

Enhancing ESL Students' Awareness of Coherence-Creating Mechanisms in Writing

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Coherence is central to effective writing. However, it is often regarded as a fuzzy and elusive concept that is difficult to teach and difficult to learn. This article attempts to identify the text-based and reader-based features that are crucial to the creation of coherence and describes a number of classroom tasks that can be exploited to enhance ESL students' awareness of coherence-creating mechanisms in writing.

Introduction

For a long time coherence has been identified as an important quality of effective writing. It is "an essential practical construct in discussing the quality of written discourse" (Richards, 1990, p. 104) and is central to effective writing (Bamberg, 1984). However, coherence is extremely complex and difficult to define. It is described as a "multi-faceted concept" (Spiegel & Fitzgerald, 1990, p. 49) encompassing "a multitude of reader- and text-based features" (Johns, 1986, p. 247). Although recent advances in textual linguistics have broadened our understanding of coherence, the concept is still not well understood, and its pedagogical implications and applications have not been fully explored.

Although coherence is of increasing interest to researchers around the world, practical applications of coherence theories have been slow to appear (perhaps because the concept is not well understood and has been variously interpreted). (Connor & Johns, 1990, p. 1)

As a result, coherence is considered a fuzzy and elusive concept (Connor, 1990) that remains difficult to teach, and hence difficult to learn (Connor & Johns, 1990).

Although most teachers consider coherence an essential element of good writing, it remains difficult to teach. Teachers acclaim its benefits, demonstrate its effects, and exemplify good models, but students still do not know how to write coherently. (Cerniglia, Medsker, & Connor, 1990, p. 229)

The aim of this article is to explore the pedagogical implications and applications of the concept of coherence. It first identifies text-based and reader-based features that are central to the creation of coherence in writing. It then suggests some pedagogical techniques to help teachers enhance students' awareness of the coherence-creating mechanisms in writing. The techniques and tasks described in the article have been tried successfully with some first-year university students in Hong Kong. These students were aged between 19 to 20 and have studied English as a second language for about 15 years. The procedures for the tasks are described, and the materials are included in the Appendixes. Teachers may adapt the tasks, choose their own texts, or design similar or related tasks to cater to the needs of their own learners.

Coherence-Creating Mechanisms in Writing

The coherence-creating mechanisms described in this article are based on the pedagogical framework of coherence put forward by Lee (in press), which covers the following.

1. *Purpose, audience, and context of situation* (Coulthard, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The construction of texts begins with the writer's intention of communicating ideas. To create coherent writing, the writer must first ask a basic question: What is the purpose of my writing? Closely related to the purpose is audience awareness. A text is coherent only when the connections between the ideas and their relevance to the purpose of the writer are accessible to the reader. Audience awareness further entails an understanding of the context of the situation in which the writing takes place. The writer needs to know the subject matter, the relationship between the writer and the reader, the mode of the writing, and how to maintain a register that is both appropriate and consistent for the writing.
2. *Macrostructure* (Hoey, 1983; Swales, 1990; van Dijk, 1981). Macrostructure refers to the overall text structure, which is a summary of the major functions or categories of the text. If the writers think about the overall structure of a text and write it down in advance, they will make sure that the major components are included in the text when they begin to write. Take Hoey's (1983) problem-solution structure as an example. Many student writers tend to omit the "situation" in their writing because they mistakenly assume that the readers know what the writers are talking about. With a knowledge of macrostructure, the writers will consider the major functional components in the overall structure of their writing and thus improve its coherence.
3. *Information distribution* (Danes, 1974; Firbas, 1975; Halliday, 1974). Information distribution is about the ordering of elements in a text. Research has shown that discourse that follows the given-new principle

(i.e., old information followed by new information) is more coherent. Given information refers to information that has been introduced, that is, old information. New information, on the other hand, refers to information that is introduced for the first time. Generally speaking, in a sentence the given information is put first, and the new information comes last. In *The cat ate the rat*, it is assumed the reader knows that the cat ate something (i.e., the given information), and the new information is that it was a rat that was eaten. The following two principles are useful in helping writers produce coherent texts (Williams, 1990).

- a. Put at the beginning of a sentence ideas that you have already referred to or implied, or concepts that you can reasonably assume your reader is already familiar with and will readily recognize (i.e., given information).
 - b. Put at the end of the sentence the newest or the most significant information, that is, information that you want to stress or elaborate on in your next sentence (i.e., new information).
4. *Propositional development* (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Mann & Thompson, 1992). To create coherent texts, the writers need to pay heed to the propositional content, that is, the underlying assertions of a text, how they are developed, and how they relate to each other to produce coherence. For example, generalizations or opinions have to be backed up with examples, illustrations, or justifications.
 5. *Cohesion* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Nunan, 1993). Cohesion contributes to coherence by making sure that there is connectedness between sentences and clausal units. Examples of cohesion are references, conjunctions, and repetitions (see Halliday & Hasan, 1976, for classification of cohesion).
 6. *Metadiscourse* (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996; Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993; vande Kopple, 1985; Williams, 1981). Coherent writing is reader-friendly. Metadiscourse features are linguistic materials in texts that help the readers organize, interpret, and evaluate information given, making the writing more accessible to the readers (see Appendix A for classification of metadiscourse).

Note. There is some overlap between cohesion and metadiscourse, because some cohesive devices such as conjunctions are also metadiscourse features

Coherence Awareness-Raising Tasks

It is suggested that the awareness-raising tasks described in this section be preceded by some kind of explicit instruction. By explicit instruction I mean direct teaching through tasks, examples, explanations, and so forth, which entails the use of metalinguistic terms. For example, students need to understand what given and new information is, in order to analyze the information

distribution in texts. They need to learn about some examples of macrostructure, for example, problem-solution structure, before they can engage in simple text analysis tasks. They also need to be shown examples of metadiscourse (see Appendix A for classification of metadiscourse based on Crismore et al., 1993) in order to identify instances of overuse and misuse. In the following, I illustrate each coherence topic with an example of an awareness-raising task (see Appendixes B to H for the materials used).

Purpose, Audience, and Context of Situation

The text chosen to enhance students' awareness of purpose, audience and context situation is the "doorknob text" (Appendix B). The text does not provide a clear sense of purpose or show an awareness of the intended reader; nor does it orient the reader to a context. As a result, the writing is not reader-friendly. Students can be asked to discuss whether the text is effective and coherent. Teachers can draw students' attention to the purpose of the text, its intended reader, and the context of situation, and how such an understanding impinges on the coherence of the writing. Students can then work in small groups to improve the text.

Macrostructure

The text chosen to enhance students' awareness of macrostructure is a letter of complaint (Appendix C) with some of the details of the situation and problem misplaced. Students can be asked to read the letter and to discuss if it is a well-organized piece of writing. Students then analyze the macrostructure in terms of situation, problem, solution, and evaluation and identify possible coherence gaps. Students can work in small groups to improve the macrostructure of the letter.

Information Distribution

The text used to increase students' awareness of information distribution in texts is a jumbled text (Appendix D). Students are asked to sequence the sentences into the right order, explaining the links between the given and new information.

Propositional Development

To enhance students' awareness of propositional development, students are shown a text with some sentences blanked out (Appendix E). They have to read the entire text to get the overall meaning before they complete the missing parts. In doing the task, students have to think of the propositional content and consider how propositions link with each other.

Cohesion

The task chosen to increase students' awareness of cohesion focuses on connectives. Students are shown two versions of the same text (Appendix

F)—one with a lot of connectives and the other without connectives. Students will compare and discuss the two versions of the text in terms of their effectiveness and coherence. In the end they choose one of the texts and rewrite it, either to reduce the number of connectives in the first version, or to include some connectives in the other, where appropriate.

Metadiscourse

Students are shown a text (Appendix G) that overuses metadiscourse. They work in small groups and discuss the functions of the metadiscoursal devices (which are underlined), and delete them where appropriate. Students may then exchange and review each other's work to determine how reader-friendly the writing is. An alternative is to show students a text that lacks metadiscourse (Appendix H) and ask them to add metadiscoursal devices where appropriate.

Teaching Coherence: Some Guiding Principles

Choice of Texts

The texts used to illustrate the coherence awareness-raising tasks above are all authentic and student texts. In particular, imperfect texts are used in a number of examples rather than model texts. It must be remembered that coherence is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, but it lies on a continuum (Lindeberg, 1985). Imperfect texts lie on different points near the incoherent end of the continuum, and they provide students with excellent opportunities to apply the strategies learned to improve the overall coherence of the texts. A study of badly written texts, according to Coulthard (1994), may help writers understand the nature of "successful textualization" (p. 2).

An Integrated Approach

The coherence awareness-raising tasks demonstrate an integrated approach to language teaching where students are engaged in practicing an array of skills. For example, students read a text and discuss its effectiveness, engage in text analysis, and work collaboratively to rewrite it. The text stimulates discussions, leading to mini-writing practice at the end. Students' writing can also be exchanged for peer review. Thus the tasks suggested in this article not only increase students' awareness of coherence-creating mechanisms in writing, but they also put students in situations where they use language for real communicative purposes.

Sequence of Topics

Good pedagogy in writing, according to Land and Whitley (1989) demands that we pay heed to larger features of texts. The coherence awareness-raising tasks in the above are sequenced such that students start with more global (or macro) concerns and then move on to more local (or micro) considerations

(see Figure 1). Teachers may first start with writing as a vehicle for communication—hence purpose, audience, and context of situation, putting the reader orientation into focus. They can then move on to the macrostructure of texts, shifting students’ attention from surface and sentence-level concerns to concern with the overall structure of texts. Next is information distribution and how it helps the writer develop the discourse topic. An understanding of information distribution can facilitate the propositional development, which is the next focus. Finally, teachers can concentrate on the more local concerns, namely, cohesion and other metadiscoursal features in text. The last feature, metadiscourse, puts the reader orientation back into the focus, echoing the importance of text as a vehicle for communication. Figure 1 outlines the coherence features discussed in the above.

Coherence Checklist

Based on the coherence features described above, a coherence checklist can be drawn up for student writers. In writing/revising, the writers can ask themselves the following questions.

1. Is the purpose of the writing made clear to the reader?

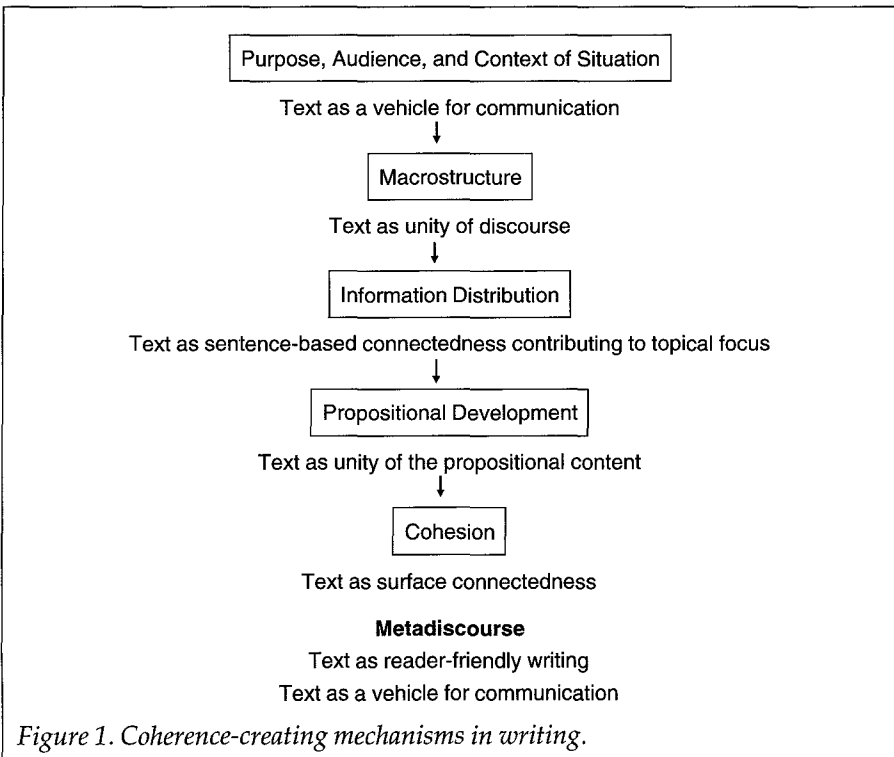


Figure 1. Coherence-creating mechanisms in writing.

2. Who is the intended/imagined reader? Does the text show an awareness of a consistent imagined reader?
3. Does the text show an awareness of the context of situation in which the writing takes place?
4. Does the text have a clear macrostructure that matches the overall communicative intent of the writing?
5. Is the information appropriately arranged?
6. Is the propositional content clear? Are propositions adequately developed and logically linked?
7. Are cohesive devices appropriately used?
8. Is there sufficient and appropriate use of metadiscourse to guide the reader in understanding the writing?

Conclusion

Writing was described as a technology by Grabe and Kaplan (1996), who maintained that the skills required for writing do not come naturally but are gained through *conscious effort*. By providing a model for coherence-creating mechanisms in writing, it is hoped that the learning of coherence can be made easier and more manageable for ESL learners.

The Author

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Appendix A: Classification of Metadiscourse

Two types of metadiscourse have been found in persuasive writing. The following classification is based on Crismore et al. (1993).

1. Textual Metadiscourse (used for logical and ethical appeals)

Textual Markers

Examples

Logical connectives—help readers recognize how texts are organized, and how different parts of the text are related to each other functionally or semantically

such as, but, therefore, in addition, however

Sequencers—words for counting or numbering

first, second

Reminders—referring to earlier text material
Topicalizers—indicating a topic shift

we noted earlier ...

In regard to wealth ... , Now the question arises ...

Interpretive Markers

Examples

Code glosses—explanations of textual material, providing additional information or examples for words or propositions that the writer predicts the reader may find problematic

by this I mean; X means Y, in other words, namely

Illocution markers—naming the act the writer is performing

To give an example, ...; To sum up, ...; I state again that smoking is ...; My question is ...: What I am emphasizing is ...

Announcements—telling readers about the text

There are two reasons ...

2. *Interpersonal Metadiscourse (used for emotional and ethical appeals)*

Interpersonal Markers

Examples

Hedges—showing the lack of commitment to the truth-value of the whole proposition

can, could, may, might, would, I think, I guess, I suppose, perhaps
Note. Mode (can, could, may, might, would, etc.) is important for hedging

Certainty markers—expressing full commitment to the truth-value of the proposition

Certainly, I know, obviously

Attributors—references to authorities that help increase the intellectual persuasive force of writing

Einstein claimed that ...; According to psychiatrists, ...

Attitude markers—expressing the writer's affective values, their attitude toward the propositional content, the readers, the style of the text, or themselves as writers of the text

I hope, I agree/disagree, unfortunately, most importantly, undoubtedly, surprisingly

Commentary—which helps establish writer-reader relationship

- direct address to the reader—*you may not agree that ...*
- imperatives/directives—*think about that, you should consider your health*
- real questions that are later answered by the writer in the text—*why are comics so popular among teenagers?*
- rhetorical questions that readers must answer by actively making inferences and by accessing their background knowledge about the topic—*what difference does it make?*

Appendix B: Purpose, Audience, and Context of Situation

Imagine you are the readers for whom the text is intended. Would you say the text is coherent. Why? Discuss in small groups.

Text discovered hanging on the door knob of a room in a hotel in Jakarta

(1) Please place this door knob hanger outside your room before 11 pm if you wish to have a newspaper delivered tomorrow morning. (2) If you are staying longer than one night, your newspaper door knob will be placed outside by the evening room attendant from the second night onwards. (3) If you wish not to be disturbed, place this door knob outside prior to the evening turndown service. (4) Leave this door knob in the holder if you do not want a newspaper delivered. (Falvey, personal communication)

In small groups discuss ways to improve the text and then rewrite it. Be ready to tell the others why the changes that you propose are necessary.

Appendix C: Macrostructure

Read the following letter and analyze it in terms of the problem-solution structure. In small groups rewrite it to improve its macrostructure.

Nothing Done

(1) I have lived in a public housing estate for more than 17 years, and I find that the quality of management of my estate, Tsz Man, to be deteriorating. (2) Tenants are forbidden from keeping dogs on the estate. (3) However, I have noticed that there is a marked increase in the number of dogs being kept by families. (4) The rules are there for a reason. The dogs make the estate dirty and they bark at night, keeping residents awake. (5) However, in spite of the ban on dogs, the management has done nothing about this problem. (6) I hope that the estate officer will take some action. (*South China Morning Post*, February 10, 1996)

Appendix D: Information Distribution

Sequence the following sentences, paying special attention to the linkage of given and new information among the sentences.

1. Physical handicaps, lack of specific abilities, or inadequate self-control can prevent an individual from achieving a desired goal.
2. The physical environment presents such obstacles as traffic jams, crowded lines at the supermarkets, droughts that destroy agricultural crops, and noise that prevents concentration.
3. A wide range of obstacles, both external and internal, can interfere with an individual's efforts to reach a goal.
4. Not everyone can become a skilled musician or pass the examinations necessary to become a physician or a lawyer.

5. The social environment presents obstacles in the form of restrictions imposed by other people, which may range from parental denials to broader problems of racial or sexual discrimination.
6. Frustration occurs when progress toward a desired goal is blocked or delayed.
7. Sometimes the barriers to goal satisfaction stem from the individual's own limitations.
8. If an individual sets goals beyond his or her ability, frustration is apt to result. (Atkinson, Atkinson, & Hilgard, 1983, p. 423)

Appendix E: Propositional Development

Read the following text and fill in the missing parts, paying special attention to the propositional content and the relations between propositions. Work in small groups.

Gamble

I am a form five student and I am concerned about _____ .
 I didn't understand why so many students felt despair over these exams and how some even committed suicide. However, as the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), _____
 As most of us are not geniuses, _____

We have to give up some, if not all, of our hobbies. I am really scared, and I think many of the candidates may feel the same way as I do. Because _____

And if we really fail, we will have nothing left.

In effect, the HKCEE is the biggest gamble in our lives. Some, who cannot cope with this, _____ .Others, _____

Is this not a cruel system?

(*South China Morning Post*, February 10, 1996)

Appendix F: Cohesion

Compare the following two texts and decide which is more coherent? Why? Discuss.

Version 1

Forrest Gump is a man who shows very low intelligence and he is physically disabled. However, he is not aware that he is so pure and innocent. Moreover, he always suffers from losses and is ridiculed by the others, but he can get advantages from misfortune usually. In order to meet his goal in life, he does things without distraction, so he can get a great accomplishment and even the ordinary people cannot do this. Then he be-

came rich and famous but his life is still insipid. In addition, he has loved the same girl since his childhood and he has never changed his mind. Therefore an American magazine interviewed 300 people all of them agree that Forrest Gump is an ideal lover. In fact, this movie beautifies the actual life. If there was a Forrest Gump in real life I believe he would have been cheated very often. So I think no girl will love this stupid man. It is because a kind person is no longer so perfect today. However, his life is full of happiness. So we must try to enjoy our lives and set a target for ourselves. After setting the target, we must try our best to meet it. Then everyone can succeed in the near future. To sum up, I like this film very much. It is because I can learn something new about human life from this movie. (Pellowe, 1996)

Version 2

Forrest Gump is a man who shows very low intelligence. He is physically disabled. He is not aware that he is so pure and innocent. He always suffers from losses. He is ridiculed by the others. He can get advantages from misfortune usually. To meet his goal in life, he does things without distraction. He can get a great accomplishment. Even the ordinary people cannot do this. He became rich and famous. His life is still insipid. He has loved the same girl since his childhood. He has never changed his mind. An American magazine interviewed 300 people. All of them agree that Forrest Gump is an ideal lover. This movie beautifies the actual life. A Forrest Gump in real life would have been cheated very often. I think no girl will love this stupid man. A kind person is no longer so perfect today. His life is full of happiness. We must try to enjoy our lives. We must set a target for ourselves. We must try our best to meet it. Everyone can succeed in the near future. I like this film very much. I can learn something new about human life from this movie. (Pellowe, 1996)

Appendix G: Metadiscourse

A number of metadiscoursal devices are used in the following text (see italics). Are they used appropriately? Discuss.

1. *Undoubtedly*, the United States is at present the world's largest exporter of
2. agricultural products. *According to recent reports*, its agricultural net balance of
3. payments in recent years has exceeded \$10 billion a year. *Moreover*, as rising costs of
4. imported petroleum and other goods have increased the U.S. trade deficit, this

5. agricultural surplus has taken on great financial importance in both the domestic and
6. international markets. *Why is it so? There are several reasons. First,* agricultural
7. exports maintain profitable market prices for the American farmer and bolster the
8. national economy by providing over one million jobs, which means job opportunities
9. *are improved. Secondly, regarding the income from farm exports, it alone is used to*
10. purchase about \$9 billion worth of domestic farm machinery and equipment annually.
11. *In addition,* exports of U.S. agricultural products *also* reduce price-depressing
12. surpluses. *Therefore,* without exports, the government would be subsidizing
13. American farmers by more than \$10 billion a year over the current rate. *Finally, as*
14. *mentioned earlier,* agricultural exports provide an entry to foreign markets that can be
15. exploited by other industries. *To sum up, I think the United States is certainly the*
16. world's largest exporter of agricultural products.

Appendix H

Read the following student essay and in small groups, suggest where metadiscoursal features can or should be added, and why.

Many people are afraid of being old but we have to face it. There are different stages in our lives. Being old is one of the stages we have to reach. Some people may think that they are too young to worry about the elderly stage. I think we should be more concerned about the elderly now in order to get well prepared for being old.

The work power of the elderly decreases since the muscle and bone do not work very efficiently in the old people. They may run or walk in slow motion. The ability to resist the disease of the internal organ decreases so the elderly get ill easily. If the old people like eating fatty meat, alcohol and high calories food, they will have high chance to suffer from heart, liver and other diseases. This will affect their health.

The retired old people spend much time in home and they have nothing to do. They are in lack of the working satisfaction. They may regard themselves as rubbish in the society. They feel lonely because the sons

and daughters go out to work and leave them alone. Some may live alone because the young do not want to live with them. No one takes care of them and they will feel very lonely.

The old people should pay more attention to their body and diet. They should avoid doing vigorous exercises for fear that the bones and muscles are destroyed. They should be concerned with their diet. They should have a balanced diet and eat the foods which have high nutritious value. They should avoid eating fatty meat, drinking alcohol and smoking so that they can retain better health.

More old age centres should be provided for the elderly. They can spare time in taking part in the activities held by the centres. They can sing, dance and talk in there. They can make friends in the old age centre and they will not feel bored and lonely anymore. The young should show more concern for their parents and grandparents. They should spend more time to talk and go with the elderly.

The elderly is a part of our society. They should not be discriminated and abandoned. We should pay more attention to them.