second language (ESL) textual sophistication. It suggests that the second language text is an inefficiently self-regulating system, at the levels of grammar, lexis and logico-rhetorical structure. Learner texts use a narrow or even fixed set of key lexical phrases; they deploy cohesive ties that bind the text incorrectly, they omit cohesive ties altogether, or redundantly retain items that are easily recovered from the situational context. Following a review of some typical second language cohesion problems, the chapter offers an analysis of the emergent texture of four versions of the same paper, each written by a different ESL student. The results suggest that a learner text-maker is unable to perceive the ineffective choices in texts written at levels of sophistication higher than those he or she is capable of creating.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 10 years, the investigation of the written texts of English as a second language (ESL) learners has turned increasingly to the use of computer-aided corpus analysis (De Beaugrande, 1997; Freedman, Pringle & Yalden, 1979; Reid, 1992; Granger, 2002; Kroll, 1990; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). Since it is strongly committed to the acceptance of the evidence found in large sources of natural format data, corpus research offers a means for establishing Robert De Beaugrande’s triumvirate of normal science attributes at the heart of second language acquisition research: convergence, consensus, and coverage (De Beaugrande, 1997; Sinclair, 1991). One major initial concern within this new field of study has been the issue of how to measure the student’s growing ESL sophistication. To date, a majority of the applied linguists who have investigated this
issue believe that an adequate explanation must focus predominantly on some notion of lexical richness (Laufer, 2005; Laufer & Nation, 1998; Meara, 2005; Shaw & Liu, 1998; Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki & Kim, 1998). In this chapter, however, I will argue that an exclusive focus on lexis offers an oversimplified account of the ability of the second language writer to produce written English texts. As an alternative, I will suggest that applied linguists need to offer a three-fold account of second language textual development, one that incorporates grammar, lexis and logico-rhetorical structure.

**THE TEXT AS A SELF-REGULATING SYSTEM**

A well-written text may be defined as a self-regulating system. The well-written text exhibits an informational dialectic of ease and efficiency in a register appropriate for the situational context (De Beaugrande, 1980; Iser, 1978). As a self-regulating system, the well-written text provides a set of directives to enable the reader to probe a variety of intra-textual (and extra-textual) relations to a certain depth at distinct grammatical, lexical and logico-rhetorical levels, without giving rise to insoluble discrepancies, paradoxes, ambiguities, or contradictions (De Beaugrande, 1980; Murphy, 2005a). If the texts of ESL students are considered as a special case of the more general category of the poorly written text, what this means is that the typical learner text is inefficiently self-regulating. One of the major reasons why this is so is because the second language text possess emergent texture (Murphy, 2001). In other words, because the grammatical, lexical and logico-rhetorical relations in the second language text remain underdeveloped, many of its textual directives lead to ambiguities, discrepancies, paradoxes, contradictions and redundancies. Particularly for those readers who have had limited experience working with learner texts, the result is frequently frustration and confusion.

**THE MURPHY-LEE SECOND LANGUAGE CORPUS**

The Murphy-Lee Second Language Corpus is a personal collection of Korean English-language learner texts that I have been assembling with the assistance of my wife, Lee Joon-kyoung, in the Department of English at Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea since 1999. As of Fall, 2006, the total word count is approximately 100,000 words, with the corpus increasing at the rate of about 15,000 words per year. Although the corpus contains the work by students in a number of different humanities departments at the university, the bulk of the material is by students in the English department. For the past five years, I have focused on the collection of five-paragraph essays. All of the five-paragraph essays in the corpus include at least one revision; many of them include two. These essays are of two principal types: discussions of movie themes and literary interpretation of short stories, mostly by James Joyce. However, there are also a number of other genres represented in the corpus, including about 120 single paragraphs as well as an increasing number of graduate-level summaries and critiques of published linguistics papers. In addition, a small set of assignments have involved the revision of a low-level learner text. These last assignments were undertaken as part of a one-week take-home end-of-term examination.

**LEXIS OR GRAMMAR?**

In the Hallidayean account of English grammar, the formation of the five key word groups—the nominal group, the verbal group, the adverbial group, the adjectival group, and the prepositional group—involves the text-maker in simultaneous grammatical and lexical word choices. The grammatical items consist of that set of words involved in a small fixed number of obligatory choices. As Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens (1964) suggest: