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Coherence and Cohesion
in College Students' English Spoken Discourse

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markers and interactive signals; (b) Disfluency markers such as false starts, repairs and pause fillers; (c) mean length of utterance (MLU). Although previous studies have shown that discourse organization strategies, i.e., type A, contribute to comprehensibility, it was found that while organization cues enhance comprehensibility, disfluency may override the various strategies to yield a much less comprehensible discourse. On the other hand, students from different disciplines do not seem to exhibit differences in the use of discourse organizational cues. The findings suggest that pedagogical instruction should place equal emphasis on discourse strategies and fluency.

Keywords: college students, oral presentation, coherence, disfluency, comprehensibility, discourse organization markers

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the skills and comprehensibility of spoken discourse of Nonnative English speakers, with particular attention to college students' in-class oral presentations. A comparison was also made among students of different disciplines. The components of the oral presentations of the subjects are classified into three major categories to investigate their interaction with comprehensibility: (a) those which contribute to comprehensibility such as overall organization cues, logical development

In EFL classrooms where students are required to present a prepared topic to the whole class, the researcher has found that, in addition to pronunciation, lexical and grammatical accuracy, the use of discourse organization markers is a crucial factor that accounts for the comprehensibility and the overall delivery of the student's presentation. Even when reading prepared script, many students have failed to organize their ideas into a coherent text because of the lack of discourse organization strategies. As a

result, the presentation is at best a patchwork of isolated sentences and hard for the listeners to grasp the main idea and structure of the presentation. Studies have also shown that the use of discourse information structuring cues that contribute toe discourse coherence have been shown to have effects on L2 comprehension (Chaudron 1983, and Lennon 1984, Chaudron & Richards 1986, Tyler 1989 and 1992 and Williams 1992). With this observation and the findings that support the importance of discourse strategies, the current study attempts to conduct a study on the use of discourse strategies in oral presentation among EFL students in Taiwan so that the their problems with discourse organization in oral presentation be revealed and pedagogical instructions be proposed to improve the comprehensibility of EFL students' delivery.

The subjects of this study are non-native English learners with their speaking proficiency ranging from high-beginning to low-advanced levels. Their oral presentations are video-recorded and transcribed into intonation units. Oral presentations refer to in-class monologic oral reports assigned to students on a given academic topic. Little interaction with the audience is involved.

The model for analyzing the subjects' academic discourse is based on the components proposed by Smith et al. (1992) in their study of ITA lectures with some modifications. The components include a) overall organization cues such as those involving introduction or summary, b) markers of logical development such as cause-effect relationship, c) markers that establish relevance to current or previous context, d) micro-markers such as definition, illustration, repetition, and e) interactive signals such as questions to check audience understanding.

In addition to the above components, disturbing factors such disfluency markers and mean length of utterance (MLU) are also coded and counted for a comparison with the above components in their correlation with comprehensibility.

The results show that beginners use fewer organizational and discourse strategies than more advanced learners. Their discourse is characterized by a greater number of disfluency markers such as inappropriate pauses, hesitation markers and fragmental utterances. Their mean length of utterance is much lower than that of more advanced students.

For intermediate learners (NNS), it was found that NNSs are similar to those of native speakers (NS) in terms of the frequency and type of discourse organizational cues. However, NNSs reveal a significantly higher portion of disfluency markers and shorter intonation units. In the rating of comprehensibility, peer raters responded that while discourse organizational cues may contribute to comprehensibility, disturbing factors such as pauses, repairs, false starts and fragments override these discourse strategies to yield a much less comprehensible presentation.

The low-advanced group have similar strategies and frequencies to those of native speakers, and their repairs, pauses and fragments are much fewer, which yields a highly comprehensible presentation. This is in congruity with the ACTFL guidelines given in Byrnes and Canale (1987).

Students of different disciplines do not reveal significant differences in the organization of discourse and the use of different strategies. However, since only those at the high-beginning level are compared in terms of their use of discourse strategies, the result is inconclusive and awaits further research.

The findings are not in accord with the assumption that discourse strategies contribute to comprehensibility. Rather, the results show that although discourse strategies might increase comprehensibility, disfluency markers override the effect of discourse strategies. On the other hand, it confirms in part the guidelines for speaking proficiency (Bynes & Canale 1987).

Due to the limit in scope, time and variety of subjects, this study did not compare statistically the use of discourse strategies from subjects of different disciplines. Although the researcher has attempted to collect oral presentations of subjects majoring in natural science or art, those giving presentations are mainly at the high-beginning to low-intermediate levels, as compared to the English majors who are mostly over low-intermediate level. Besides, the number of subjects from natural science and art departments is too low for us to achieve any significant statistical results. It is suggested that future studies collect data from a greater number of subjects across different universities so that statistical results comparing different proficiency levels of different disciplines can be obtained.

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