

Summary/Commentary from TESOL 2014 Attendees PORTLAND, OREGON

In this section, AEC faculty report on selected sessions from TESOL 2014. All summaries and commentaries are written by AEC faculty.



Melissa Stamer-Peterson and Katie McClintic



Summary/Commentary

Melissa Stamer-Peterson

Session Title: Teaching Cohesion Strategies: Going Beyond Logical Connectors

Presenters: Wendy Wang, Kay Stremmer, Erin Luyendyk and Susan Brokaw, Eastern Michigan University

Content area: Intensive English Programs

Session type: Practice-Oriented

Summary

Teaching cohesion is often either overlooked or assumed to be understood in the ESL context, but students often do not fundamentally understand what cohesion is or how to apply cohesion to their writing. When looking at cohesion in English, students need to understand grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis), lexico-grammatical cohesion (using conjunctions), and lexical cohesion (repetition, synonym, superordinate, general terms, collocation). Grammatical cohesion is often addressed in a grammar textbook, lexical cohesion in a reading textbook, and conjunctions are typically addressed in academic writing, according to the presenters. ESL textbooks predominately represent logical connectors as the chosen method of cohesion. However, in order to better help students with cohesion strategies, ESL teachers must know what logical connectors are, but most textbooks fail to comprehensively address them – or, if they do, they are more likely to give a short list of connectors. Textbooks infrequently offer exercises to allow students to adequately practice these skills. In a review of academic ESL writing textbooks, the presenters found that pronouns, demonstratives, synonyms, logical connectors and repetition of key words are the most common forms of cohesion. Few textbooks include the use of coordination and/or subordination to connect ideas, the use of consistent subjects or putting new information at the end of a sentence for emphasis (references: Dollahite & Haun, 2012; Raimes, 2008; Swales & Feak, 2012).

When learning cohesive strategies explicitly, students typically go through three stages of development: writing without cohesion (no connections between ideas), using emphatic logical connectors (using sentence-initial transition words like thus, therefore, then, furthermore), writing with cohesion strategies (employing lexical cohesion strategies and phrasal connectors). In order to encourage students to employ the third stage, teachers are encouraged to present cohesion strategies using authentic, rather than ESL, texts. This provides students with repeated exposure to key pedagogical issues in second language academic writing, such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and avoiding plagiarism. Teachers should also engage students in cohesion analysis, provide students with opportunities to practice using cohesion strategies one at a time, and, finally, encourage students to use these strategies in their own writing. Teachers should, in summary, never assume that students inherently understand cohesion, but, instead, should teach these strategies explicitly.

Commentary

The information and materials from this presentation can be applied to our classes in the AEC. When students first begin writing at level 4 high-intermediate, they tend to utilize basic lexico-grammatical cohesion strategies – using basic transitions at the beginning of each sentence. Most students have a subset of transitions they are comfortable using. However, it is important that they have a larger pool from which to draw. After they have shown mastery of a variety of sentence-first transitions, we can then move to more complicated, less innate cohesion strategies: employing lexical cohesion (repetition, synonyms, superordinate terms, general terms, collocations with phrasal connectors) and grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis). It is first important for students to observe these strategies used in natural, academic English in various fields of study which they will encounter. Once they can recognize that academics regularly employ lexical and grammatical cohesion strategies, they will be ready to begin incorporating these into their own writing. Teachers can then begin to introduce ways to link sentences within (or between once within has been mastered) paragraphs using the new strategies. Activities should be designed explicitly, naming the strategies, and giving

clear examples. An essay or short paper should be assigned once students have understood how to implement these strategies skillfully into their own writing. Cohesion should be scored separately from grammar and content on the next essay so students realize that this is an important element of writing and Western thought.

Session Title: Curriculum Repair: If It's Broken, Fix It!

Presenters: Gloria Munson and Vicki Sorensen, University of Texas at Arlington

Content area: Materials Development

Session type: Practice-Oriented

Summary

This presentation focused on curriculum repair and the road to accreditation. At UT-Arlington, the presenters began reviewing and repairing the curriculum in 2012 as an on-going process. This IEP has a three-semester academic year with 16 weeks in the Fall and Spring and 10 weeks in the Summer. The presenters teach three courses: Reading/Writing, Grammar, and Speaking/Listening.

While completing the CEA accreditation process, they noticed that they use the same curriculum for the 10-week program that they do for the 16-week program. Their mission was to document every part of the curriculum and repair areas of weakness – and this was an area of weakness. The short semester did not seem to impact the students negatively, but according to CEA, there was a problem in the disparity in semester length. Their goal was to fix the problem with semester length by teaching appropriate content to fit the needs of the students and the time constraint. Their second directive was to align all parts of the curriculum with student learning outcomes. They planned as follows: semester one was for reviewing the length of semesters to improve balance; semester two was for matching course objectives with student learning outcomes; semester three was for aligning these objectives, semester four was for reviewing final exams, and semester five was for reviewing materials and textbooks.

In order to start this process, they needed buy-in from the staff and faculty, so, in developing this new curriculum, they conducted faculty-wide brainstorm sessions and surveys. They found that in the 10-week program, there was less time to absorb and practice the material, less time in areas of instruction, inability of some instructors to complete the syllabus, increased stress, and omission of some positive repetitiveness. After discussing possible alternatives with faculty, they came up with the idea to have summer modules, which added class-time during the week. These were different from regular classes in that there was no homework and all activities were completed.

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