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A taxonomy of learner errors in signalling nouns

Signalling nouns are nouns which have cohesive properties across and within clauses. (Flowerdew, 2003a, 2003b). A signalling noun is potentially any abstract noun the meaning of which can only be made specific by reference to its context. Examples of signalling nouns are **attitude, assistance, difficulty, endurance, process, reason, result** etc. The following are examples of signalling nouns functioning in an across-clause manner:

1. This theory leaves a number of **facts** unexplained. For example, starch is absent from the guard cells of certain plants; some guard cells lack chloroplasts but still open and close; and the stomatal movements of some plants may not necessarily be related to the time of day; . . .
2. Electricity is used to drive the motor of an electric train, but inevitably some of the energy is lost as heat. This unavoidable **fact** is of great importance in biology.

While the next example has a signalling noun functioning within the clause:

3. Transpiration is the inevitable **result** of the necessity for the inside of the leaf to be open to the atmosphere.

Signalling nouns in discourse are closely associated with nominalisation and are problematic for learners. Based on a corpus of Cantonese L1 English learner data, this paper presents a taxonomy of errors. The errors are classified according to whether they are across-clause or within clause. Within clause errors include incorrect choice of signalling noun, missing signalling noun, and confusion between signalling noun and gerund. Across-clausal errors include incorrect lexical noun and incorrect word forms. Incorrect word forms can be sub-classified into noun form confusion, adjective vs. noun confusion and gerund vs. noun confusion. Some explanation for these errors is presented in terms of typological transfer.

Flowerdew, J. (2003a) Register specificity of signalling nouns in discourse. In C. Meyer and P. Leistyna (Eds.) Corpus analysis: Language structure and language use. Amsterdam: Rodopi Publishers. pp. 35-46. 2003.
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