An Analysis of the Use of Cohesive and Written Discourse Features by Korean EFL Learners

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Ahn, Soojin. 2009. An Analysis of the Use of Cohesive and Discourse Features by Korean EFL Learners. The Journal of Studies in Language 25.3. 601-629. This paper investigated the use of cohesive devices and written discourse features in summary composed by university-level Korean EFL learners with different reading comprehension ability. Two groups (N=58) of Korean EFL learners at a university in Kyeonggido, Korea, participated in the study. To measure the participants’ general reading ability, reading comprehension test was administered. Two general categories, cohesive devices and written discourse features, were also investigated to measure linguistic features the participants used in their writing. This study replicated a basic design used in Kang’s (2005) study that examines narrative essays of Korean EFL learners. The results suggest that reading proficiency significantly affects collocation (a lexical cohesion). Of particular interest were the findings that the more proficient readers failed to produce significant differences in other cohesive devices and written discourse features. This seems to suggest that regardless of the different levels of reading comprehension ability, the Korean university EFL learners showed restricted choice of syntactic and lexical features by heavily depending on specific categories of cohesive devices and academic writing discourse. Implications of these findings are discussed with a particular focus on pedagogical goals regarding teaching and learning of English writing for Korean university EFL learners. (Hanyang University)

Key words: cohesive devices, written discourse features, reading comprehension ability, collocation (a lexical cohesion)
1. Introduction

Over the last 40 years, the attention in second language acquisition (SLA) has been devoted to the area of non-native speakers’ writing in English. Many researchers and practitioners have tried to investigate the process of writing for language learners as distinct from L2 writing standards and a factor contributing to the differences in the written production of native speakers and non-native speakers of language learners (Cumming, 1989; Reid, 1992; Bardovi-Harlig, 1995). Much of the research on L2 writing has found that the learners’ lack of written discourse knowledge in the target language is likely to result from limitations in their language competence. They suggested language learners with higher English proficiency levels used matured and complex cohesive and discourse features in their writing, specific to target language norms (Silva, 1993; Hinkel, 2003). By contrast, lower proficiency learners showed restricted choice of cohesive and discourse features, which is probably a general problem for language learners (Hinkel, 2003).

Several studies on L2 writing have begun to address these issues in terms of the nature of the relationship between reading and writing skills. It is suggested that learners can learn much about writing from reading. Writing is likely to be a skill simultaneously developed as they are progressing towards high reading proficiency levels (Krashen, 1984; Kennedy, 1985; Cox et al., 1991; Leki, 1998). But it is controversial that as a result of exposure to reading material, learners develop an awareness of L2 academic writing conventions (Crowhurst, 1991; Yuen, 1993; Petch-Tyson, 1998; Stegemoller, 2004).

First, research findings from several studies indicate that reading comprehension ability were to affect L1 and L2 learners’ ability to use cohesive devices effectively in a written text (Krashen, 1984; Kennedy, 1985; Cox et al., 1991; Leki, 1998). In a study with third and fifth grade levels of native speakers, Cox, Shanahan and Tinzmann (1991) found that the use of sophisticated cohesive devices was more frequent in good readers’ text. Likewise, Kennedy (1985) has found significant differences in the organization, coherence, and quality of syntheses from