

Coherence and “Content Schema”

Content schema is background information that is essential for understanding a text (Martin, 1995; Carrell, 1982; Enkvist, 1987). Carrell states that if the reader does not have the schema required for understanding a text, “all the cohesive ties in the world won’t help that text cohere for that reader” (p.485). That is, in order to be able to understand the writer’s line of development of an idea, the reader must be able to understand every step (every piece of information) in that development to its completion. If the development of an idea is “interrupted” by a missing piece of essential information, the reader may have difficulty moving on to the next step in the development. Carrell gives this example and further explanation:

“The picnic was ruined. No one remembered to bring a corkscrew.” This mini-text coheres, I maintain, not because there is a necessary linguistic lexical cohesive tie between picnic and corkscrew but rather because we can access familiar schema for interpreting it in which picnics and corkscrews go together. For anyone who cannot access such a schema the text will fail to cohere. (p. 484)

If the reader does not have the schema of a picnic with wine in his mind, or if the reader does not know what a corkscrew is used for, he will have difficulty seeing the connection between a picnic and a corkscrew and will, therefore, not be able to understand why the picnic was ruined. In the following paragraph (English 1, second paragraph), coherence is weakened because lack of background schema for “Love-Ticket” prevents the reader (American college students were the assigned audience) from understanding why “Love-Ticket” makes it “easy to approach a play.”¹¹

Sample 1.

Arts and culture in Seoul is getting better thanks to effort of government. First of all . . . Second, there are getting easy to have a chance that is had experience of arts and culture in Seoul. For instance, government put a system of “Love-Ticket” in operation to popularize culture of play. In result it’s easy to approach a play. . . .

More experienced student writers also often fail to appreciate the fact that different readers bring different schema to what they read. The following paragraph (English 4, paragraph 3) is the first supporting paragraph in an expository essay of a total of four paragraphs. The essay was written after the writer and her classmates read an article that included the concept of “descriptive pacing.” The audience for the essay was American college students; our student writers expected that the Americans would know what “descriptive pacing” (in sentence 3) is, and the writer did not define the term in sentences 4 or 5, with the likely result that the American reader would probably get stuck somewhere after sentence 3.

Sample 2.

1) A lot of Korean salespeople have a tendency to slight using “hypnotic pacing” but they are still successful. 2) According to DRS, the best salespeople first try to establish a mood of trust and rapport by means of “hypnotic pacing”: statements and gestures that play back a customer’s observation, experience or behavior. 3) Based on my sales pitch observation, the Korean sales agents tend to neglect using “descriptive pacing” when they first meet their customers. 4) For instance, when the Korean salespeople first meet their customers, they usually jump immediately into their sales pitches with , “What brought you here?” or “Are you looking for something special?” 5) To be more specific . . .

Providing background information has to do with audience. According to Kim (2001), it is difficult for Korean student writers of English at all levels of training to consistently focus on the audience: “less skilled writers” have “little sensitivity to the audience of their writing” (p. 66). Neglecting the audience probably has something to do with egocentricity, which in turn has to do with cognitive maturity, and the difficulty of paying consistent attention to audience is reduced as the student progresses from one level of writing training to the next. Odell (1983), writing about native English speaking student writers, says that the range of audiences to whom a writer is able to direct a piece of writing expands as the writer grows from immature egocentricity to mature consciousness of the world around himself. As a students learns more about other ways of thinking, they recognize and consider the existence of more audiences, and therefore is better able to address a greater variety of audiences.

The writer of Sample 7 probably had it in her subconscious that her teacher was the actual reader, and did not consider the assigned audience. This raises the question of whether the writer is being truly egocentric in not supplying the necessary background information, or simply forgetting the assigned audience and writing for the real audience, her teacher, who knew what descriptive pacing was. The latter seems to be the case here, but in the “Love-Ticket” paragraph (Sample 6), the reader had no way of knowing whether the real reader knew about love tickets.

References

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