Learning with Text: Toward a Multi-Dimensional Perspective on Text-Based Communication

Laura K. Allen, Lacey C. Zachary
Mississippi State University
{Laura.Allen, lcz15}@msstate.edu

Danielle S. McNamara
Arizona State University
dsmcnama@asu.edu

A commonly held belief among educators, researchers, and students is that high-quality texts are easier to read than low-quality texts, as they contain more engaging narrative and story-like elements. Interestingly, these assumptions have typically failed to be supported by the writing literature. Research suggests that higher quality writing is typically associated with decreased levels of text narrativity and readability. Although narrative elements may sometimes be associated with high-quality writing, the majority of research suggests that higher quality writing is associated with decreased levels of text narrativity, and measures of readability in general.

One potential explanation for this conflicting evidence lies in the situational influence of text elements on writing quality. In other words, it is possible that the frequency of specific linguistic or rhetorical text elements alone is not consistently indicative of essay quality. Rather, these effects may be largely driven by individual differences in students' ability to leverage the benefits of these elements in appropriate contexts. Indeed, recent research points to the contextual variability of linguistic features across different audiences, prompts, and assignments (Allen, Snow, & McNamara, 2016; Crossley, Roscoe, & McNamara, 2014). Crossley and colleagues (2014) for example, found that there were multiple profiles of high-quality writing, which demonstrated different linguistic properties. This evidence points toward the need to examine writing in more situated contexts.

This presentation will further explore the hypothesis that writing proficiency is associated with an individual's flexible use of text properties, rather than simply the consistent use of a particular set of properties. Across three experiments, this study relies on a combination of natural language processing, dynamic methodologies, and behavioral methodologies to examine the role of linguistic flexibility during the writing process. Overall, this study provides important insights into the role of flexibility in writing skill and develop a strong foundation on which to conduct future research and educational interventions.

REFERENCES

Allen, L. K., Snow, E. L., & McNamara, D. S. (2016). The narrative waltz: The role of flexibility in writing proficiency. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *108*(7), 911.

Crossley, S. A., Roscoe, R., & McNamara, D. S. (2014). What is successful writing? An investigation into the multiple ways writers can write successful essays. *Written Communication*, *31*(2), 184–214.