

Helping Students Develop Coherence in Writing

C OHERENCE 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** (Danes 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*) (Halliday and Hasan 1976), 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.

1. a. Near a large forest lived a poor wood-cutter with his wife and two children.
b. The boy's name was John and the girl's name was Mary.
2. a. My mother has written a new book.
b. It's about gardening.

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, state-

ment 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.

Instructions: Read the following letter of complaint and examine its macrostructure.

Dear sir:

Recently, I have noticed a marked increase in the number of dogs kept by families on my estate. I have lived on a public housing estate for more than 10 years. Tenants living on the estate are not allowed to keep dogs. However, I find the quality of management of my estate deteriorating. The rules are there for a reason. The dogs make the estate dirty and they bark at night, keeping residents awake. However, in spite of the ban on dogs, the management has done nothing about the problem. I hope that the estate officer will take some action.

Yours truly,

Assignment: Develop a new outline for the letter using the notes below.

Situation:

Problem:

Solution:

Evaluation:

Example: An improved outline of the letter based on the problem-solution structure

Situation: I have been living on the housing estate for 10 years. There is a ban on dogs here for good reasons. The dogs make the estate dirty and they bark at night, keeping residents awake.

Problem: The estate does not monitor the ban; therefore dogs increase in number and disturb the residents.

Solution: A strict ban on dogs and close monitoring is necessary.

Evaluation: If not, the management will further deteriorate and the estate will not be a good place to live.

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.

Outline: Macrostructure format

Situation:

Three advantages:

Three disadvantages:

Conclusion:

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

Sentences from Letter	Move
I am writing to apply for the post of Academic Secretary at X University.	stating purpose
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...	establishing credentials
I have enclosed my resume, which outlines my qualifications and experience.	enclosing documents
I am happy to attend an interview where I can explain my qualifications and experience more fully.	requesting an interview
Thank you very much.	ending politely

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.

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?

Metadiscourse device	Examples
Direct address to the reader	You may think... You may ask... You may not agree...
Rhetorical question	Don't we all have a right to...? What difference does it make?
Certainty marker	Certainly, of course, obviously
Imperative	Consider this... Think about this...
Attitude marker	Undoubtedly, unfortunately, surprisingly
Direct question	Why are more and more people...?

- 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?
- 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.

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APPENDICES 1&2

Macrostructure

APPENDIX 1

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...



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