Discourse-based Grammar and the Teaching of Academic Reading and Writing in EFL Contexts[*]

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When one is reading or writing, various forms of bottom-up knowledge—e.g., grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and the mechanics of written language—interact with the top-down processes at the level of discourse. One of the reasons English language learners encounter a lot of difficulty when they are engaged in academic reading and writing is that they have been taught grammar only at the sentence level and not at the discourse level. In order to illustrate how discourse-based grammar instruction can facilitate the acquisition of academic reading and writing, this paper discusses various ways in which the following four topics can be dealt with at the discourse level: cohesion, the tense and aspect system, comma usage, and existential *there*. Obviously, discourse-based grammar instruction should be integrated with the teaching of the other top-down and bottom-up skills necessary for academic reading and writing. EFL teachers, however, need to know more about discourse grammar to effectively make their learners aware of it and to offer them learning activities that will contribute to better reading comprehension and written production.

Key words: discourse-based grammar, academic reading and writing, cohesion, tense and aspect, punctuation, existential *there*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic reading and writing are complex processes involving many skills (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Both reading and writing involve two types of top-down knowledge referred to as schemata, i.e., pre-existing knowledge structures in memory: (a) content schemata, which store prior information, details, and facts on topics, and (b) formal schemata, which store knowledge of discourse organization or rhetorical structure with respect to genres or communicative purposes. These schemata are utilized in academic reading and writing. Other top-down knowledge comes from (a) pragmatics, i.e., choices language users make between linguistic forms and the messages they convey in various situations, and (b) metacognition, i.e., the planning, regulation, and monitoring of language comprehension or production. Also relevant to top-down processing are strategies specific to academic reading and writing. These processes all become more complex when one is carrying them out in a foreign language.

The focus of this paper, however, is on the bottom-up knowledge required for effective academic reading and writing in EFL contexts. This bottom-up knowledge involves grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and the mechanics of written language, including punctuation, capitalization, headings, and indentation. These forms of bottom-up knowledge interact with the top-down processes at the level of discourse when one is reading or writing. The specific focus of this paper is the role of discourse-based grammar instruction and how it can facilitate the acquisition of academic reading and writing, given the work that has been done on the grammar of discourse. In order to illustrate the importance of teaching grammar at the discourse level, we will discuss the following four topics in detail: (a) cohesion, (b) the tense and aspect system, (c) comma usage, and (d) existential *there*. We have relied in part on some previous publications (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 2002; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000) for some of the examples in this paper. We thus ask for the reader's indulgence if any of our examples are familiar.

2. COHESION

Serious work on the grammar of English discourse began with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work on cohesion in English. They described four types of grammatical cohesion, for which we will provide authentic examples drawn from various genres of expository written English. (Halliday and Hasan used primarily examples from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, a piece of fiction.)

(1) Reference (e.g., pronouns, definite article, and demonstratives): When **my son** spoke perfect English in New Jersey, **customers** did not understand <u>him</u>, but when <u>he</u> used a fake Japanese accent, <u>they</u> understood <u>him</u> . . . (Yokoyama, 2010 -2011, p. 215)

In the above example (boldface and underlining added), the pronouns *him/he* and *they* refer back to *my son* and *customers*, respectively. In example (2) below, the asterisk indicates where the ellipsis occurs; the noun *shoppers* has not been repeated here and can be reconstructed from the discourse. Ellipsis is far more frequent in speech than in writing. The types of ellipsis that one finds in academic writing are rather constrained and are relatively easy to describe and exemplify.

(2) Ellipsis (omission of an element to avoid repetition): Shoppers stood in a . . . line that flanked the main path of the shopping center; the earliest * arrived at 5 a.m. (*Los Angeles Times*, B1, February 15, 2013)

In example (3), the verb *do* (underlining added) functions as a substitute for *know what is "right" and what is "wrong" in their native language* and thus helps the writer avoid a significant amount of repetition. Substitution, like ellipsis, is much more frequent in speech than in writing. In fact, this example has an orate quality to it.

(3) Substitution (use of forms like *one/ones, do(it/so), so/not,* and *the same* to avoid repetition): So do native speakers of American English actually know what is "right" and what is "wrong" in their native language? And if they <u>do</u>, why is there such variance? (Yokoyama, 2010-2011, p. 220)

In example (4), the connector *also* (underlining added) indicates that the second proposition adds to what has been stated in the first proposition. Halliday and Hasan (1976) set up four large semantic classes of conjunction terms: additive, e.g., *also*; adversative, e.g., *however*; causal, e.g., *therefore*; and temporal/sequential, e.g., *first of all*.

(4) Conjunction (conjunctions and other clausal connectors that make explicit the logical relationships holding between propositions or between discourse segments): As applied linguists, we have been socialized into a deep appreciation for the diversity of languages and cultures in the world community. We have <u>also</u> been taught to be constantly learning and developing tools to help those around us. (Anya et al., 2010-2011, p. 160)

Of the four broad categories of grammatical cohesion described above—reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction—our teaching experience indicates that reference and conjunction are the most important ones for academic reading and writing and deserve explicit instruction, whereas ellipsis and substitution can be dealt with on an as-needed basis. We shall now demonstrate some ways in which reference and conjunction can be problematic for EFL learners.

2.1. Learner Problems with Reference

As Halliday and Hasan (1976) noted, reference markers in English discourse can refer to complex phrases, complete propositions, and even blocks of text, not just to nouns or simple noun phrases. This is where explicit instruction is needed since many languages do not have such conventions concerning reference forms. Two examples follow.

(5) Election realignments "occur because a new generation comes in with sufficient unity and number to tip the balance between two otherwise closely competing points of view. And that's what we think is underway." (*Los Angeles Times,* A21, February 15, 2013)

(6) The ITA exam is considered a high-stakes exam. While the procedure [the various steps have been described earlier] directly impacts some stakeholders and indirectly others, it is important to be aware and considerate of all the consequences at every stage of this process to make it fair, effective, and non-discriminatory. (Londe, 2010-2011, p. 256)

In example (5) above, the demonstrative *that* (underlining added) refers back to virtually everything in the preceding discourse that describes what an "election realignment" is, and the author then proposes that such a realignment is occurring. In example (6), the demonstrative *this* combines with the general academic noun *process* (underlining added to both words) to refer back to the entire step-by-step process involved in carrying out an international teaching assistant exam. These are the types of textual reference used in academic writing that need the most attention so that ESL/EFL learners become comfortable with comprehending their scope when they read and with using them when they write for academic purposes—this is especially true for those students who do not have these broad types of reference in their first language.

2.2. Learner Problems with Conjunction

As discussed by Celce-Murcia (2002), some of the errors in the use of connectors in the writing of non-native graduate students at UCLA strongly suggest that they could benefit from exposure to and analysis of well-selected authentic written discourse containing commonly occurring connectors. We believe that this would be helpful for their second-language reading comprehension and writing development. They need to be made aware of the fact that even though some connectors intuitively seem to belong to the same general category—i.e., to one of the four categories outlined by Halliday and Hasan (1976) (namely: additive, adversative, causal, and sequential)—such forms often cannot substitute for each other. Two example errors from Japanese L1 speakers follow (as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2002, p. 154; underlining added).

(7) Lightbown and Spada (1990) showed that learners who received error corrections performed better on some corrected sentences than those that did not. White (1991) . . . also showed the positive effect of corrective feedback in developing second language proficiency in classroom interaction. <u>On the contrary</u>, other studies examined the effect of corrective feedback in an experimental environment and found that the effect . . . was much more limited.

(8) For example, a teacher might provide feedback for a student's error in an utterance elicited by the teacher in a question-answer sequence. <u>On the contrary</u>, if a student asks a question with an error in the utterance, but whose approximate meaning is understood by the teacher, the teacher will answer instead of correcting the student's question . . .

Clearly, in both of these cases, a native speaker would use a connector like *in contrast* rather than *on the contrary*. Williams (1996) uses logical formulas to show us why we cannot substitute these two connectors for each other and provides authentic examples, (9) and (10) below, from academic discourse to illustrate his analysis.

(9) X (a) <u>*in/by contrast*</u> Y (b): . . . primary labor market jobs are characterized by good wages, upgrading opportunities, on-the-job training, and fringe benefits. <u>In contrast</u>, secondary labor markets are characterized by jobs with low wages, little or no on-the-job training, few opportunities for upgrading and few fringe benefits. (Anderson, 1979, p. 42)

Here we have two parallel but contrasting topics, X and Y, that have parallel but

contrasting comments, (a) and (b), respectively. In such cases, a connector like *in contrast* is most appropriate. Below we see an example of *on the contrary* used appropriately; one cannot substitute *in contrast* here.

(10) X (negative proposition); <u>*on the contrary*</u>, Y (contradiction of X): In this article I offer a different view, based on new insights into how cultural change comes about. According to this view, the spread of the Indo-European languages did not require conquest. <u>On the contrary</u>, it was likely to have been a peaceful diffusion linked to the spread of agriculture from its origins in Anatolia and the Near East . . . (Renfrew, 1989, p. 106)

The practice in some EFL writing textbooks to list similar logical connectors together can be highly misleading. Authentic text-based discourse should be used, along with formulas like those of Williams (1996), to teach the use of each logical connector that is commonly used in academic reading and writing.

3. THE TENSE AND ASPECT SYSTEM

We now move from Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal work on cohesion, and extensions thereof, to research on the English tense and aspect system that several of our graduate students, our colleagues, and we have carried out over many years. We will focus on patterns that were observed mostly in written discourse and leave aside the many patterns we discovered in spoken discourse.

3.1. Tense Use in Generalizations and Specific Examples

Our first example is the only one where sentence-level meanings and functions appear to transfer to the discourse level. Brinton (1994) made us aware of an introductory psychology textbook, *Psychology in Action* (Huffman, Vernoy, & Vernoy, 1994), in which paragraphs with specific examples always were expressed in the simple past tense, whereas adjacent paragraphs making generalizations based on the examples were always in the simple present tense. Here is one of Brinton's examples taken from the textbook.

(11) In 1848, Phineas Gage suffered a bizarre accident when an explosion happened at his work place. As a result of the explosion, an iron rod entered his skull and pierced his frontal lobe. Phineas recovered physically from this accident, but his personality changed forever.

From the case study of Phineas Gage, it appears that the frontal lobe controls much of our individual personality and defines our ability to make decisions. We now know that the frontal lobe helps us to plan and change actions. (Brinton, 1994, p. 9)

Although in most cases the specific example preceded the generalization (as is the case in the example above), the opposite order was also possible; however, the tense usage remained consistent. The specific example was in the past tense and the generalization was in the present tense. Here is an example of the less frequent pattern.

(12) The difference between an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and milder forms of compulsion is that OCD behaviors are much more extreme, appear irrational to almost everyone, and interfere considerably with everyday life. Individuals with OCD sometimes wash their hands hundreds of times a day or spend hours performing senseless rituals of organizing and cleaning. Billionaire Howard Hughes provides an example of obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Due to his unreasonable fear of germs, Hughes made people who worked with him wear white gloves, sometimes several pairs, when handling documents he would later touch. When newspapers were brought to him, they had to be in stacks of three so he could slide the middle one out by grasping it with Kleenex. To escape contamination by dust, he ordered that masking tape be put around the doors and windows of his cars and houses. (Huffman, Vernoy, & Vernoy, 1994, p. 522)

Second language learners aware of these tense patterns in adjacent paragraphs or episodes would have an advantage in their reading of the academic discourse in this textbook. This knowledge, too, should facilitate their writing on the exams or assignments they do for such a course. It would also be interesting to know how widespread this use of tenses is in textbooks used in the social sciences. It is likely that this psychology textbook is not the only instance of this practice.

3.2. Written Narratives of Significant Events

Our second example involves written narrative reports of significant events where the past perfect tense has a function completely different from its typical two sentence-level uses.

(13) I had already done the dishes when John arrived.

(14) If Ann <u>had studied</u> harder, she would have passed.

In these sentence-level examples, the first one deals with a sequence of events, and the past perfect (in contrast to the simple past tense) marks the earlier of two events in the past, i.e., "the dishes were done before John arrived." The second example is a counterfactual conditional in which both clauses are to be interpreted negatively, i.e., "Ann didn't study hard enough, and she didn't pass the course." The past perfect and the "*would have* + past participle" construction mark the counterfactuality. The two example texts below (as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 173; underlining added), on the other hand, involve rhetorical use of the past perfect at the discourse level, in contrast to its use at the sentence level.

(15) "The Convocation": The students sat in the bleachers of Pauley Pavilion watching the faculty enter in their caps and gowns. Dignitaries continued to arrive while the band played a festive melody for the onlookers. To the cheers of the crowd, President Clinton came in and took his assigned seat on the podium . . . UCLA's 75th anniversary <u>had begun</u>.

(16) "The Case of Koko": In the 1980's, researchers at Stanford University were trying to teach American Sign Language to Koko, a female gorilla. Koko was well cared for and was surrounded by interesting objects. Her caretakers continually exposed her to signs for the foods and toys in her environment. Koko particularly loved eating bananas and playing with her kitten. One day she was hungry but couldn't find any bananas. She went to the researcher and made a good approximation of the sign for "banana." Koko was rewarded with a banana and the research team knew that Koko <u>had made</u> the connection between a sign and the object it represented.

In both of these examples, the past perfect is in the final sentence, and it occurs with a punctual verb phrase, i.e., an action that occurs instantly. The use of the past perfect in such episodes adds a dramatic flair that would be missing if the simple past tense had been used. The writer is asserting, "Pay attention; this is important. It's why I'm recounting this event." The following example contains an instance of using the past perfect with a verb denoting the later, rather than the earlier, of two events in the past, but it also involves using the past perfect to achieve dramatic effect (boldface and underlining added).

(17) Elizabeth is acknowledged as a charismatic performer and a dogged survivor, in

an age when government was ramshackle and limited and when monarchs in neighbouring countries faced internal problems that jeopardised their thrones. Such was the case with Elizabeth's rival, Mary, Queen of Scots, whom she imprisoned **in 1568** and eventually <u>had executed</u> **in 1587**. (Retrieved December 4, 2013 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_I_of_England)

Although the specific past-time adverbials *in 1568* and *in 1587* clearly show that the event of imprisoning occurred before the event of executing, the past perfect is used with the later event *had executed*, a usage which can only be explained by the rhetorical use of the past perfect at the discourse level.

3.3. Historical Present

Something we have known for a long time is that past events can be narrated in the present tense for dramatic effect in order to create the impression that the event is taking place as the reader experiences the text. We call this stylistic trick "the historical present" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 166). Commonly occurring in oral narrative, the historical present can also be found in academic lectures, as in the following excerpt from a lecture in a university Astrophysics course (boldface and underlining added).

(18) How many people have seen an eclipse of the sun? Pretty spectacular thing, huh? Uh . . . but you know, you have to travel to get there. It doesn't come to you. So here's what happened. **In 1917**, Einstein <u>publishes</u> his theory of general relativity. And then **in 1919**, there'<u>s gonna be</u> an eclipse in Brazil, I think it was. Uh . . . and it <u>seems</u> like a good idea that you should actually go and test this theory, which <u>has made</u> a very specific prediction about what ought to be going on with these stars. So, Eddington, we've heard of him before. He's the guy who trashed his student Chandrasekhar some years later. But at the time, he was young, up-and-coming British scientist, <u>mounts</u> an expedition to Brazil to test this theory. And it <u>works</u>! <u>Goes</u> down there, he <u>takes</u> these pictures, it <u>does</u> just what Einstein said. And this is the event that makes Einstein into a great international figure. (Excerpt from lecture 13 of Charles Bailyn's *Astrophysics: Frontiers and Controversies*, posted on iTunes U under Yale University in October 2009)

In trying to create a vivid image for the students in class, the lecturer uses the historical present to relate the story of how a British scientist was able to prove

Einstein's theory of general relativity by observing an eclipse of the sun in 1919.[1] What is particularly interesting about this excerpt is that the historical present occurs with specific past-time adverbials, i.e., *In 1917* and *in 1919*.

The historical present also occurs in written discourse, although not as commonly as in oral narrative. In the following example (underlining added), part of an editorial that criticizes the Bush administration for reneging on its promise and urges the Senate to rectify the situation, the writer uses the historical present when recounting Bush's visit to Africa in order to create a vivid image of the event for the reader, thereby making the criticism more dramatic.

(19) Over the past year or so, President Bush and many senators have visited Africa to witness firsthand the ravages of AIDS. They <u>hold</u> sick babies, <u>pat</u> the hands of dying women, <u>visit</u> community groups caring for orphans and clinics bereft of medicine. They <u>make</u> heartfelt statements that lives can and must be saved. Then they <u>come</u> home and <u>stiff</u> the global AIDS budget. Mr. Bush made a worldwide splash by promising a $15 billion, five-year program. He endorsed an authorization of $3 billion for 2004, which was passed by both the House and Senate. But the White House and the Congressional leadership then conspired to cut the actual money appropriated back to $2.1 billion. The Senate can take a small step toward righting things today, as it considers an amendment by Senator Mike DeWine of Ohio. (*New York Times*, "The Senate's Last Chance on AIDS," October 28, 2003)

In addition, if events like the UCLA convocation in (15) or the case of Koko in (16) were retold in the historical present, we would expect to get the following tense shift:

Past tense report with past perfect climax (regular pattern)

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Present tense report with present perfect climax (historical present pattern)

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[1] Klein (2009, pp. 48-51) discusses eight different non-canonical usages of tense, including the historical present, in which the tense forms are "used in a way which clearly goes against their 'normal' meaning." Instead of historical present, however, he uses the term "narrative present" and distinguishes it from examples such as (18), which he calls "*praesens tabulare*," i.e. simply presenting a series of historical facts. Although this seems a valid distinction, we believe that teachers should avoid making such a technical distinction when presenting these kinds of examples to ESL/EFL students.

Indeed, the writer of example (20) below, an article about ice caves in Antarctica in the *National Geographic* magazine (underlining added), has a dramatic style and uses not only the historical present to engage the reader but also the present perfect verb form to conclude the episode, thereby making the entire passage both vivid and dramatic.

> (20) We're wearing harnesses and hard hats and descending on ropes and ladders into an ice cave known as Warren Cave, which has been hollowed out by steam from the volcano. We unclip the harnesses about 40 feet below the surface of the mountain. The floor is moist . . . soil and rocks; the walls are ice. We are here to retrieve a temperature probe—one of 23 the group left on the mountain a year ago in the hopes of determining how much the soil temperatures change and thus whether these environments are relatively stable. As we move away from the entrance, the light fades, and we have to use flashlights . . . . Then Moore disappears down a corridor and, after a few moments, gives a shout. He's <u>found</u> the probe. (*National Geographic*, July, 2012, p. 115)

We are not the only ones who have analyzed the use of tense in written discourse. Swales (1990), among others, has given us many useful observations on how tenses are deployed in scientific journal articles written in English. However, much additional work remains to be done regarding the use of tense and aspect in written academic discourse, i.e., in contexts that go well beyond the sentence level.

4. COMMA USAGE

Another area of grammar often taught at the sentence level, or even completely ignored in EFL contexts, is punctuation. When Sung and Yoo (2013) analyzed a learner corpus containing compositions written by 99 seventh grade students in Korea, all of whom had been learning English at least since third grade, they found that of the 1,536 tokens of necessary punctuation marks they identified, fewer than 10% of them were used correctly. Aside from the period, the comma was by far the most frequently needed punctuation mark in the corpus, and only 20% of the 465 necessary commas were used correctly, about 99% of the errors being instances of omission.

In a study that examined the use of the comma in a learner corpus containing 787 compositions written by university students in Korea, Jung and Yoo (2011) also found that omission was the most common type of error, the other three types of error—i.e., incorrect addition, wrong punctuation mark, and wrong position—accounting for fewer than half of all the comma errors that they identified. One of the reasons these Korean

learners of English commit so many omission errors with the English comma is that its usage seems to be much more complicated than its Korean counterpart. Hacker (2009, pp. 270-284), for example, lists ten different rules for the comma, and only a cursory examination of the first five rules will give the reader a good idea of how complicated English comma usage is:

1. Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses, e.g., *Nearly everyone has heard of love at first sight, but I fell in love at first dance*.
2. Use a comma after an introductory clause or phrase, e.g., *When Irwin was ready to iron, his cat tripped on the cord.*
3. Use a comma between all items in a series, e.g., *Bubbles of air, leaves, ferns, bits of wood, and insects are often found trapped in amber*.
4. Use a comma between coordinate adjectives not joined with *and*, e.g., *Roberto is a <u>warm, gentle, affectionate</u> father*. Do not use a comma between cumulative adjectives, e.g., *<u>Three large gray</u> shapes moved slowly toward us.*
5. Use commas to set off nonrestrictive elements, e.g., *For camp the children need sturdy shoes, <u>which are expensive</u>*. Do not use commas to set off restrictive elements, e.g., *For camp the children need clothes <u>that are washable</u>.*

As can be seen in the examples following each rule above, all the rules are exemplified with single sentences. Although Hacker (2009) does a fairly good job of illustrating each rule with sentence-level examples, discourse-level analysis is also necessary to fully exemplify the first and the fifth rules above. As Yoon and Yoo (2011) discovered, the simple rule of using a comma "before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses" is sensitive to a discourse-level factor—namely, the length of the sentences before and after the coordinating conjunction. Although "never start a sentence with *and* or *but*" is another common version of the same rule, which Trimble (1975, p. 85) calls a myth about writing, it is not uncommon for a sentence to start with either conjunction, as in the following two examples from the Brown Corpus (underlining added).

(21) Many of the toll-road bonds still are selling at prices that offer the prospect of an annual yield of 4 per cent, or very close to that. <u>And</u> this is true in the case of some turnpikes on which revenues have risen close to, or beyond, the point at which the roads start to pay all operating costs plus annual interest on the bonds.

(22) They also instituted a ration system under which all employers in the Congo were required to furnish their employees with clothing and adequate food. <u>But</u> instead

of delivering the ration—either in actual commodities or in cash—at intervals of perhaps two weeks or a month, the Belgians felt obliged to dole it out more often.

Having been exposed to numerous authentic examples in which *and* or *but* is used at the beginning of a sentence, students then produce sentences like the following (Yoon & Yoo, 2011, p. 226).

(23) I lived in my hometown for 15 years. Many fashionable buildings are built every moment. <u>And</u> the city has been bigger and bigger. <u>But</u> traffic problems are same. There is no change. <u>So</u> my family moved another city last year.

What they do not realize, however, is that the reason some sentences start with *and* or *but* is to break up sentences that would otherwise be too long. When Yoon and Yoo (2011, p. 236) measured the average length of the independent clauses before and after sentence-initial *and* or *but*, the figure was about 21 words for the Brown Corpus but was only about 11 words for their learner corpus of essays written by 399 college freshman students in Korea. Thus, if *and* and *but* had been used sentence medially to join two independent clauses, the resulting sentences would have become rather too long in the Brown Corpus examples but not in the learner corpus examples that Yoon and Yoo analyzed.

The other rule of comma usage for which discourse-level analysis proves valuable is the one regarding nonrestrictive elements. Retrieved from a discussion board on the Internet (City-of-Kik: Media Entertainment Discussion, 2002, December 31), the following movie review contains a comma use with a nonrestrictive relative clause that seems ungrammatical at the sentence level.

(24) Opening in limited release, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, the Charlie Kaufman-penned movie about game-show creator and host Chuck Barris, is generating the same sort of rumpus among critics that Barris's *The Gong Show* touched off a quarter-century ago. On the one hand, Kenneth Turan in the *Los Angeles Times* notes derisively: "The autobiography of a man who created some of the most irritating programs in television has . . . been made into a most irritating film." On the other hand, Lou Lumenick in *the New York Post* calls it a head-clearing, mind-blowing blast from the past—one of the year's best. In between, there's all kinds of mixed feelings about <u>the movie, in which</u> George Clooney marks his directorial debut and which stars Sam Rockwell in the Barris role. While including in his complaints that Clooney pops off ideas the way Mr. Barris bopped on the Gong Show stage, Elvis Mitchell in the *New York Times* nevertheless concludes: "*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* is a good piece of work more often

than not."

If the sentence containing *the movie, in which* were examined in isolation, it would be considered ungrammatical as the relative clause following *the movie* must restrict the reference of the noun *movie* in order to justify the use of the definite article before it. The reason this relative clause is considered nonrestrictive, thus requiring the use of the comma, becomes clear only when we take the whole discourse into consideration: The reference of *the movie*, i.e., *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, has already been identified at the outset of the discourse.

5. EXISTENTIAL *THERE*

Our final topic in this paper is the discourse use of existential *there*, or non-referential *there*, in academic writing. The usual EFL materials present learners with sentences that locate some object in space, as in (25) and (26) below.

(25) <u>There is</u> a book on the table.

(26) <u>There are</u> two pencils on my desk.

This is not how existential *there* is used in academic writing—nor in most types of written discourse for that matter. The most common use of this construction in academic writing is to present a list of related topics or to state a summarizing conclusion (Ahlers, 1991; Huckin & Pesante, 1988). Example (27) comes from a biology textbook (underlying added).

(27) <u>There are</u> three major modes of natural selection. [The three modes are then listed and defined]:
　　　1. Stabilizing selection favors . . .
　　　2. Directional selection shifts . . .
　　　3. Disruptive selection favors . . . (Starr & Taggart, 1989, p. 547)

In the interest of brevity, we have not provided the complete definitions of the three kinds of natural selection; they are quite lengthy. For example (28), we reconstruct what most of us have read in many journal articles about educational experiments; such articles often end a discussion sub-section with a statement much like this one:

(28) <u>There were</u> no significant differences found between the control group and the experimental group.

In other words, the way the existential *there* construction is used in academic written discourse has little to do with the conventional sentence-level presentations of this form in EFL textbooks. What the textbooks do is fine as a sentence-level introduction for beginners; however, instruction at the intermediate and advanced levels needs to deal with the discourse functions of this construction.

The teaching of this construction becomes even more complicated if we consider the case of Japanese EFL learners, who have no equivalent of existential *there* in their native language. In an interesting study, Sasaki (1990) asked Japanese postsecondary EFL students to do a free writing task describing in complete sentences facts they had received in list form about Taro's school. Most of them could not even produce a grammatical sentence and made such mistakes as the ones shown in (29).

(29) a. *Taro's school is/are 27 students.
　　 b. *Taro's school has students in 27.
　　 c. *Students of Taro's school is 27.

Those students who could produce a grammatical sentence wrote sentences that were awkward at best, as in (30), and only a few very advanced learners were able to produce the sentence that most native speakers of English would have produced, as in (31).

(30) a. Taro's school has 27 students.
　　 b. 27 students are in Taro's school.

(31) There are 27 students in Taro's school.

With Sasaki's study in mind, and realizing that the Japanese language has no structural equivalent for the English existential *there* construction, we looked at some discourse data that we had at our disposal: Ph.D. dissertation proposals in Applied Linguistics. We selected three officially approved proposals, described below, and examined each one carefully for use of existential *there*:

Proposal 1　　by a native speaker of English
　　　　　　　　44 pages of double-spaced 14 pt. font
　　　　　　　　15 uses of existential *there* (1 in a quote)

Proposal 2   L1 Japanese with advanced L2 English
             39 pages of doubled-spaced 12 pt. font
             33 uses of existential *there* (4 in quotes)

Proposal 3   L1 Japanese, intermediate L2 English
             30 pages of doubled-spaced 12 pt. font
             Zero uses of existential *there*

Proposals 1 and 2 used existential *there* very similarly, and two-thirds of their tokens were in the review of the literature section (10 and 22 tokens respectively). Proposal 2 had a longer literature review section than proposal 1, which explains the greater number of tokens of existential *there*. Proposal 3 appears to be an extreme example of what Schachter (1974) first observed and referred to as "avoidance," i.e., not using a construction because of unfamiliarity or discomfort with it. There were, in fact, several places in the literature review of this proposal where we felt that a native English speaker or a skilled and advanced L2 user would have produced an existential *there* construction. Here is one such example, which is followed by our suggested reformulation.

(32) Excerpt from proposal 3: Lastly, Chaudron discusses four problems with feedback to justify the usefulness of the set of types and features in Chaudron (1977). The four problems (Chaudron, 1988: 145, 149) are as follows . . . [the 4 problems are listed]

(33) Suggested reformulation: Lastly, <u>there are</u> four problems concerning feedback that justify the usefulness of the set of types and features first proposed in Chaudron (1977) and discussed again in Chaudron (1988: 145, 149) . . . [the 4 problems are listed]

Our reformulation not only uses existential *there* to introduce the list of problems that the author wishes to mention, but also allows us to focus on feedback, the topic of the proposal, rather than on Chaudron, one of several applied linguists who had published research on feedback.

This case study analysis demonstrates that the tendencies Sasaki (1990) identified in the writing of her Japanese postsecondary learners of English will persist in their L2 writing at an even more advanced level if they are not taught when and why to use structures like existential *there* at the discourse level as well as at the sentence level. Clearly, the writer of proposal 3 has not acquired any notion of when or why to use

existential *there* in academic written English.

6. CONCLUSION

Second language reading and writing are complex processes that demand many top-down and bottom-up skills on the part of L2 learners. One of the many reasons why English language learners encounter so much difficulty is that they have not been taught the kinds of information about discourse-level grammar that we have been discussing in this paper.

We need to reanalyze virtually all of English grammar at the discourse level in order to be able to teach our students the grammar that will serve them when they read and write English for academic purposes. Sentence-level knowledge of structures and ability to use these sentence-level structures are but elementary prerequisites to learning how to interpret these structures when they read and how to produce these structures when they write. The more advanced skills involved in interpreting and using structures accurately at the discourse level constitute critical knowledge for the acquisition of academic literacy.

Obviously, EFL teachers need to know more about discourse grammar to effectively make their learners aware of it and to offer them learning activities that will contribute to better reading comprehension and written production. Such grammar instruction, however, needs to be integrated with the teaching of the other top-down and bottom-up skills which are part of effective academic reading and writing.

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Applicable levels: Secondary, tertiary

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