

COHERENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING WRITING

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study consisting of three text-based analyses of groups of student argumentative essays written on the same topic. The aim was to identify text-based features of coherence in L1 and L2. The analyses were carried out on essays written by first and third year undergraduates at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philology "Blazhe Koneski" at the Ss. "Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia who wrote in their first language Macedonian, L1, and in English as a foreign language, L2. The goal was to recognise the importance of discourse organisation in academic writing in L1, and to examine factors which may affect second language learners' competence in the organisation of written discourse in English as a foreign language, L2. The paper points out the differences in the rhetorical models in Macedonian and English written discourse and how these differences may have an impact on writing assessment and the teaching of writing at university level.

Keywords: Coherence, organizational patterns, topical structure analysis, rhetorical models, teaching writing

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Writing is embedded in culture and since there are differences from one culture to another, there are differences as to the accepted or preferred rhetorical norms and conventions from one culture to another, from one written discourse to another.

Successful writing does not just mean adhering to the rules of grammar and vocabulary. It means following a whole range of other written discourse norms or conventions. Students should be taught strategies to improve their writing in line with English speaking academic discourse conventions. Students need to be sensitized to the differing organizational patterns and discourse styles and how they affect communication. Writing instruction should prepare students to take internationally recognized language tests, and to enable students to develop competence in argumentation, persuasion and critical thinking.

Text analysis research has shown that clear higher-order rhetorical structure with appropriate transitions or discourse markers aids the reader in understanding the text. The implication is that we, as teachers and researchers should aim to train students to use top-level rhetorical strategies/models in order to improve their writing quality (Connor & Schneider, 1990). Both researchers and teachers insist that if the linguistic features of effective texts can be identified, they can be taught to students (ibid.). Important cohesion analyses based on sentence-level features and inter-sentential relations, drawing on the work of Halliday and Hassan (1976) have not been able to describe important coherence relations on the level of whole discourse (Connor, 1984b; Evensen, 1990; Wikborg, 1985, 1987). L2 writing research has clearly demonstrated that a text may be cohesive but not coherent.

The present paper will report on results of three text-based analyses of groups of argumentative essays written on the same topic by first and third year undergraduates who wrote in Macedonian, L1, and in English, L2. The motivation for the research has been the need to be able to teach students how to write effectively, as well as to initiate contrastive and comparative research in writing between Macedonian and English. The focus of the research was on coherence, more precisely the study attempted to find out how the student writers achieve coherence in their writing in Macedonian and in English and whether systematic writing instruction at university level helps students focus on the discourse level of texts.

Defining coherence

Coherence is generally accepted as a *sine qua non* in written discourse (Bamberg, 1983:417); writing that does not achieve coherence will certainly fail to communicate the intended message to the reader. Knowledge of what constitutes coherence is particularly important in writing, since the concept of coherence is different in L1 and L2. Writing instruction has recognized that students have problems at the level of whole discourse, not just sentence level connectedness. On the other hand, students focus on sentence-level connectedness and understand coherence narrowly. In order to be able to help students develop coherence in their writing, it is essential that teachers have a thorough understanding of what makes a stretch of writing coherent. It is necessary to define coherence in broader terms, on the level of whole discourse (Lee, 2002).

- From a linguistic point of view, coherence can be said to be internal to the text – coherence is defined in terms of the formal properties of the text.
- The non-linguistic aspect, that is coherence as an internal feature of the reader – focuses on the role of the reader in creating coherence. Coherence is a characteristic of the mind, the intellect and this is what enables interpretation of the text. Coherence is not a feature of the text itself. Modern reading comprehension theories assert that text processing is an interaction between the reader and the text and that readers employ their knowledge of the world (content schemata) and knowledge of text structures (formal schemata) to make sense of a text (Carrell, 1987; Bamberg, 1983).

Whether coherence is regarded as text-based or reader-based, it is important that the writer, the text and the readers all interact in the construction of coherence.

Based on studies by Lee, (1998, 2002) and the literature review, coherence can be described as including the following features:

- Connectivity of the surface text with cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976)
- An information structure which guides the reader through the text and contributes to the topical development of the text (Connor & Farmer, 1990;

Firbas, 1986; Lautamatti, 1987); in other words how information is distributed (e.g. old before new) to contribute to topical development.

- Connectivity of the underlying content evidenced by relations between propositions. A proposition is an assertion. It is through the relationships between propositions that *global* coherence is established (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978).
- Macrostructure with a characteristic pattern and shape appropriate to its communicative purpose and context (Hoey, 1983, 1991);
- Metadiscourse features as signalizers of coherence relations (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996; Crismore et al., 1993); This includes, logical connectors, sequencers, hedges (Lee, 2002).

As shown earlier, knowledge structures play an important role in the construction of coherence, reader-based features such as *purpose*, *audience* and *context* should be taken into account in the execution of the research and also in teaching (Lee, 1998).

Rhetorical models for organizing information in argumentative essays in Macedonian and English

According to findings of contrastive research in other languages, namely, Bulgarian, German and English (Clyne, 1987; Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, 2001;), as well as based on the descriptions of organizational and compositional structure of written discourse by Macedonian scholars (Minova-Gjurkova, 2003; Pandev, 2004; Ducevska, 2005), we could summarize prominent differences in the rhetorical models of argumentative writing both in Macedonian and English. These organizational patterns or rhetorical models are used by the authors in the process of composing and writing argumentative essays in English and in Macedonian. Important research in this contrastive domain was carried out in the Bulgarian language by Svetlana Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva. Due to the linguistic and cultural similarity of the Macedonian language with Bulgarian, the research results obtained for the Bulgarian written conventions were used to analyze and summarize the characteristics of the norms and conventions of written discourse in Macedonian. These discourse patterns were then contrasted with Anglo-American rhetorical conventions. The following features were obtained:

- Argumentative as well as expository writing in the Anglo-American writing norms consists of formulating a thesis statement and elaboration which should be elicited from the topic of the composition which is already conceived to enable such processing. The writer's purpose is indicated at the very beginning of the essay in the introduction. In contrast, the Macedonian patterns of organizing the flow of ideas allow the writer more freedom, including digressions from the main topic, since the latter is regarded as a stimulus for free expression (cf. Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, 2001).
- Relevance is considered to be a key component of 'good', acceptable writing and is the most important 'virtue' (Clyne, 1987:74) in English written discourse;
- Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence and ends with a transition leading on to the next paragraph, so that linear progression is achieved. If facts, or new ideas are introduced which are not relevant, and do not contribute to the overall unity of the text, then these digressions are not tolerated and are unacceptable. Conversely, the Macedonian style of writing is characterized by unclear division of paragraphs and free compositional structure (cf. Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, 2001).
- Coherence is explicit and the text is audience friendly, audience oriented. The writer/author has a high level of awareness of reader expectations regarding the discourse. Contrary to this, the Macedonian model relies on the intelligent reader demanding wide knowledge from the reader since s/he has to 'decode' the underlying messages 'encoded' by the author of the text. Coherence is implicit and associative (ibid.);
- In accordance with the English written discourse conventions, the argumentative writing belongs to the genre of academic discourse, demanding clear, relevant arguments and a clear structure. In contrast, in the Macedonian language, argumentative writing is classified as belonging to the genre of journalistic prose, the main features of which are complex, individualistic thoughts, creative expression and elegant style (ibid.);

According to Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, the above contrastive analysis of argumentative written discourse as a genre in the Bulgarian (respectively, Macedonian) language and in English, simply confirms the intuitive reflections of teachers of writing that there are

serious differences as to what constitutes a 'well' written essay in the understanding of native speakers of the two languages (Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, 2001). It could be safely said that Macedonian students who study writing in English encounter problems in the domain of the rhetorical organization of their written products, due to the interference, and to a certain extent, negative transfer of mother tongue writing norms.

The study

The classroom study involved three text-based analyses of groups of argumentative essays written on the same topic in order to identify text-based features of coherence, as well as to distinguish between groups of varying degrees of writing proficiency. The aim was to recognize the importance of discourse organization in academic writing and most importantly, to examine factors which may affect second language learners' competence in the organization of written discourse in English as a foreign language.

The analyses were carried out on compositions written by first and third year undergraduates at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philology "Blazhe Koneski" – Skopje, Ss. Cyril & Methodius University, majoring in English who wrote both in their first language, Macedonian, L1 and in English as a foreign language, L2. The topic was: ... *More severe punishments and more prisons will reduce crime. Do you agree with this statement?* All three analyses focused on coherence, i.e. attempting to identify unity and logical connectivity of the written compositions, but each analysis concentrated on a different aspect of coherence. The first analysis made comparisons of 60 (30 written in L1 and 30 written in L2) compositions in terms of organizational patterns, organization scores and overall quality. Based on empirical studies carried out by Sasaki & Hirose (2001), Connor & Schneider, (1990), similarities and differences regarding the choice of organizational structure in argumentative student essays written in their mother tongue, Macedonian L1, with argumentative essays written in English L2 by the same students were investigated. It focused on the rhetorical structure of the whole text, the position of the *main idea*, type of organizational structure: *deductive or inductive* and the presence or lack of a *summary/conclusion*. The types of organizational patterns were coded with numerical

values to enable statistical processing. The compositions were also graded by two independent raters.

The second analysis investigated in what way first year and third year undergraduates logically connect ideas. To this effect, research carried out by Witte (1983b), Connor & Schneider (1990) was replicated using topical structure analysis on three groups of compositions (total of 90 compositions written by first and third year undergraduates) based on Lautamatti's taxonomy (1987) which reveals the internal topical structure through the repetition of key words and phrases. This type of text analysis follows the flow of information structure of the text, and as such, offers an overall model of coherence for the written composition. Lautamatti's model is based on the Prague linguistic school and concentrates on the semantic ties between the topics of sentences and their relationship with the main, discourse topic. The progression of subtopics is called topical progression. Sequences of sentences were examined by looking at the sentence topics and how these topics work through the text to progressively build meaning. Based on previous research (Connor & Farmer, 1990; Connor & Schneider, 1990; Witte, 1983b) three progression types have been identified:

- *Parallel progression* – the subtopics of several sentences remain the same (the subtopic in S1, S2, S3...is the same). A parallel topic is commonly a repetition, a pronominalized form, or a synonym of the preceding topic (Connor & Farmer, 1990).
- *Sequential progression* – the comment (the new information) or *rheme* in the sentence becomes the *topic* (*given* information, or *old*) in the following sentence. Comment of S1 = topic of S2). A sequential topic is different from the immediately preceding topic. Witte (1983b) associated a greater proportion of sequential topics in lower rated essays with less coherent writing. The introduction of too many new sentence topics may obscure the discourse topic of the essay, or result in fragmented and not adequately developed writing (Connor & Schneider, 1990).
- *Extended parallel progression* – the topic is repeated after several sequential progressions.

In relation to the criteria for coding the topics in the essays, Bardovi-Harlig's notions of *topic* and *focus* was used. The topic was identified, which may or may not be the same as the grammatical subject of the sentence. Namely,

Topic:

What the author is writing about. It is context dependent; it may be given information and is probably definite (Bardovi-Harlig, 1990).

Focus:

Rest of the sentence that provides new information, part of the sentence which most advances communication, context-independent and may be indefinite (Bardovi-Harlig, 1990).

Following are sample passages showing types of progressions and coherence diagrams:

Parallel progression

Chocolates are a national craving. (2) Records show that they are sold in huge quantities. (3) Designer chocolates often sell for nearly \$30/lb. (4) It is obvious that these candies are America's number one choice.

Chocolates

they

Designer chocolates

these candies

Sequential progression

Computer interviews are used by market researchers to assess product demand. (2) Using these, many different products are analyzed. (3) For example, people may be asked about detergents.

1. Computer interviews

2. products

3. detergents

Extended parallel progression

(1) Body language varies from culture to culture. (2) To say 'yes', Americans nod their heads up and down. (3) Japanese and Italians use the same nod to say no. (4) Body language is an important skill for international managers.

Finally, the third analysis focused on investigating the important role that discourse markers have in pointing towards coherence of the text. The aim of the last

analysis was to determine the frequency of usage of certain discourse markers, as well as to attempt to define and classify these discourse markers based on their functions in the corpus of written compositions.

Results

The results of the first analysis of choice of organizational patterns revealed that there were more similarities than differences in the argumentative compositions written in L1 and L2. The highest scoring essays used the inductive organizational pattern (33% of the essays written in English, and 16% in the essays written in Macedonian), which could mean that leaving the main idea at the end of the essay, in the conclusion, is valued in Macedonian writing and is allotted a greater number of points. Of course, the results clearly demonstrated that the choice of organizational pattern is not the only factor that contributes to the overall quality of the written product. Coherence on the level of whole discourse plays an important role, connectedness between paragraphs, relevance of ideas and the appropriate use of discourse markers. The majority of students (50% of the essays written in Macedonian, and 46.67% of the English essays) used the deductive organization. More precisely, they treated the essay topic as if it were a question that had to be answered. They stated their opinion and main idea at the beginning of the essay. The discourse features of the compositions consisted of general, neutral declarations that simply gave a response to the “for” or “against” question. There was no attempt at taking up a stance, defending one’s position and persuading the reader. The compositions written in L1 had greater variety regarding the use of organizational patterns, most certainly due to the spontaneity of writing in L1. Also, the level of literacy in L1 had exerted influence. The students had not yet developed a sufficient level of competence in L1 regarding the discourse organization of their compositions in order to surpass their level of organizational competence in L2.

Regarding the results of the second analysis, the use of progression types revealed that sequential progressions abound in the first year L2 compositions, resulting in low-quality essays without much topical depth. Mann-Whitney (Wilcoxon) test confirmed differences between the first year L2 compositions, where only 21,43% used over 5 parallel progression, whereas 53% of the third year group used 5 or more parallel

progressions resulting in better quality essays without frequent diversions from the main topic. The better quality essays by the third year group were to be expected, since the students had already had five semesters of systematic writing instruction.

The results of the third analysis which focused on calculating the frequency of discourse markers as signals of coherence relations, clearly demonstrated that discourse markers were not used as often as they should have been. Thus, the analyzed corpus of compositions revealed insufficiently signaled relations both between sentences, and on the level of the whole discourse which resulted in a high level of implicitness. This in turn, rendered the written composition less comprehensible to the reader. In addition, the low frequency of causal discourse markers denoted that the quality of argumentation was not up to level. (Georgievska-Sarzhoska, 2010)

Even though text-based analyses have their limitations, the present study attempted to describe student writing by going beyond the sentence to the discourse level.

Implications of the study for the teaching and assessment of writing

Due to the differences in the rhetorical models for organizing information in English and Macedonian, some implications can be drawn as to what should be given emphasis in teaching writing and in the assessment of writing competence.

Writing instruction should include sessions of teaching explicitly the basic characteristics and aspects of coherence in the English language as well as in Macedonian. This means teaching coherence creating devices based on the features of what constitutes coherence described above. Instructors could use specific comments when giving feedback to the students, such as: under use of meta-discourse features, inappropriate use of discourse markers. Students can self-edit and review their peers' performance. Coherence 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 (Lee, 2002).

Bearing in mind that the study carried out analyses on argumentative essays, the results clearly demonstrate the need for devising an appropriate method of assessment of essays at a more advanced level of linguistic and writing competence. This new analytical model of assessment would take into account and identify the elements of

persuasion, and argumentation (Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, 2001). In other words, in addition to the linguistic, the rhetorical component in written discourse should be included in the assessment of the essay.

Due to the fact that there are differences in the understanding of the concept of coherence, as well as differences in the rhetorical models in Macedonian and English written discourse, there are also differences in the criteria for assessing essays between native English speakers and Macedonian teachers. More precisely, according to Anglo-American textual and rhetorical norms, the most important criteria for assessment of argumentative essays is sociolinguistic competence, in other words, explicit coherence and clear expression, conciseness and fulfilling reader expectations. This is followed by assessing the appropriateness of the overall organizational structure of the essay, including the correct choice of rhetorical norm (macrostructure) which should be in line with the purpose of the essay. These features are followed by evaluating the content, the intended message of the essay, the persuasive force it possesses together with the quality of argumentation (Dimitrova-Gjuzeleva, 2001). After these criteria have been fulfilled, the final stage of the assessment involves looking at the grammatical accuracy and lexical appropriacy of the essay (*ibid.*). Conversely, in the Macedonian assessment model, performed by Macedonian native speakers, the emphasis is on grammatical precision and vocabulary, followed by examining the organization and content, and finally discourse level competence is assessed (the logical flow of ideas, coherence at a deeper level of text)(*ibid.*).

Conclusion

As a result of the three analyses, we can conclude that coherence determines the semantic relations which enable the understanding of a certain text so that it might be adequately used. This entails that certain conditions have to be fulfilled in order for coherence to be realized. These are: the purpose the author wants to achieve, the expectations of the audience, conveying the intended message. The performed analyses in the study could be termed explorative, nevertheless they have shown that there are certain aspects of student writing which can be measured, or assessed, however some cannot. Focusing on improving the syntactical component will not result in better quality essays, neither will the narrow sentence level cohesive devices improve the

quality of the written text. Bearing this in mind, teaching writing should include explicit teaching of coherence creating elements and raise students' awareness of the need to focus on 'whole' texts that is on the level of discourse beyond the sentence level. Students have to be sensitized to the important role that the reader plays in creating coherence. The first module in the writing syllabus should consist of teaching the following aspects of coherence: *Purpose, audience and context of situation*. Coherence cannot be achieved without a clearly defined purpose. Teaching coherence creating devices could be carried out in two phases: the first section would include the macro-elements – purpose, audience and context, choice of macrostructure, followed by the second section consisting of teaching the micro-level elements – internal cohesion, sentence level connectedness and meta-discourse markers (Lee, 1998).

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