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A Corpus-Based Study of the Use of Shell Nouns as Cohesive Devices in Korean EFL Writing

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The current study examines the use of shell nouns in argumentative essays written by Korean EFL college writers. Shell nouns are a group of abstract nouns that require lexical realization in order to establish full meaning of the nouns. *Fact*, *problem* and *reason* are the representative items of shell nouns. Using a corpus-based method, this study analyzes shell nouns in EFL written production in terms of cohesive devices. The result indicates that both the total frequency of shell nouns and the use of shell nouns with demonstratives move closer to that of the native group, as L2 proficiency level goes higher. In addition, the qualitative analysis discloses that the L2 writers use shell nouns as exophoric references and deploy shell nouns without elaboration. It is also shown that, regardless of L2 levels, the EFL writers underuse demonstrative and shell noun phrases in sentence initial position, which is critical to establish cohesion for argumentative essays. It indicates that Korean EFL learners also have difficulties in using the cohesive property fitted into argumentative writing. These findings provide pedagogical implications that can be applied to second language writing instruction.

[Corpus linguistics/EFL writing/Argumentative essays/Cohesion/Cohesive devices/ Shell nouns]

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the important goals of second language writing instruction is to create cohesion and coherence within text. Cohesion, in particular, is related to the various

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aspects of linguistic features such as conjunctions, adverbial phrases, and lexis (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). As a result, several studies in second language writing have been done on various linguistic features that affect cohesion of writing (Jafarpur, 1991; Khalil, 1989; Liu & Braine, 2005).

Cohesion is also affected by the use of a specific noun group: shell nouns (Francis, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hinkel, 2002; Schmid, 2000). Shell nouns are a group of abstract nouns that require lexical realization in order to establish full meaning of the nouns (Biber, et al., 1999; Flowerdew, 2003; Francis, 1994; Ivanic, 1991; Quirk et al., 1985; Schmid, 2000; Sinclair, 1990; Winter, 1977). *Fact, problem* and *reason* are the representative items of shell nouns. Shell nouns relate to other segments of text, namely shell contents, and they are realized in distinctive lexico-grammatical patterns (Biber, et al., 1999; Quirk et al., 1985; Schmid, 2000; Sinclair, 1990). Especially when shell nouns are used anaphorically with demonstratives, they play a role as a cohesive device by effectively connecting segments of text. For this reason, many style manuals recommend writers using demonstrative and noun phrase to create more cohesive writing, rather than using demonstrative pronouns (Gray, 2010).

However, despite the cohesive effects of shell nouns, there has been little attention on the shell nouns in the context of ESL/EFL writing. Exploring how shell nouns are used in writing will provide the information needed to understand the textual quality of L2 writing. Specifically, the analysis on the use of shell nouns will help to see how second language writers create cohesion with the lexical quality of a specific group of nouns and what difficulties they face. Hence, it is becoming difficult to ignore the fact that additional studies on shell nouns should be carried out.

The present study aims to examine the use of shell nouns in Korean EFL learners' writing, using corpus-based method. This study focuses on the relationship between the second language proficiency and the use of shell nouns as cohesive devices.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. Cohesion in ESL/EFL Writing

Cohesion in ESL/EFL context is significant in that it can examine learners' ability to comprehend the characteristics of written language and to produce readable text. Researchers in this area have worked to identify textual features which distinguish native and nonnative texts in creating cohesion. As cohesion is correlated to various linguistic aspects such as references, conjunctions, and lexis, the studies of cohesion in ESL/EFL setting have also tried to find the distinctive textual features related to the use of cohesive

devices. While some researchers study the constellation of cohesive devices in second language writing (Johnson, 1992; Khalil, 1989; Liu & Braine, 2005; Zhang, 2000), other researchers focus on individual cohesive device (Field & Yip, 1992; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Crossley & McNamara, 2009). These studies provide the insight into systematic difference between the L1's and the L2's uses of cohesive devices.

The major concern of the research on cohesive devices is whether the number of the devices is related to the quality of writing. However, the findings of these studies have been inconsistent. Johnson (1992) analyzed cohesion in expository essays in Malay ESL and in native speakers of English. The result showed that the degree of cohesion did not indicate between good and weak writing. Also, according to Zhang (2000), there is no statistically significant difference between the number of cohesive ties and the quality of writing. On the contrary, Khalil's (1989) study of Arab EFL writing showed that EFL writers underused lexical and cohesive devices than native writers. Liu and Braine's (2005) research based on 50 argumentative essays of Chinese undergraduates showed that the number of cohesive devices is closely correlated to the quality of writing. Nevertheless, although the findings of these studies are contradictory, the studies agree that lexical cohesion is more closely related to the quality of writing. The studies of Zhang (2000) and Khalil (1989) commonly point out that the less proficient writers tend to overuse lexical reiteration, and the result of Liu and Braine (2005) revealed that there is strong statistical significant correlation between the lexical cohesion and the quality of writing.

The studies on the individual cohesive devices also provide relevant textual feature related to the creation of cohesion. Field and Yip's (1992) study of internal conjunctive cohesion discloses that L2 writers overuse and misuse the internal conjunctive. They explicate that this phenomenon is caused by the insufficient organizing skill which makes L2 writers overly rely on the use of the conjunctives. On the other hand, the study of connector usage of Granger and Tyson (1996) did not show ESL writers' overuse or underuse of the connector usage, but they emphasize that there exists variance of overuse, underuse, and misuse of certain individual connectors, and that this is mainly caused by L1 transfer. Finally, Crossley and McNamara (2009) analyzed the cohesive features of lexical use (lexical depth of knowledge, variation, and sophistication) in L1 and L2 writing, and their findings indicate that unlike L1 group, L2 writers have difficulties in manipulating the cohesive features of lexical items.

In spite of the flourishing studies on cohesion in ESL/EFL writing, shell nouns has been neglected in the research of cohesion. Even though the research on shell nouns has consistently proved that they affect cohesion of text, shell nouns have been discussed only within the context of English language. Both the studies of cohesive devices and the studies of the individual cohesive devices in ESL/EFL point out the significance of

lexical cohesion. However, these analyses on lexical cohesion mostly focus on certain cohesive or lexical features that can be applied to the general use of nouns such as reiteration and lexical variation. Hence, the detailed analysis of shell nouns as cohesive devices will help us identify textual features related to the use of shell nouns, and it will present information that can be applied to writing instruction and assessment criteria.

2. Shell Nouns as Cohesive Devices

1) Shell Nouns as Text References

The major property of shell nouns is that this group of nouns affects the cohesion within text (Francis, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hinkel, 2002). Especially when shell nouns are used with referring items such as demonstratives (e.g. *this accusation is also completely unjustified*), the cohesive effects increase. With a demonstrative determiner, the shell noun phrase plays a role as a text reference which refers to a stretch of discourse. A text reference is a reference that identifies the relevant portion of a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In other words, a text reference is a linguistic device that refers to an extended stretch of discourse realized by pronouns or demonstratives, and is closely related to the cohesion within text. Cohesion is achieved by connecting the components in a text in specific sequences (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). Thus, by deploying text references, writers can connect complex clauses with other segments of text.

What is remarkable when text reference is used with shell nouns is that the noun phrase gives more cues and information on what the text reference is referring to (Petch-Tyson, 2000; Schmid, 2000). For example:

> (1) They only look at facts that show how much college students drink, but they do not give the flip side of the issue in that there is a percentage that does not drink. *This approach* illustrates to us how audience has an effect on how an article is written. (LOCNESS[1])
> (2) Whilst many feel that it is every person's right to have a child if they wish, many others feel that it is unnatural and therefore wrong to conceive a child in *this manner* and that there are other alternatives available, for example, adoption. (LOCNESS)

As you can see from example (1), basically *This approach* is referring to the preceding clause. Also, the shell noun *approach* indicates that the potential information that the

[1] The code in brackets indicates the corpus that is quoted. LOCNESS stands for the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays.

shell noun refers to is that something can be regarded as an approach. The shell noun *approach* is well matched to the word *look*, so with the referring item *this* the shell noun phrase successfully signs to the reference item. Although it is true that the distance between the reference and referring item is relatively short, the shell noun contributes to making the reference clearer and more precise. In addition, example (2) also demonstrates how shell nouns play a role in clarifying what the reference is indicating. The shell noun *manner*, in this case, goes well with *feel.* By presenting an additional cue, not only can the readers catch the reference text more easily, but the writer can also make the writing more cohesively tied.

Moreover, a shell noun itself reflects that it is related to a stretch of discourse. This property of shell nouns intensifies the identity of text references. According to Francis (1994), shell nouns perform like "pro-forms (p. 86)." Like a "pro-verb," shell nouns perform like a text reference item such as pronouns and demonstratives. Francis also points out that unlike other pro-forms a shell noun is not a repetition or a 'synonym' of any preceding element. Instead, it is presented as being equivalent to the clause or the clauses that it replaces, while naming them for the first time (Francis, 1994). That is, when a shell noun is used with a demonstrative determiner, the shell noun itself is a sign that the reference is referring to a longer stretch of text.

Consequently, when a text reference is used with a shell noun phrase, it contributes to strengthening the cohesion within the writing. The use of shell nouns with demonstrative determiners fortifies the effect of text reference. Moreover, the empirical research proved that the actual use of shell nouns as text references takes up high frequency in native texts, more than 40% of the total use of demonstrative determiners (Gray & Cortes, 2011). Thus, examining the shell noun use can be a great approach to analyzing cohesion within ESL/EFL writings.

2) Shell Nouns as Topic Linking and Shifting

Another textual function of shell nouns is that they function to link topics and shift to new ones (Mauranen, 1993; Petch-Tyson, 2000; Schmid, 2000). This function is closely related to the function of text reference, since it becomes effective when text references are placed in the theme position of a sentence. Like text references, the function of topic linking and shifting creates cohesion of text, and it also contributes to building firm and persuasive argumentation.

Deploying shell nouns in the theme position allows new information to be introduced within a given framework (Brown & Yule, 1983; Francis, 1994; Mauranen, 1993; Schmid 2000; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). This is because while shell noun phrases of

text references create a concept-forming and evaluating link, they also set up the starting-point of the new information. It is illustrated in examples (3):

> (3) Secondly, many people believe that the amount of the cost of each ticket which goes to various charities is far too little. At present this stands at 5%. People feel that this amount is not enough, especially as one of the main reasons for the introduction of a British national lottery was the issue of raising funds for home charities and needy causes. *This issue* is coupled with the profit margin which the lottery organisers, Camelot, obtain. (LOCNESS)

In the case of example (3), *This issue* is encapsulating the proposition that is composed of the three precedent sentences. While the noun phrase links the previous sentences, it also offers a certain status or perspective in regard to the proposition. The shell noun *issue* leads the readers to consider the proposition as an *issue*, linking the previous proposition to the current clause. Hence, by serving as a starting point for new information, the shell noun phrase marks a topic change. This contributes to preserving discourse topic continuity by relating the new paragraph to the previous one (Schmid, 2000). In other words, this function exerts influence both backwards and forwards by preserving discourse topic continuity and relating the new proposition to the previous one (Francis, 1994; Schmid, 2000). Consequently, it creates cohesion within the writing.

Another feature of the textual function of shell nouns as a topic linking and shifting device is that it helps to build a strong argument which is cohesively well interwoven. According to Mauranen (1993) and Petch-Tyson (2000), the use of demonstrative and shell nouns structure in sentence-initial position makes the argument stratified and hierarchical by constructing the earlier proposition into the current one. Charles (2003) also emphasizes that the shell nouns in a sentence initial position work toward convincing argument. According to Charles, the successful encapsulation of the antecedent gives an impression that the argument is clearly established, and that the clearly established argument is more convincing. Moreover, the choice of a shell noun facilitates to construct “an appropriate stance” (p. 324) which is an essential element in a forceful argument. That is, exploiting shell nouns as cohesive devices is critical for argumentative writing, as these cohesive devices affect the effects of argument by making the argument more stratified and convincing.

In sum, the topic linking and shifting function is of importance not only for cohesion within the writing, but also for firm argumentation. The nominalization of the previous proposition creates cohesion within a text by tying clauses or propositions tightly. Also, text references in the theme position used with shell nouns contribute to stratifying argument and constructing a proper stance. Thus, examining this textual function of shell

nouns in ESL/EFL context can be a breakthrough for scrutinizing cohesion within text especially for argumentative essays.

III. METHOD

1. Research Questions

In order to achieve the purpose of the study that is mentioned above, the following research questions are addressed:

> **RQ 1:** Does the frequency of shell nouns differ according to the proficiency levels?
> **RQ 2:** How does the use of shell nouns as text references differ according to the proficiency levels?
> **RQ 3:** How does the use of shell nouns as topic linking and shifting function differ according to the proficiency levels?

The three of research questions were examined basically in terms of frequency. Also, the qualitative analysis was conducted to reveal a linguistic phenomenon which was not observed in the quantitative analysis.

2. Data

1) Yonsei English Learner Corpus (YELC)

The data analyzed in the present study consists of Yonsei English Learner Corpus (YELC). In order to fully examine and understand the use of shell nouns by Korean EFL writers, the native corpus data was analyzed to see if there were any contrasting or distinctive features of language use in the writings of Korean EFL learners. As a reference corpus, the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) was chosen. The detailed descriptions of YELC and LOCNESS are as follows.

The data analyzed in the current study is Yonsei English Learner Corpus (YELC). The participants of the study consisted of 3,136 incoming freshman students at a university in Korea (Yonsei University) in 2011. When it comes to the procedure as to how the corpus was established, the participants of YELC were required to take the Yonsei English Placement Test (YEPT), composed of two sections: computer-based speaking and writing. The test directs the students to write a 300-word opinion essay on a given social

issue in 30 minutes. These social issues range, for example, from corporal punishment in school and public smoking to the use of cell phones while driving.

The student essays were assessed based on a holistic score divided into nine levels (Al, A1+, A2, B1, B1+, B2, B2+, C1 and C2) by current native English instructors at the University. The assessment criteria were based on the assessment grid for writing from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (see Appendix).

It should be noted that the writings of A1 and C2 group students were excluded from the target corpus. A1 students' writings were hard to be recognized as essay writings in English, and there were only two participants in C2. The total size of data that was analyzed is 762,628 words from 3,136 students.

TABLE 1

The Number of Students and Running Words

Level	Number of students	Number of running words
A1+	98	18,572
A2	560	128,015
B1	1,234	266,283
B1+	732	199,960
B2	388	111,828
B2+	83	25,191
C1	42	12,779
Total	3,136	762,628

2) Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS)

In order to fully examine the use of shell nouns in Korean EFL writings, a reference corpus was also adopted. The native corpus chosen for the present study is the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). It is a corpus of native English essays written by British and American university students. The native corpus was partially used for a valid comparison with the non-native corpus. The corpus chosen for the present study is British sub-corpus (BSC). The corpus is composed of argumentative essays written by British university students. The topics include transportation, the parliamentary system, fox hunting, boxing, the national lottery and a single Europe (60,209 words). Both native and non-native corpora were established under the similar condition; that both corpora were timed essays and did not allow external resources.

3. The List of Shell Nouns

The shell nouns analyzed in the current study were adopted from Hinkel's study (2004). Although the definition and the selection of shell nouns slightly differ according to researchers, the set of shell nouns chosen for the current study is based on the features and register of the corpora examined.

TABLE 2
The List of Shell Nouns

Shell nouns				
approach	class	feature	problem	system
aspect	difficulty	form	process	task
category	event	issue	purpose	tendency
challenge	experience	item	reason	topic
change	facet	manner	result	trend
characteristic	fact	method	stage	type
circumstance	factor	phase	subject	

4. Data Analysis

In the current study, the frequency and functional analysis were carried out, using a corpus-based method. The frequency analysis is claimed to be suitable in describing the developmental pattern of the linguistic phenomena of L2 learners (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Accordingly, this approach was selected in order to examine the developmental patterns of the use of shell nouns. In addition, a shell noun has its distinctive lexico-grammatical patterns, and these lexico-grammatical patterns have textual functions. Thus, it was examined how L2 learners perform the textual functions by using shell nouns, adopting "function-form analysis" (Ellis & Barkuizen, 2005, p. 112).

In order to conduct a frequency analysis, a custom written script (the adopted programming language is Perl) was chosen. Each research question was primarily examined quantitatively, and a qualitative analysis was also conducted to describe linguistic phenomena which cannot be observed through the quantitative analysis. When necessary, chi-square tests were carried out in order to investigate the statistical significance of the differences in frequency. Detailed data analysis methods and procedures are as follows.

First, the frequency of shell nouns across proficiency levels was studied. Although the custom written script was used to count the frequency of shell nouns automatically, some of the nouns in the list were counted manually. This is because some of the nouns (*change, form, experience, challenge, result, fact* in *in fact*, *result* in *as a result*) can also be used as a verb or adverb. These nouns were examined manually after filtering from the custom written script. Base on the frequency data, we examined whether the proficiency level affects the use of shell nouns. After scrutinizing the relation between proficiency and shell noun use, the non-native data was compared to the native data to see if second language learners under- or over- use the shell nouns.

Secondly, in order to examine the use of shell nouns as text references, the frequency of demonstrative determiners used with shell nouns was counted. The frequency of shell nouns with the referring items was classified based on the proficiency levels in order to examine whether there are proficiency effects or not. The comparison with the native corpus was done to get a better understanding of the feature of Korean EFL writers. Finally, a qualitative analysis was conducted. The written production was closely analyzed to detect distinctive patterns in certain levels and the possible factors that affect the frequency of the shell nouns with the referring items.

Lastly, the frequency of shell nouns used for topic linking and shifting function was calculated. In order to measure the frequency of the designated function, all instances of the shell nouns with the referring items (demonstrative determiners) especially located in the theme position was counted. The raw frequency of the shell nouns used for topic linking and shifting was calculated in proportion to the total frequency of shell nouns with the referring items. After obtaining the results, the data were analyzed to see whether there is statistical significance between the proficiency levels. Finally, the comparison with the native data was also carried out to investigate the contrasting feature of Korean EFL learners.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Overall Frequency of Shell Nouns

The overall frequency of shell nouns increased according to the proficiency levels. As levels went higher, learners used more shell nouns. The normalized (to 1,000,000 words) frequency of the occurrence of shell nouns ranged from 5523 to 6339. Table 3 presents the normalized frequency of shell nouns in all levels of Korean EFL learners and native writers.

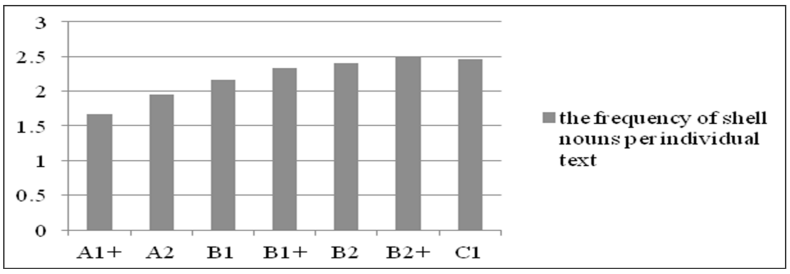
TABLE 3
Overall Frequency of Shell Nouns (normalized 1,000,000 words)

Level	A1+	A2	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1	LOCNESS
	5223	5445	5873	6241	6948	6868	6339	6280

From A1+ to B2 level, the overall frequency gradually increased, and from B2+ level a slight downturn occurred. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of the frequency became closer to that of the native speakers'. The chi-square test also confirmed the difference in frequency among the seven proficiency levels ($x^2 = 30.22, df = 6, p < 0.005$). Finally, the relatively higher levels achieved the native like use of shell nouns in terms of the frequency. The chi-square test confirmed that there is no statistical significance between C1 level and LOCNESS ($x^2 = 0.006, df = 1, p < 0.05$).

The individual use of shell nouns also presented a developmental pattern in terms of occurrence. In this vein, the mean frequency was calculated onto the Korean EFL writers who used shell nouns at least once. The result shows that the frequency of shell nouns per text also showed an increasing pattern. The chi-square test also proves this statistical significance ($x^2 = 116.27, df = 6, p < 0.005$). When it comes to the frequently used words, *reason, problem, system, method, issue,* and *fact* are used most frequently (in order). The reason why only Korean EFL data is presented is that the average length of text of the two corpora, YELC and LOCNESS is quite dissimilar. Since it is inappropriate to compare the two corpora which have difference in terms of text size, only Korean EFL data was considered. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the occurrence of shell nouns per individual text.

FIGURE 1
The Frequency of Shell Nouns Per Individual Text



In summary, the present study confirmed that the frequency of shell nouns is a level-related phenomenon, supported by both the aggregated mean frequency and individual text-based mean frequency. However, the comparison of mere frequency is insufficient

to examine the written production by the nonnative students and to explain the understanding of the function of shell nouns. The subsequent analysis on the functions of shell nouns will provide more information on the use of shell nouns and Korean EFL writing.

2. Shell Nouns as Text Reference

Unexpectedly, the result of shell nouns as text reference showed a reversed pattern from that of the overall frequency of shell nouns. The frequency became closer to that seen in the native group as proficiency improved, by decreasing the frequency with which shell nouns as text references. Ranging from 808 to 470 (normalized to 1,000,000), the frequency of shell nouns with demonstrative determiners gradually decreased except for B2+ level. The chi-square tests proved that the difference in the frequency at each level is statistically meaningful ($x^2 = 27.77$ df $= 6, p < 0.005$). Table 4 presents the total use of demonstrative determiners and shell noun structures.

TABLE 4
The Total Use of Demonstrative Determiners and Shell Noun Structures (normalized to 1,000,000)

Level	*that* + shell	*these* + shell	*this* + shell	*those* + shell	TOTAL
A1+	0	0	808	0	808
A2	117	94	492	16	719
B1	113	143	391	15	661
B1+	55	115	325	55	550
B2	27	107	358	9	501
B2+	40	238	318	40	635
C1	0	235	235	0	470
LOCNESS	0	177	417	13	606

According to Table 4, the frequency in C1 level (470 times) seems considerably lower than that of the native group (606 times). However, the chi-square test showed that the difference between C1 and LOCNESS was not statistically significant ($x^2 = 2.292, df = 1, p < 0.05$). Additionally, the chi-square test confirmed that the difference in the frequency in B2+ and LOCNESS was not statistically meaningful ($x^2 = 0.133, df = 1, p < 0.05$). In sum, the statistical analysis suggests that the frequency of the use of shell nouns as text reference becomes more like that of the native group as proficiency is improved.

It should be noted what factors affect the reversed patterns of the frequency. As seen table 4, the overuse of distal demonstrative determiner with shell nouns structure (*that* + shell noun) mainly caused the higher frequency of the lower levels. In other words, the Korean EFL learners achieved the native-like frequency by eliminating the overuse of

that + shell nouns structure. As the lowest level A1+ used shell nouns as text reference in restricted structure (only *this* + shell noun), they did not used "*that* + shell noun" at all (0 times). From the A2 level, the second language learner started to actively use the four types of demonstrative determiners with shell nouns. What is remarkable is that once the Korean EFL learners started to use the four types of demonstratives (A2 level), the overuse of "*that* + shell noun" appeared. Table 5 presents the percentage of distal demonstrative determiners in the total use of text reference.

TABLE 5
The Percentage of "*that* + shell noun" Structure

	A1+	A2	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1	LOCNESS
percentage (%)	0	16.3	17.0	10.0	5.4	6.3	0	0

A2 and B1 levels used "*that* + shell noun" more than a hundred times (A2-117 times, B1-113 times). This is a glaring contrast, since no such structure was used in the native corpus. The frequency drastically decreased at the level of B1+, and the relatively lower percentage was maintained in B2+. There was no occurrence of such structure in C1 level.

In order to better understand the overuse of distal demonstrative determiners with shell nouns in the lower levels, the writings by those students were closely examined. The qualitative analysis provided distinctive linguistic phenomena which showed themselves especially in the writings of the lower level students. The feature related to the use of "*that* + shell noun" pattern is that the lower levels use them even when the item being referred immediately precedes the reference. Excerpts (4) to (5) below illustrate the use of distal demonstrative determiners even in cases of short distance that appeared in lower to intermediate levels.

> (4) Somebody saies punishment point alternates phycal punishment. But *that method* doesn't affect students because they don't care about that points. Just thing they care about is a funny and convienient. (A2)[2]
>
> (5) second, if internet usuer`s name is strange, he would have some trouble using internet. Many person would make fun of him and *that experience* would last long and would hurt him. Finnaly, he will not use internet or he will have a trauma. (B1)

According to example (4), the student writer encapsulated the antecedent sentence as a *method*. However, although the antecedent clause is located immediately before the

[2] In order for the "authenticity" of the corpus (Granger, 2002, p.5), the grammatical errors of the learner corpus were not edited.

current sentence, the writer used a distal demonstrative determiner. Moreover, the student writer of (5) used the distal referential item, even though the referring clause, *Many person would make fun of him,* was in the same sentence.

This linguistic phenomenon seems to be caused by insufficient knowledge of demonstratives, and the insufficient knowledge is affected by the deficient understanding of written register. Proximity is a key concept when classifying the demonstrative *this/these* and *that/those*. Hence, using distal demonstrative determiners where proximal demonstratives are expected suggests that the L2 learners in the lower levels have difficulties in using the proper demonstratives. In addition, according to Biber et al. (1999), the distal demonstrative determiner *that* occurs most frequently in conversation than in any other register. The proximate forms (*this/these*) are most common in academic prose, since determiners in academic prose are often used anaphorically in order to refer to the immediately antecedent text. That is, the lower level students tended to get rid of the overuse of the distal demonstrative and shell noun phrases, as they develop the awareness of the written register rather than the students improved the use of shell nouns as cohesive devices.

The frequency analysis revealed that the use of text references with shell nouns in the nonnative writing became closer to that of natives. Also, the result revealed that the major factor leading to native-like frequency is the overuse of the distal demonstrative *that*. However, in order to examine if there is any contrasting linguistic feature that the quantitative analysis did not capture, additional qualitative analysis was also conducted. As a result, it was found that the context where demonstrative and shell noun phrases were used in the second language writers' text quite differed from that of the native writers. While the native writers used this structure for the cohesive function which connects the segments of text, the L2 writers employed the structure to refer to the writing topics on the prompts which is outside of the text. Also, the second language writers used the shell noun phrase for text references to present the ideational content without elaboration or specifying.

The purpose of the prompts for writing task is to provide the context (Hinkel, 2002). Hinkel (2002) asserts that the prompts affect the language use of writers. The new finding of the current study is that the prompts influence the use of shell nouns in Korean L2 writers. The qualitative analysis which was done by examining the actual text showed that the Korean EFL writers employed the text reference used with shell nouns to refer to the writing topic. For example:

> (6) *This topic* is difficult and not simple.um... my opinion that Korean men should forced to complete military service is agree. (A1+)

(7) very dangerous topic. I disagree *this topic*. Because all korean men be forced to go to military service, This is unuseful. (A1+)
(8) *This subject* gets hot issue in our generation. So many people said that why our country force us to complete military service that others not. (A2)
(9) *This topic* is sensitive one for all creatures on the earth. Surely, animals have their own right as human beings do. (B1)

Excerpts (6) to (9) present the use of text references in the L2 writing used with shell nouns which are referring to the topic on the prompts. This use of text references can be regarded as "an exophoric reference (p. 33)" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The exophoric reference is that the item being referred is hypothesized, so speakers can retrieve the potential information. This way of using shell noun phrases rarely contributes to creating cohesion within text, since it makes the readers dependent on the outside resource. Thus, the qualitative finding suggests that the frequency data is insufficient to assert that the Korean EFL writers naturally develop the understanding of the cohesive function of shell nouns.

Another contrasting feature which appeared in the EFL text is that the phrases were used for carrying ideational content without elaboration. For example:

(10) i also think their plays are also prohibited so clear the internet. but, if they use their real name, i think that it doesn't the solution of *that issue* on website NATE, they comment on their real name, but only open name, they only have blames but can't keep them stop. (A2)
(11) I disagree that people must use their real name on the Internet. Because, if people are forced to write their real name on internet, authorities can get the power to control objector to authrities. So the people who observe unfair activity couldn't inform *that fact* to the others. (B1)
(12) so I recommend that all buildings must establish specific place permitted to smoke. the related autorities must listen carefully this opinion. and then, they must making the policy about *this problem*. (B1)

With demonstrative determiner, shell nouns in excerpts (10) to (12) are used as text references, and the references function as cohesive devices by connecting the reference with other segments of text. However, the Korean college writers seem to struggle for using this function. Although they used the shell nouns with demonstrative determiners, the writers provided just ideational contents without indicating contents. As a result, despite the fact that the EFL writers used the cohesive devices, the writing remains vague and ambiguous.

On the contrary, the use of the text references which are used with shell nouns in the native writing showed the contrasting patterns to that of the nonnatives.

> (13) One of the most innovative features of the European Community compared with other international bodies is that the member states have ceded to it a part of their national sovereignty and endowed it with its own sovereign powers, which it can use to adopt acts, having the force of national law. *This novel approach* to pooling national sovereignty is called "integration". (LOCNESS)
> (14) Along with the traffic congestion, comes pollution. The green house effect is a major issue to most citizens but very few of them are prepared to give up their car to show it. The government however, is beginning to address *this issue* and the car manufacturers are placing catalytic converters on their newer cars. (LOCNESS)
> (15) It can lead to weak and ineffecutual government as in Italy where governments seldom last over a year. It can also allow the rise of the political extreems as in Italy also where even a small share of the entire vote (0.15%) would lead to a seat in Parliament. The main way seen in getting round *this problem* is by adopting a single trans double vote system. (LOCNESS)

Unlike the EFL writers, the native writers explicitly elaborate the information that is being referred to. Also, the native writers seemed to clearly understand the concept of proximity in the written language when they use demonstratives. As seen in the above excerpts, the writers deployed the proximal demonstratives, presenting the item being referred to in the immediately preceding sentence. As a result, the native group successfully achieved the cohesive effects of the demonstrative and shell noun structure.

Although the EFL group achieved the native-like frequency of the use of shell nouns as cohesive devices, it is hard to assure that the L2 writers become more aware of the cohesive function of shell nouns. This is because the writers who are in the lower level eliminated the overuse not by becoming more alert to the cohesive function of shell nouns, but by developing the understanding of the written register. Also, the qualitative analysis suggests that the context where the “demonstrative plus shell noun” structures are used considerably differs from the native group who use this structure mainly for cohesive devices. Although the Korean EFL writers reach the native-like frequency of the text reference, the quality of the writing does not reflect the cohesiveness of the written production.

3. Shell Nouns as Topic Linking and Shifting Devices

One of the advantages of the use of shell nouns is that they can play an important role as topic linking and shifting devices. In particular, when a demonstrative determiner within a shell noun structure is placed in the theme position of the sentence, it functions as a topic shifting and linking device. This function of the shell noun phrase contributes to cohesion within text and building a stratified argumentation (Francis, 1994; Halliday, 1993, 1994; Schmid 2000).

The result of the analysis on the topic linking and shifting function showed that, regardless of the proficiency levels, Korean learners take advantage of this function of shell nouns less than the native group. The proportion of topic shifting and linking function per total use of demonstrative determiner and shell noun structure was analyzed, and given in Table 6 in terms of the percentage of demonstrative and shell noun structures used in each level.

TABLE 6
The Proportion of Demonstrative and Shell Nouns in Thematic Position

Level	A1+	A2	B1	B1+	B2	B2+	C1	LOCNESS
percentage(%)	40.0	45.7	44.9	42.7	44.2	50.0	50.0	64.6

There was a meager increase according to the proficiency level, ranging from 40.0% to 50.0%. However, the statistical test (chi-square test) demonstrated that the difference between the proficiency levels was not statistically significant ($x^2 = 0.57, df = 6, p < 0.05$). The result is quite contrasting, because whereas the native group used this function 64.6 % which is over the half of the total use, all of seven groups in nonnative group used it less than 50%. Hence, unlike the overall frequency of shell nouns, the frequency of the use of shell nouns for their topic linking and shifting function did not reach the level of native group even in the higher levels. This result of function-form analysis supports that the L2 writers have difficulties in utilizing shell nouns as cohesive devices.

It is well-known that thematic management of text reference is important in writing. By deploying text references that are used with a shell noun, L1 writers can nominalize complex information that was previously mentioned. Also, by providing new information in the theme position, the writers can build up the new information within the given structure (Halliday, 1993; Schmid, 2000). In the current research, a qualitative analysis was conducted in order to examine whether the second language writers were able to use this function of shell nouns as well.

(16) And in many developed countries, teachers solve the problem with discussing their students. *This method* is wiser and more efficient than physical punishment. If they don't do any physical punishments, both teacher and student will not hurt. (A2+)

(17) For an example, if smokings are allowed in public buildings, adolescents or kids can approach smoking easily. It means that they can learn or start smoking easily which is very harmful to young people. *This result* is the most unhealthy situation in all kinds of society. (B1+)

(18) Second reason is that korea is not in dangerous situation. So, we are not require many people that complete military service. *This fact* proves that we have no reason that all korean men should be forced to complete military service. (B1)

The L2 writer of excerpt (16) encapsulated the previous sentence by employing a shell noun phrase – *This method* – and then the writer added an evaluative statement – *wiser and more efficient.* In doing so, the writer of (16) successfully integrated the previous sentence and provided new information about it as well. Similarly, the student writer of (17) also established the argument more firmly by employing the shell noun phrase, *This result*. The writer of (17) presented an example and presented evaluative statement of the example. The writer of excerpt (18) first characterized the preceding sentence as a *fact,* deploying the shell noun. Within the given framework, the writer added additional information in the theme position. Thus, either by providing specific information or by presenting evaluative statement, the writhers successfully constructed their argument.

The qualitative analysis also revealed that the non-native students were skilled at using the encapsulating function of shell nouns accompanied with demonstrative determiners.

(19) And i think it is also be reduced if people are using their real name when they are using the internet. In the internet, there are many rumors about the celebrities that is distributed by invisible netizens. *This problem* also big problem as well. (A2)

(20) The students do think that the teachers who can't punish them are not scared and afraid anymore, so they act too rude to their teachers. *This tendency* will be continued and it will cause sirious problems in the education society. (B1+)

(21) I once had a bad experience with a smoker who was smoking right in front of me. It was a public building and there was a baby beside me. The baby's mom, who couldn't take it anymore politely suggested the smoker to put out the cigarette. However, the smoker didn't listen and acted rudely. They were almost in fight. *This experience* shows that there are some smokers who do not realize how serious the problem is. (B2+)

The student's excerpt (19) shows that the EFL writer effectively encapsulated the previous information presented as a complete clause. Considering the semantic quality of the antecedent, the shell noun *problem* was a fine choice. *This experience* in the excerpt (20) also referred to the antecedent which was realized as a complete clause. Excerpt (21) encapsulates even more complex information composed of more than one clause. According to Gray (2010), a text reference accompanied with shell nouns is used when the referring item is either a complete clause or more than a sentence. Hence, the Korean EFL learners do not seem to have contrasting linguistic features related to the use of this structure. However, the quantitative analysis suggests that the L2 learners need to be encouraged to exploit this pattern more strategically.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the use of shell nouns as cohesive devices in the written production by Korean college EFL writers. Although the previous studies consistently pointed out the cohesive functions of shell nouns, there has been little research on the use of shell nouns in terms of second language learning. The current study is significant, since this study contributes to understanding the essential textual quality of L2 writing, in particular, cohesion, in the second language writers' text. Results are as follows: Firstly, the overall frequency of shell nouns in the nonnative group moved closer to that of the native by increasing the total occurrence of shell nouns. On the other hand, unlike the overall frequency, the frequency of shell nouns as text references in EFL writing achieved the native-like frequency by decreasing the overuse of the occurrence of shell nouns as text references. The result revealed that the higher frequency of shell nouns as text references in the lower levels was mainly caused by the overuse of the distal demonstrative *that*. The qualitative analysis discloses that the second language writers eliminated the overuse of the distal demonstrative, as they became more aware of the characteristics of written language rather than the cohesive function of shell nouns themselves. The qualitative analysis also revealed that, regardless of the proficiency levels, the context where the shell nouns used in L2 writing differed from the native writing. By using shell nouns as exophoric references and deploying shell nouns without elaboration, the essays did not successfully activate cohesive effects; hence, the writings of the EFL students remain vague and obscure despite the adequate number of cohesive devices. The examination of topic linking and shifting function of shell nouns indicated that the Korean EFL writers used the topic linking and shifting function less than the native writers regardless of L2 levels. It suggests that while the native writers are adept

at deploying shell nouns where the cohesive effects is forceful, the EFL group are not equipped with using cohesive function of shell nouns strategically.

The present study provides significant information that can be applied to second language writing instruction. The findings of this study suggest that the use of shell nouns need to be instructed explicitly as cohesive devices in second/foreign language writing. It is expected that the direct and concrete instruction on the use of shell nouns can help second language writers to create well established cohesion, as well as to get rid of vagueness of their writing. The results suggest that the lower levels face difficulties in understanding the distinction of demonstratives which are fitted in written register. By instructing them the concept of proximity that is applied to the written language, the instructors can expect the lower levels to write more cohesively and have a better understanding of the characteristics of written language. In addition, the findings of this study highlight the importance of presenting shell nouns as a group and teaching the referential property of shell nouns.

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APPENDIX

OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION

C2	Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.
C1	Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
B2	Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.
B1	Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.
A2	Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like “and", “but” and “because”.
A1	Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.

(The council of Europe, 2001, p.23)

REPORTS & ESSAYS

C2	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex reports, articles or essays which present a case, or give critical appreciation of proposals or literary works. Can provide an appropriate and effective logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.
C1	Can write clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples.
B2	Can write an essay or report that develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail. Can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem.

	Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.
B1	Can write short, simple essays on topics of interest. Can summarise, report and give his/her opinion about accumulated factual information on familiar routine and non-routine matters within his field with some confidence.
	Can write very brief, reports to a standard conventionalised format, which pass on routine factual information and state reasons for actions.
A2	No descriptor available
A1	No descriptor available

(The council of Europe, 2001, p.24)

Examples in: English
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