

**FRANCISCO FERNÁNDEZ (Ed.)**

# **LOS ESTUDIOS INGLESES**

**EL RETO DEL TERCER MILENIO**



MISCELLANEOUS - Volume 2 (2000)

Studies in **E**nglish **L**anguage and **L**iterature

LENGUA INGLESA. UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA

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ISBN: 84-370-4217-8

Depósito legal: V. 5.233 - 1999

Artes Gráficas Soler, S. L. - La Olivereta, 28 - 46018 Valencia

# THE ACQUISITION OF WRITTEN COMPETENCE THROUGH LEXICAL CHAINS: Comparison between native and non-native speakers\*

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## 1. Introduction

There is a considerable body of knowledge within 2nd language research resulting from many studies on language use by non-native speakers (NNS), for instance, in the field of learning and communication strategies. However, all of them restrict their results to describing the linguistic acquisition of that L2. Here is where pragmatics can contribute to this field as a theoretical framework which permits us to study how NNS manage in the context of a target language from a discursive competence viewpoint (Kasper, 1992; Kasper, G. & Schmidt, R., 1996). The research trend called *interlanguage pragmatics* analyses NNS pragmatic competence, bearing in mind the transfer of pragmatic competence in their L1 and comparing it to native speakers' (NS) L1.

The effort devoted to analysing the rhetorical written competence of NNS and, as a result, the state of their interlanguage has been quite scanty so far. The reason for this is that the construction of this interlanguage has had very often a double difficulty for speakers and also for researchers, since it is difficult to separate the different levels of acquisition. In other words, it is difficult to set limits between the acquisition process of grammatical, rhetorical or conversational competence, among others.

An essential element to analyse written interlanguage from a pragmatic point of view is textual coherence, understood as the result of lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hasan, 1984; Hoey, 1991).

This is where our research comes in. We attempt to study the pragmatic usage of lexis through cohesive chains or lexical patterns which lead to textual coherence in English written discourse (Hasan, 1984; Hoey, 1991). We have tried to find out whether lexical competence is directly related to the grammatical competence of speakers, or, on the contrary, whether it

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\* Este trabajo se inscribe en el marco del proyecto La competencia pragmática contrastiva e intercultural: análisis e implicaciones pedagógicas. subvencionado por la Dirección General de Enseñanza Superior e Investigación Científica del Ministerio de Educación y Cultura (Ref.PB96-0773).

follows a different path, such as transfer from L1.

## **2. Interlanguage pragmatic competence**

L1 transfer is an important element influencing pragmatic competence in L2 and one that has been widely studied within L2 research (Ellis, 1985). Most of these studies claim that in any L2 learning process, learners receive input that they contrast with their L1 knowledge and, in this way, build their acquisition process (Corder, 1971; Nemser, 1971). It is thus that the concept of interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) was born. From a pragmatics viewpoint, this phenomenon can be described as the linguistic competence, somewhere between L1 and L2, that NNS develop, and in which multiple L1 transfer processes can be found, therefore influencing diverse linguistic levels.

These phenomena have been studied within a general theory of second language acquisition, through much empirical work on contrastive analysis, error analysis or learning and communication strategies.

Only recently, pragmatics and its potential for analysing discursive problems has begun to be used as a framework to back up these studies. This new trend has been called *interlanguage pragmatics* (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Kasper, 1992).

## **3. Pragmatic lexical usage in the written discourse of NNS.**

Pragmatic lexical usage in written discourse is one piece of evidence that shows the state of interlanguage in most NNS and, in this way, allows us to diagnose it, so as to design ways of improving it.

This pragmatic usage can show NNS' level of maturity in managing a concrete skill like writing and also assist the researcher in analysing its textual organization, represented by the treatment of *topic* and *sub-topic*, for non-fiction written texts. Textual organization is basically represented by cohesion and coherence, since these two parameters give a text internal structure (Lewis, 1993).

Analysing cohesion and coherence in our students' written production has proved to be one of the best ways to examine whether their grammatical competence parallels the discourse patterns that will permit them to acquire the pragmatic skills and, therefore, communicative dominion of L2 in this written skill.



#### 4. Cohesion and coherence through lexical patterns: Hoey's model (1991).

For Beaugrande & Dressler, cohesion and coherence are two levels that any text must have in order to be communicative. These authors state that cohesion "concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text are mutually connected within a sequence" (1981: 3). Coherence, on the other hand, refers to "ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant" (1981: 4).

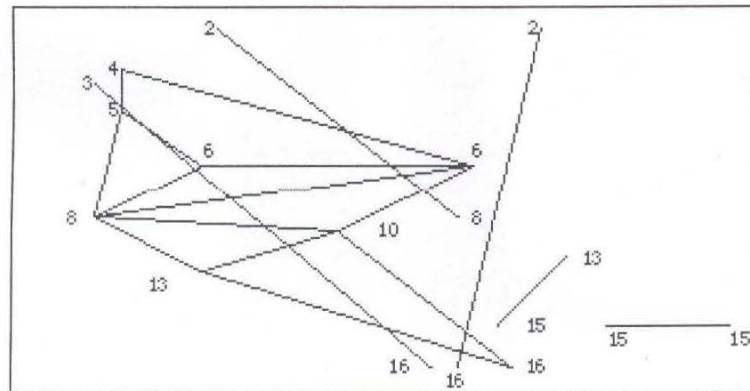
Hoey (1991) reviews some previous studies for his proposal of cohesion analysis based on lexical chains: he takes the concepts of *cohesive ties* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) which he calls *cohesive links*. Unlike the former these does not include collocations or conjunctions. He also takes into consideration Hasan's (1984) identity chains, made of cohesive links which all sharing the same referent. This is the methodological framework that we have applied in our research.

One way to make a text cohere is through lexical repetition. The types of lexical repetition that Hoey proposes are: simple repetition, complex repetition, simple paraphrase and complex paraphrase. *Simple repetition* takes place when a lexical term that has already appeared in the text is repeated, making reference to the same object, real or imaginary. The only possible variation is singular/plural. Although polisemy constitutes a difficulty due to the many nuances that most common terms may have, absolute identity of meaning is not necessary as long as the referent is the same for two terms. *Complex repetition* occurs when two lexical terms share a common morpheme but are not formally identical (*drug* and *drugging*) or when they are formally identical but have different grammatical functions (*human* -adjective- and *humans* -noun-). *Simple paraphrase* is the third category, since it can also serve the function of repetition. For Hoey, simple paraphrase takes place "whenever a lexical item may substitute for another in context without loss or gain in specificity and with no discernible change in meaning" (1991: 62). It corresponds to what Hasan (1984) calls synonymy, although Hoey adds context as an instrument to make the relationship possible or impossible. Examples of simple paraphrase are: *sedating*, *drugging* and *tranquillized*, in a medical context. Here, the "connection triangle" can be applied when two terms are within a paraphrase situation and a third one links a paraphrase with the second, thus creating a connection net of three terms.

*Complex Paraphrase* is the last category, “a can of lexical worms” in Hoey’s words. It is thus necessary to interpret it in a very rigorous way, only accepting a restricted number of criteria. It takes place when two lexical terms can be defined in a way that one includes the other, even though they do not share a lexical morpheme. The first criterion makes reference to the antonymy: *happy-unhappy*, *cold-hot*. The second happens when a lexical term is a complex repetition of another (*writer-writings*) and also a simple paraphrase or antonym of a third term (*writer-author*). Then, a complex paraphrase between *writings* y *author* takes place.

The third situation for a complex paraphrase happens when the previously described situation is taken into consideration but the third term is absent in the text. However, this elliptic third term must be of such a kind that in case it was substituted by the paraphrased term, no difference would be possible in our interpretation. For instance, *instruction* and *teacher* may appear in a text while *teaching*, although absent, can act as a third element of connection). So, *instruction* and *teacher* can be treated as complex paraphrase in this context.

When repetitions have already been identified in a text, the following step is to establish a network formed by lexical ties. These ties connect sentences in a series of links leading to textual coherence. One link is not defined in terms of number of connections, although it will never take place with less than three. Hoey calls these tied sentences *nets* and says that it is possible to find some type of correlation between these networks and the genre the texts belong to (1991: 92).



Topological Diagram 1: Network of lexical repetitions.

As for the relationship between repetition and writing neither Brodine (1983) nor Skuja (1984) have found relevant differences in usage frequency of cohesive elements in the written discourse of native and non-native students. Skuja, however, observed that native students placed lexical repetitions at longer distances, covering a whole text, whereas non-native students only covered a paragraph. This last observation implies that, if the sentences that make reference to the topic can be identified thanks to their repetitions in a text, then students should be instructed to refer to their first topic sentences through lexical repetitions throughout the whole text so providing it with coherence.

Diagram 1 on the previous page is an example of the topological diagrams proposed by Hoey (1991) in order to explain how lexical chains are formed within a text. It can be observed how sentences 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13 and 16 form a network of lexical cohesion. This network provides a specific organization to the text, giving coherence as a result.

### 5. Research

We have carried out a comparative analysis of a series of written compositions produced by Spanish and English students. Lexical chains have been analysed in both groups using the methodological framework proposed by Hoey (1991). Then, coherence networks have been traced, following topological diagrams with the purpose of identifying the textual organization standard reached by both groups and the possible differences between natives and non-natives.

It is important to point out that non-native students have been subdivided into two groups, of higher and lower English language competence. The reason for this is to discover whether a lower level of language competence runs parallel to a lower standard of textual organization through lexical chains, and viceversa. Therefore, the research groups consist of one English group and two non-native groups.

Our hypothesis is that NNs will have less rhetorical competence than Ns, as occurs with regard to their language competence in English. In other words, Ns should have better developed textual coherence networks, since they are immersed in the field of English. In the same way, NNs with a lower standard of English should develop poorer lexical coherence networks than NNs with a higher standard of English.

All this leads to a research question deriving from what we have talked about in the introduction: does greater language or pragmatic competence



in an L2 run parallel to a high rhetorical competence in that L2? Does grammatical competence have to be acquired at the same pace as rhetorical competence for Ns and NNs? Our research attempts to shed some light on this matter.

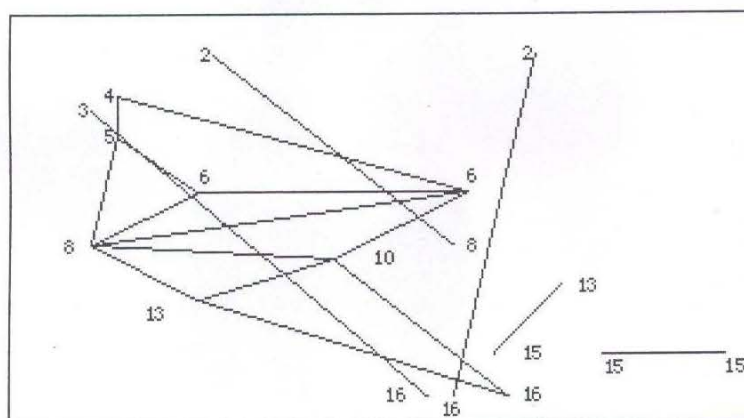
## 6. Results

The results from three different levels do not show dramatic differences among the groups. In the first place, examples of good internal coherence have been found in each group of subjects, native and non-native. This implies that they have developed lexical chains of, at least, three links, with long enough distances among them so as to include, throughout the whole text, topics and sub-topics, without juxtapositions.

In the second place, we have found in the three groups (natives, high competence non-natives and low competence non-natives) a number of texts which only partially achieved coherence, since they either show juxtapositions or a lack of topics and sub-topics.

Finally, we have observed some texts with deficient textual coherence in the three groups, since, although there are lexical chains and cohesive links, coherence is not achieved due to abundant juxtapositions and omissions in covering topics and sub-topics. These results are now described by means of Hoey's topological diagrams:

Example of *partial coherence*. High competence non-native group.



Topological diagram 2: Speaker n° 6.

Commentary:

One only link reaches the category of a network: sentences 4, 5, 6, 6, 8,

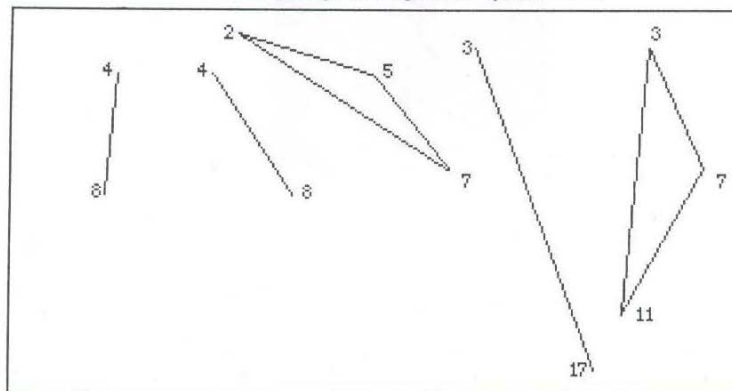


10, 13 and 16 repeat the term *course* (simple repetition). Cohesive devices are used at a certain distance, showing good topic distribution, from the beginning to the end of the text. However, sentences 4, 5, 6 and 6 are too close and juxtaposed, thus the network is not completely acceptable. There is only one valid link —insufficient for a good cohesive structure, since topic and sub-topics are not covered.

	Speaker N° 6
1.	Dear Sir, I am a student of English Philology who is interested in spending next summer at an American university and in attending to the summer <i>course</i> , and I am writing to you to know further information about this <i>course</i> :
5.	I would like to know when the <i>course</i> will start and what the <i>course</i> will teach me exactly if I attend. About the level in the language, to take part in this <i>course</i> , do I have to speak English fluently or can I choose the most appropriate level according to my knowledge?
10.	Once I have attended to the <i>course</i> , will there be any exam? If so, will I get any diploma to prove that I have passed it? And how important this diploma will be for my CV?
15.	While attending to the <i>course</i> , will I have to live with an American family or in a Hall of Residence? In the second case, which are the conditions and rules to live there? In case I am going to an American university this summer to attend to this <i>course</i> , where and when do I have to go to get registered and to confirm -or to cancel- my attending in advance?
20.	I am looking forward to hearing from you. Yours faithfully,

Example of *adequate* coherence. Group of non-native speakers with lower competence.

Topological diagram 3: Speaker n° 1.



*Commentary:*

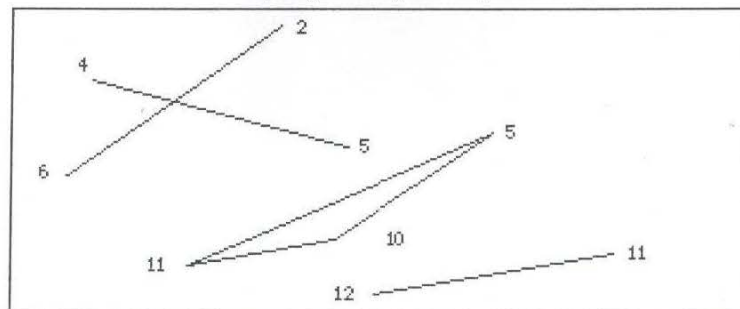
Two links have the category of a network: sentences 2, 5 and 7 repeat the terms *student*, *studies*, *study* (complex repetition) and sentences 3, 7 and 11 repeat the term *course* (simple repetition).

Cohesive devices used in the first network show a good repetition and organization pattern, since they involve complex repetition that covers a sub-topic. The second network presents another good repetition and organization pattern, covering the whole text. There are two valid links in the text, thus, sufficient for an adequate textual coherence structure.

	Speaker N°1
1.	I am a 21 year old Spanish student on the third year of <i>English Philology</i> at the Valencia University. I got the information concerning your <i>University</i> through a booklet I read in the American House, here in Valencia. I found the <i>University</i> very convenient for me in order to complete and improve my level of <i>English</i> .
5.	Nevertheless, I would be quite grateful if you were so kind to provide me some data I would like to know. I am interested on the duration, contents and tuition of the course I could make, and the way in which registration
10.	is made, as also the fact that if any confirmation of assistance is needed. I would also like to know whether you need my previous qualification and if I require a language standard. I would like you to tell me the way in which I would be examined and if I would get any diploma if I passed the course. Finally it would be fantastic if I could have the possibility to live in a Hall of Residence.
15.	
20.	As I have never been in an English speaking country I think it would be a very interesting experience to spend a whole course at your <i>University</i> , because I think fluency on <i>English</i> is essential for my future aspirations. A student of <i>English</i> can arrive to a point in which s/he is more or less proficient regarding grammar but if you do not acquire fluency you cannot go much further.
	Hoping an answer on your part I thank you for your attention. Yours sincerely,,

Example of *insufficient* coherence pattern. Group of native speakers.

*Topological diagram 4: Speaker n° 4.*



*Commentary:*

Only one link holds the category of a network: sentences 5, 10 and 11 repeat the term *course* (simple repetition). Cohesive instruments show an insufficient repetition structure, with short distances and juxtapositions, that do not cover the whole text. This one only link pattern cannot constitute an adequate textual coherence.

	Speaker No.4
1.	Dear Sir/Madam, I am studying for a degree in Spanish and Media at Trinity and All Saints University College, Leeds, England and I am interested in spending next summer at your university. I would be grateful if you could send me some more information about the summer <i>courses</i> in Spanish.
5.	Please could you tell me how long the courses are, what sort of work they contain and how much they cost? I would also like to know whether any previous qualifications are necessary and if there is an exam at the end of the <i>course</i> . Is there a diploma to be obtained from the <i>course</i> ? Would it be possible to stay in the Halls of Residence and if so, could I have more details about the Halls? It would also be useful to me to have the information about registration and whether I need to confirm my place in advance.
10.	
15.	

**7. Conclusion**

Although more empirical data may be necessary to confirm our findings, we can say, tentatively, from our examples that native speakers show a slightly better mastery of lexical and cohesive patterns than non-natives. This leads to better textual coherence, which may be due to their L1 competence. On the contrary, non-native subjects of both high and low L2 competence show poorer cohesive links, possibly due to English being their L2. Our hypothesis seems to be correct, when we observe subjects as members of compact groups. There is a certain equivalence between language competence and rhetorical or pragmatic competence, although the differences are not too great.

However, when observing subjects individually in the three groups, we can say that being a Ns does not presuppose having a better command of rhetorical patterns than a NNs. One can find native subjects with inferior pragmatic competence to that of some non-natives, as we can deduce from the topological diagrams. Some native subjects use juxtaposed terms in



their cohesive patterns, with too short a distance between equal terms, or a tendency not to cover topic and sub-topics throughout the text, thus producing poor textual organization.

These results lead us to believe that language competence, either in L1 or L2 does not guarantee sound pragmatic usage of cohesive links or textual coherence.

As a final conclusion we can affirm that good language competence is an important factor in achieving a mastery of rhetorical or pragmatic patterns.

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