Cohesion in L2 writing: Contrasting human rating with automated assessment

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Writing a cohesive text is an important ability for foreign language (L2) learners. Cohesive features are therefore included in instruments that measure L2 writing quality. One example is the rating tool of Functional Adequacy (FA) developed by Kuiken and Vedder (2017) for the rubric-based rating of L2 writing quality, which includes the dimension Cohesion and Coherence. Another example are automated L2 text assessment tools like CTAP (Chen & Meurers, 2016) that include counts of specific cohesive devices. This project contrasts results of both methods to analyse cohesion in L2 writing, human rubric-based rating and automated analyses of cohesive density. To this aim, data of a study that explored the impact of study abroad (SA) on the written production of university students in L2 German were used. The participants wrote three narrative texts related to their SA experiences: the first just before their SA, the second immediately after their return, and the third after a short post-SA intervention. Eighteen texts produced by six randomly selected participants were assessed by three expert raters using the FA rubrics for cohesion and coherence. The same texts were also analysed automatically for argument overlap, pronoun use and connectives using the German version of CTAP. The results uncovered discrepancies between the human rubric-based assessment and the automated assessment. Changes in cohesive quality according to human rubric-based rating were not reflected in the automatically retrieved cohesive density counts. This suggests that the raters based their assessment on other features than the ones included in the automated analysis. Based on an additional analysis of the texts, we hypothesize that these features include a ratio between text length, number of paragraphs and number of propositions. The findings will be discussed in the light of L2 writing quality assessment and potential implications for writing pedagogy.