The International Research Foundation
for English Language Education

Title of Project:
The Role of Content Word Overlap in Second Language Reading

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Project Summary:

This dissertation explores the effects of text-based factors on second language (L2) reading comprehension. To date, L2 reading research lacks a consensus on how to most accurately determine text readability (cf McNamara et al., 2010). Assessment developers often use automated text analysis tools, such as the Flesch-Kincaid, to determine text readability; however, not all research supports using these tools with L2 readers due to their exclusive focus on lexical and syntactic features (Crossley et al., 2008). Other research recommends measuring cohesion to better predict text readability, such as the analysis tool Coh-Metrix (Graesser et al.,2004). This paper aims to resolve the issue of predicting text readability by examining the role of *content word overlap* (CWO), a cohesion measure included in Coh-Metrix, in its contribution to readability alongside lexical and syntactic measures.

Utilizing a novel methodological approach including on-line tasks and off-line data, this dissertation seeks to obtain a complete picture of the role of CWO in L2 reading. The on-line task employs eye-tracking to record adult L2 participants' reading of more or less cohesive texts. Real-time analyses reveal if the presence of CWO facilitates cognitive processing as evident by faster reading times on target words. In order to operationalize the role of CWO with automated text analyses, the off-line task analyzes a university-level L2 reading comprehension assessment to determine which automated text analysis tool yields the best prediction. The results of this study will benefit language assessment developers and educators in ensuring texts are appropriately matched to their readers.