Text coherence perceived by Japanese learners of English: The role of sentence connectivity and language proficiency

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Successful and coherent text comprehension in a second language (L2) requires not only word recognition and syntactic parsing, but also an understanding of connectivity between sentences (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Theories suggest the two important types of sentence connectivity for comprehension (Wolfe, 2005): ”Causal Relatedness” (CR), or cause-and-effect relations, and ”Semantic Relatedness” (SR), or semantic overlap between propositions. Previous studies found L2 learners perceive CR between sentences (Horiba, 1996), but few explored the effects of SR. To fill in this gap, this study examined influences of SR in addition to CR on L2 learners’ perception of text coherence, including the consideration of learners’ language proficiency.

A total of 104 Japanese university students learning English (beginning- and intermediate-level learners) participated in a series of experiments. They read two-sentence texts varying in CR and SR between the sentences; for example, ”Frank had to pass his last exam to graduate. He began to study for his final test.” (This example is high in CR and SR.) CR was determined by subjective ratings in the preliminary study. SR was measured by a corpus-based technique, ”Latent Semantic Analysis” (Landauer et al., 1998). Participants judged the coherence of the texts on a 5-point scale (1 = ”not coherent at all”; 5 = ”very coherent”).

The analysis of judgment ratings indicated some significant effects. First, learners perceived texts as more coherent when CR and/or SR was high, indicating that L2 learners perceive not only CR but also SR between sentences. Second, when reading texts high in CR, beginning-level learners emphasized SR more in their judgments than did intermediate-level learners; SR had a stronger perceived impact on text coherence to lower proficiency learners. These findings are discussed in light of cognitive processes involved in L2 reading, providing some implications for reading instruction and material development.

Keywords: Proficiency, Reading, Text Analysis, Coherence, Discourse.