Helping Students Develop Coherence in Writing

COHERENCE IS TRADITIONALLY DESCRIBED AS THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT LINK THE ideas in a text to create meaning for the readers. Although coherence is crucial to effective writing, it is often considered an abstract, elusive, and controversial concept that is difficult to teach and difficult to learn (Connor 1990; Connor and Johns 1990). Research has found that in their writing, ESL/EFL students focus almost exclusively on the word and sentence levels rather than the level of the whole discourse, that is, textual coherence (Bamberg 1984; Ferris and Hedgecock 1998). The majority of ESL/EFL students feel that “their only sense of security comes from what they have learned about grammar” (Leki 1996:34) and that grammar is the only tool they can use in writing English essays (Silva 1992).

It is important that students be taught alternative strategies to improve their writing. A pedagogical focus on coherence can shift students’ attention from sentence-level grammar to discourse features such as textual structuring and propositional unity, which are crucial to creating meaning in texts. Indeed, helping students improve the coherence of their writing ought to be a significant aspect of L2 writing instruction.
To help students focus on coherence in writing, it is essential that teachers have a thorough understanding of what makes a text coherent. Many composition texts and writing handbooks describe coherence in three ways: 1) connectedness between sentences (McCrimmon 1980), 2) use of explicit cohesive devices at the paragraph level (Bander 1983; Dodds 2000; Lauer et al. 1985), and 3) use of connective devices such as pronouns, repetitive structures, and transitional markers (Hodges and Whitten 1982).

Such conceptions of coherence, however, construe coherence narrowly in terms of sentence-level connectedness and paragraph unity rather than discourse unity. They reflect the major emphasis in ESL/EFL writing handbooks and perpetuate a narrow interpretation of coherence (Langan 1996; Langosch 1999; Oshima and Hogue 1999). To help students create coherence in their writing, it is necessary to define and describe coherence in a broader sense.

**What is coherence in writing?**

Based on a review of the literature, we can conclude that coherence includes the following five features:

1. **A macrostructure that provides a pattern characteristic and appropriate to its communicative purpose** (Hoey 1983; Martin and Rothery 1986). Macrostructure is an outline of the main categories or functions of the text. It helps writers and readers understand how sentences in a text are related to each other and how they contribute to the overall coherence of a text. The communicative purpose plays an important role in determining the macrostructure for writers. For example, when the writer's purpose is to tell a story, it is common to arrange the events using a chronological pattern. When the writer's purpose is to propose a solution to a problem, a pattern of situation, problem, solution, and then evaluation may be used. When the purpose is to debate a controversial issue, the writer could arrange the ideas so that both sides of the issue are examined, followed by a conclusion in which the writer weighs the pros and cons of each side.

2. **An information structure that guides the reader in understanding how information is organized and how the topic of text is developed** (Danis 1974; Firbas 1986). Simply summarized, coherent texts often comply with the principle of giving old information before new information.

3. **Connectivity of the underlying content evidenced by relations between propositions** (Kintsch and van Dijk 1978; van Dijk 1980). A proposition is an assertion. It is through the relationships between propositions that the coherence of a text is established. For instance, a proposition that is not supported or developed can easily become a mere generalization. In order to develop coherence in writing, it is helpful to justify a proposition or exemplify it with elaboration. For example, the statement, *Free transport would be a good thing for the city's shops and businesses,* is a proposition without any support. The writer could add support, such as *Free transport would be a good thing for the city's shops and businesses, because bus and underground users would have more money available to spend on both necessities and luxuries.*

4. **Connectivity of the surface text evidenced by the presence of cohesive devices.** Cohesive devices are words or phrases that help to establish relationships between different sentences or between different parts of a sentence. Some examples are pronoun references (*he, she, it, this, that*), conjunctions (*but, also, therefore, however*), and content lexical ties such as repetition, synonymy/antonymy, and superordinates/hyponymy (*animals/cats*) (Liu 2000).

5. **Appropriate metadiscourse features** (Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen 1993; Vande Kopple 1985). Metadiscourse markers in texts help readers organize, interpret, and evaluate information. Some examples are logical connectives (*therefore, but*), sequencers (*firstly, secondly, finally*), certainty markers (*certainly, no doubt*), and hedges (*can, may*).

Thus, coherence can be defined in terms of macrostructure, information structure, propositional development, cohesion, and metadiscourse. When students understand how these elements of coherence work in texts, they are more likely to use them appropriately to develop coherence in their writing.

**Strategies to teach coherence**

To help my students understand how the elements of coherence function in different types of texts and improve their writing, I designed materials on each of the five features.
described above for my EFL classes at a university in Hong Kong. Judging from student feedback and analysis of their writing, the materials increased their awareness of the role of coherence in writing and gave them new strategies for adding it in their writing. I used the materials in five stages of instruction: introductory activities, explicit teaching, student handouts, awareness-raising tasks, and follow-up writing practice. The materials can be easily modified to suit learners of different proficiency levels and in different learning contexts. Below I describe some of these materials and how they can be employed to teach coherence in writing.

1. Introductory activities
   Introduce students to the topic and stimulate their interest in the role of coherence in writing. In the introduction to macrostructure, for instance, students can take turns retelling a fairy tale that is familiar to them all. Or, they can describe an embarrassing event. Major aspects of the story structure, such as situation, problem, solution, and evaluation, are then discussed.

   In presenting information structure, it is helpful to teach students how to become more aware of the distribution of information in texts. I use pairs of sentences like those below and ask students to identify the "old" information given in the first sentence and then the new information in the second sentence.

2. Explicit teaching
   Provide students with explicit explanations, preferably using authentic texts and simple text-analysis tasks. For instance, in teaching macrostructure, students can analyze texts that contain the problem-solution structure and rearrange jumbled sentences. For the example below, the teacher checks the students’ answers and points out the correct problem-solution structure. Statement 2 is the situation, statement 4 is the problem (marked by "However"), statement 1 is the solution, and statement 3 is the evaluation. Through explicit teaching students can be shown that when they include the major elements of the macrostructure and order them logically, they are likely to achieve coherence in their writing.

Instructions: Re-order the sentences so they make sense.

1. I am writing to inquire if it would be possible for you to include this information as a simple correction in the next issue.

2. I was glad to see my article called "Advertising Management Service," which appeared in the September issue of your newsletter.

3. This would give my company credit for encouraging the use of the techniques described in the article and for allowing me to publish them.

4. However, my affiliation with this company as their advertising manager was omitted.

3. Student handouts
   After explicit instruction, prepare student handouts on specific topics in order to help consolidate students’ understanding of coherence. Unfamiliar metalinguistic terms can also be explained and illustrated with examples in this stage. For instance, a handout I prepared on macrostructure defines the meaning of macrostructure in texts and gives examples from typical expository writing. An extract from the macrostructure handout showing the introductory notes on the topic and the explanatory notes on the problem-solution structure is provided in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 is another handout, which provides explicit explanations about several devices for adding coherence at the metadiscourse level.

4. Awareness-raising tasks
   This is a crucial stage of teaching in which students engage in a range of text analysis tasks in order to apply the concepts they have learnt. These tasks require reading and some rewriting. For instance, the awareness-raising task below asks students to read a letter of complaint and analyze its macrostructure, then revise the letter to improve it.
The elements of this letter of complaint are not logically ordered. The writer does not begin the letter by providing details of the situation. Instead, the problem of the increasing number of dogs is fronted. Other parts of the problem, for example, “The management has done nothing...,” are in different places in the letter, making the complaint difficult to follow. If students are able to find these problems in the letter, they should be able to improve the coherence of the letter. Students can work in small groups to develop a new outline for the letter, then revise it individually. An example of an improved outline of the letter based on the problem-solution structure is provided.

5. Writing practice
This stage allows students to apply the concepts of coherence to their own writing. Give students a topic, then tell them to plan their writing by developing an outline based on a macrostructure suitable for the essay. For instance, students can analyze a current, controversial issue discussed in a newspaper editorial by writing about the advantages and disadvantages of the issue. They can use the outline provided below before drafting their essays.

Teaching the conventions of coherence in different genres
It is important to note that because coherence is specific to genres, the devices for creating it do not necessarily apply to all kinds of writing and may vary with different genres (Giltrow 1995). Therefore, it is important to teach students how the purpose, audience, and context of a text affects its coherence. In certain texts, structure is very important to create coherence. For example, in job application letters, macrostructure is formalized to a great degree. A job application letter typically comprises several moves (units of discourse), namely, stating the purpose of the letter, establishing
the applicant’s credentials, enclosing documents, requesting an interview, and ending politely (Bhatia 1993). Students can be provided with sample outlines of application letters, such as the one above, to analyze the macrostructure in terms of these formalized moves.

In teaching information structure, students can be shown that the principle of giving old information before new information, which characterizes the information distribution in most coherent texts, is often violated in some genres, such as advertisements and poetry, but is almost mandatory in other genres, such as research reports and academic writing. The excerpts below from advertising can be used to illustrate how this principle is often inverted in advertisements.

**Excerpts from advertisements**

A. If you want to learn Chinese to communicate with your business colleagues and friends or want to learn any of the world’s major languages, company X has the solution for you!

B. If you travel frequently, you deserve to be recognized as someone worthy of special attention. The Passengers Association—the oldest, largest, and most influential travellers’ club in the world—will bring you such recognition immediately.

**Sentences from Letter**

I am writing to apply for the post of Academic Secretary at X University.

I have a B.A. in English from the University of Y, where I worked as the Secretary of the Student Union. I have strong computer skills and I also have...

I have enclosed my resume, which outlines my qualifications and experience.

I am happy to attend an interview where I can explain my qualifications and experience more fully.

Thank you very much.

**Move**

- stating purpose
- establishing credentials
- enclosing documents
- requesting an interview
- ending politely

Metadiscourse plays an important role in some genres, such as persuasive writing and extended essays, but it may be less important in other genres, such as personal letters. Students can be asked to mark some typical examples of metadiscourse devices that are used to make an emotional appeal in persuasive writing. On the next page is a list of six ways to add coherence at the metadiscourse level. All the examples cited can be used to sensitise students to the coherence conventions of different genres.

**A coherence checklist**

With knowledge of the concept of coherence, students can benefit from a coherence checklist to improve their writing. While revising their writing, they can ask themselves the following questions:

1. Does the text show awareness of the purpose, audience, and context in which the writing takes place?
2. Does the text have a clear macrostructure that suits the overall communicative intent of the writing?
3. Is the information appropriately arranged? Is there any information that needs to be rearranged in order to improve the coherence?
4. Is the propositional content clear? Are propositions adequately developed and logically linked? Are there any propositions that need to be modified or further developed?
5. Are cohesive devices appropriately used? Are there any cohesive devices that are overused? Are there any cohesive devices that could have been used but are not used?

6. Is there sufficient and appropriate use of metadiscourse to guide the reader in understanding the writing? Is there any metadiscourse that is overused? Is there any metadiscourse that could have been used but is not used?

Conclusion
In the classroom, the teaching of coherence can reap some immediate benefits for both teachers and learners. Teachers can share the metalanguage of coherence with students, replacing vague comments like “the essay lacks unity” or “the ideas do not fit together” with specific comments like “unclear reference,” “inappropriate conjunction,” or “under-use of metadiscourse here.” Thus, teacher feedback can be made more effective. Students can use a coherence checklist to self-edit and to review their peers’ writing. Indeed, though coherence is difficult to learn, it need not be an abstract theory that is remote from practice. It can be a concrete concept that can be described, taught, and learnt in the classroom.

References
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**Macrostructure**

Appendix 1

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**Macrostructure** generally refers to the overall structure of a text. It is an outline of the main categories or functions of the text. It helps readers understand how sentences in a text are related to each other, and how they contribute to the overall coherence of a text.

Many student writers think the overall structure of a text is derived from the linkage between adjacent sentences. That is, as long as sentences are linked with the previous or the following ones, the text has unity and is coherent. In fact, each sentence in a text has a function in relation to the overall structure of a text, not just in relation to the preceding and following sentences.

A very common way to approach macrostructure is to break down a text into three functional units: introduction, body, and conclusion. This is, however, a simplistic view of how a text is organized or structured. It does not give the writer any idea about what to include in each of the functional units. Let’s look at some more helpful ways to approach the macrostructure of texts.

**Problem-Solution Structure**

The most common macrostructure in narrative and expository texts is the problem-solution structure, which consists of the following elements:

**Situation** The situation provides the background and context for the problem that is introduced later. It also helps orientate the reader. The situation answers the question: What and who am I writing about?

**Problem** This section answers the question: What is the problem presented by this situation?

**Solution** This section presents actions that avoid, alleviate, or overcome the problem.

**Result and Evaluation** What was the result? How successful was the result? The result consists of an objective fact, whereas the evaluation may be an opinion, that is, a subjective assessment. The evaluation should answer the question: How successful is the solution?

If writers think about the overall structure of a text and outline it in advance, they can ensure that the major components are included when they begin to write. Sometimes student writers omit the situation in their writing because they mistakenly assume that the readers already know what they are talking about.
**Metadiscourse** refers to linguistic material in texts that does not add anything to the propositional content, but is intended to help the reader interpret and evaluate the information given. Metadiscourse guides the reader through the text, linking individual propositions so that they form a cohesive and coherent whole. The table below gives definitions and examples of textual and interpretive markers.

### Textual Markers

- **Logical connectives** help readers recognize how texts are organized and how different parts of the text are related to each other.
- **Sequencers** are another type of connective marker.
- **Reminders** refer to material mentioned previously in the text.

### Interpretive Markers

- **Code glosses** are explanations of text that provide additional information or examples.
- **Illocution markers** name the act the writer is performing.

### Examples

- **therefore, in addition, however, as a consequence**
- **first, second, third next, finally**
- **As noted earlier…**
- **Examples**
  - By this I mean…
  - In other words…
  - To give an example…
  - To sum up…
  - My question is…

This is an Internet-based newsletter whose mission is to give ELT professionals around the world an efficient way to stay aware of new trends and issues. It also features interviews with leaders in the profession. In the spring of 2002, among the various articles published, the online newsletter had a lengthy debate on language learning and acquisition between Robert O’Neill and Stephen Krashen plus discussion of teaching Shakespeare and using Whole Language. ESL MiniConference invites announcements of and reports from local and regional meetings and workshops.

The objective of WorldCALL is to promote and develop national and international networks for research and practice in computer assisted language learning (CALL). The second WorldCALL conference will be held May 7–10, 2003 in Canada, co-hosted by the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. For WorldCALL 2003, scholarships for professional development will be provided, offering those who have worked with CALL in developing countries the opportunity to attend this conference. A limited number of scholarships will be available for qualified participants from areas of the world that are underserved with regard to the use of new technologies and language learning. The deadline for receipt of applications is September 15. The WorldCALL Web site has detailed information.

**ESL MiniConference Online**

http://www.ESLminiconf.net

**WorldCALL 2003**

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May 7–10, 2003

September 15, 2002

(deadline for scholarship applications)