Multiple profiles of high quality second language writing

The purpose of the study is to investigate whether multiple profiles of writing would emerge from highly-rated second language learners' written texts.

Findings

1

"The quality of a written text may depend less on the use of individual linguistic features than on how these features are used in tandem."

2

Multiple profiles of high quality essays exist for even texts written in the same register, topic, and context.

3

High levels of certain features may bring about low levels of some other features. For example, more frequent use of nouns may accompany a lower frequency of pronouns.

Reasons accounting for multiple profiles:

Good writers may be aware of their limitations and capitalize on their strengths instead. For example, some writers may not be proficient users of subordination clauses, but their longer text and various vocabulary use compensate for their lack of syntactic skills.

Table 2
Profiles of the five clusters in Data Set 1 in terms of high (+) and low (−) use of features

Features	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5
1. Text length	+	+			+
2. Mean word length					
3. Diversity of vocabulary	+	+	+		+
4. Conjuncts					
5. Hedges					
6. Amplifiers	+				
7. Emphatics					
8. Demonstratives			+		
9. Downtoners			−		
10. Nouns/nominalizations		+	+	−	
11. First/second person pronouns	+		−		−
12. Impersonal pronoun "it"					
13. Adverbials			−	+	
14. Prepositions	+	+		−	
15. Definite articles					
16. Present tense verbs	−		+		
17. Stative verb "be"			+		+
18. Passives					+
19. Adverbial subordination	+		+		
20. Relative clauses					
21. Complementation			−		

4

In the current study, data set 1 consists of 160 university ESL placement compositions written by 40 students. The task is a 35 minute timed examination where learners were asked to discuss the effects of culture shock.

5

Data set 2 consists of 178 essays written by different language learners. The writing task was a 30 minute timed essay in response to either a prompt about preferred sources of news or whether teachers should make learning enjoyable and fun.

Table 4
Profiles of the three clusters in Data Set 2 in terms of high and low use of features

Features	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
1. Text length	+	+	+
2. Mean word length		+	
3. Diversity of vocabulary		+	+
4. Conjuncts	+		
5. Hedges			
6. Amplifiers			
7. Emphatics			+
8. Demonstratives			+
9. Downtoners			
10. Nouns/nominalizations		+	−
11. First/second person pronouns			
12. Impersonal pronoun "it"		−	
13. Adverbials			
14. Prepositions		+	−
15. Definite articles			
16. Present tense verbs		−	
17. Stative verb "be"			+
18. Passives			
19. Adverbial subordination		−	
20. Relative clauses			
21. Complementation		−	+

Teaching Suggestions

• Readers should not be looking for the presence of a particular set of features when assessing the quality of written texts.

• Text length consistently plays an important role in various profiles of high quality writing.

• The rating of a given writing task may be determined by a certain set of linguistic features.

• Topic may have an impact on the profiles of high quality writing.

• Be cautious that L1 background may play a role in determining linguistic profiles of student writing.

Developed from article:
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