

DOCTORAL THESIS

A study of the use of adversative, causal and temporal connectors in English argumentations, descriptions and narrations by tertiary Chinese ESL learners

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ABSTRACT

This study unravels the connector patterns and mental activities that the Chinese learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and native-English speakers display/perform upon the adoption of adversative, causal and temporal connectors while writing English argumentations, descriptions and narrations. It focuses on the ways in which the Chinese ESL learners' thinking and connector production recursively interact in meaning-building processes.

To elicit information of the writers' mental processes, three English writing tasks with concurrent verbal reports were used as main elicitation tools. Chinese university students from Low, Mid and High proficiency levels and native-American-English users (Native) were asked to speak out their thoughts while writing English argumentations, descriptions and narrations. Data were also elicited from the retrospective verbal reports and following-up interviews which were conducted right after each writing and concurrent verbal report.

Comparison of connector patterns in English texts produced by the Chinese and native-English writers suggests that the Chinese Mid and Low groups use significantly more connectors than the Native group while connector frequencies between the Chinese High and the Native group reveal no significant difference. It has been argued that the High-level students, being more linguistically skilled, can use connectors as well as other cohesive devices to form textual connections as their native-English-speaking counterparts. However, the Mid and Low-level writers, lacking abilities of manipulating other cohesive devices, tend to rely mainly on connectors.

Moreover, comparison between the three Chinese groups indicates that the Mid uses significantly more connectors in English texts than the High and Low groups. The Mid group, on the one hand, is not linguistically mature enough to use various cohesive devices as skillfully as the High group, but, on the other hand, has more knowledge on the connector usage than the Low.

When connectors were analyzed by category, it is found that the Chinese students use fewer adversative connectors in argumentations and narrations than the native-English writers. This pattern is found to have arisen from the Chinese students' rigid textual development. ESL learners, due to their poor second language (L2) proficiency, cannot develop sophisticated argumentative and narrative structures. Instead of resorting to counter-arguments and reverse-order narration, they tend to simply list ideas. This could result in lower occurrences of adversative connectors in their argumentations and narrations.

The data that are extracted from concurrent verbal reports reveal that the Chinese students use their first language (L1) for five mental activities: (1) initiation, (2) revision, (3) comment-making, (4) decision-making, and (5) monologue-conducting while using L2 for only two: initiation and revision. Examinations on the cognitive demand of the mental activities show that ESL learners rely more on their L1 to perform the cognitively more demanding

activities such as comment-making, decision-making and monologue-conducting.

Furthermore, the verbal data show that the L2 proficiency levels affect ESL writers' mental activities in two ways. First, proficient ESL learners report larger linguistic units than the less proficient ones. Second, proficient ESL learners report higher proportions of cognitively more demanding activities than the less proficient ones. These two patterns are argued to result from the different working memory capacities of the proficient and less proficient ESL writers as well as the different ways of processing information in their working memory.

Finally, a model of L2 writing process is developed to delineate how L2 proficiency, working memory and cognitive process interact and contribute to L2 writing process.

Theoretically, this L2 model refines the L1 model and enriches the current understanding of the L2 writing process in three ways. First, mental activities are classified according to how much cognitive workload they demand. Such categorization is necessary because it explains ESL learners' language choice while doing verbal reports and also explains the difficulties the learners encounter in L2 writing. Second, the L2 model separates the composing process as pre- and post-stage, which allows us to see how frequencies and types of mental activities differ in the two phases. Third, by including language choice, the L2 model addresses a wider interpretation of the mental activities in writing process.

Pedagogically, the comprehensive and explanatory accounts of the connector patterns and mental activities address the problems that ESL learners have when using connectors in L2 writing. This will definitely facilitate the teaching of L2 writing.

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