Capturing Coherence in English Learner Writing: Cohesion & Relational Structure

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Establishing discourse coherence is an interactive process that – when we speak of written communication – involves both the writer and the reader of a text (e.g. Givón, 1995; Widdowson, 2004). One of the central concerns in writing instruction at tertiary level is that students learn to produce "coherent text", meaning that they learn to structure and present their thoughts in such a way that a reader can infer coherent discourse from their texts.

In language teaching, coherence is often linked to the use of cohesive devices at the textual surface level, which is also reflected in studies of learner writing. As these studies show, however, the relationship between coherence and cohesion is not easily captured and findings are divergent, some studies arguing against a relation between cohesion and coherence in learner writing, others finding that a relation between these two aspects of discourse does indeed exist. Even if a relation is postulated, the exact relationship between coherence and cohesion in learner writing is not clear. As Carrell already pointed out in 1981 (486), a coherent text may well also be cohesive, but this is not necessarily the case. What seems to be missing is an analytical level that allows for the investigation of the specific role that cohesive elements at the textual surface level play in the coherence structure of learner texts.

To address this problem a corpus of argumentative essays produced by first year students of English at the University of Vienna was subjected to a multi-layered analysis, including (1) global coherence ratings as well as (2) the analysis of coherence relations that can be identified in the texts and (3) cohesive devices used. These analyses were implemented using RST Tool and UAM CorpusTool developed by Mick O'Donnell.

The first level of analysis, i.e. the global coherence rating, was done by members of the respective discourse community, i.e. English lecturers who are the de facto audience of the texts in question. Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) (Mann & Thompson, 1987; 1988; Taboada & Mann, 2006) was chosen as a model for the second layer of analysis, i.e. the analysis of relational (coherence) structure. The framework of Rhetorical Structure Theory defines a range of possible logical relations that can occur in a text and suggests that in a coherent text, every unit can be assigned a function, i.e. a coherent text should not exhibit non-sequiturs. RST can thus be used to explain the relational coherence structure of texts. It also allows for the investigation of the (cohesive) realization of the identified coherence relations on the textual surface level. Cohesive devices are thus tagged on a third layer of analysis.

This contribution shows that by combining these three layers of qualitative corpus analysis, the textual surface level can be analyzed with reference to the functional level of relational structures. It is found that not only do relational structures differ between coherent and less coherent or incoherent texts, but the realization of specific coherence relations also differs, not only in the number of cohesive devices used, but also with regard to types of

cohesive devices used. Thanks to the multi-level analysis these devices can be analyzed with respect to the role they play in the signaling of specific relational structures.

These insights into aspects of text organization and the way cohesive devices are employed in learner writing will be discussed with a focus on possible implications for the teaching of second language writing.

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