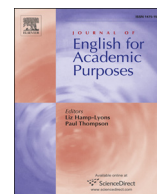


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Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

Guiding the reader (or not) to re-create coherence: Observations on postgraduate student writing in an academic argumentative writing task

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 April 2014

Received in revised form 31 July 2014

Accepted 31 July 2014

Available online 23 August 2014

Keywords:

Argumentative writing

Coherence

Cohesion

Rhetorical relations

Concession

ABSTRACT

Coherence is a notoriously difficult construct to describe for the purposes of responding to student writing. Student writers can be admonished for failing to make their writing sufficiently coherent, yet their lecturers may struggle to understand or explain why it lacks coherence. This study aimed to contribute to understanding of coherence, a term widely used but relatively under-theorised in the EAP literature. It reports a qualitative inquiry to explore two aspects of coherence in fairly advanced EAP writing. Samples of postgraduate students' responses to an academic argumentative writing task were analysed with a double focus. Firstly with reference to a classification of textual metadiscourse in persuasion (Dafouz-Milne, 2008) we observed how signals of text organisation were used and secondly with reference to the construct of rhetorical relations with and without signalling (Hoey, 2001; Taboada, 2006) we observed how concessive relations, a key relation in argumentation, were presented. Each focus represented a different discourse analytical approach (one concerned with form and one with a rhetorical relation). Illustrative texts are presented to show specific ways the use of the discourse features guided the reader (or not) to a line of understanding. Suggestions are made for targeted EAP writing instruction, assessment and research.

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1. Introduction

The ability to write well-formed text is often fundamental to success in educational settings across many subjects in the curriculum (Wolfe, 2011). Although students' writing may be graded by their lecturers and supervisors primarily for content (ideas and information), content needs to be understood not only in terms of the meaning of individual ideas and pieces of information but also in terms of how the text develops and how ideas and information inter-relate. But for this to happen, the reader needs to be able to re-create the coherence the writer had in mind. However, although there has been considerable research into the use of cohesive devices in student writing, research into coherence in student writing has been much more limited, which is probably due to the perspective that "coherence is not directly observable" (Struthers, Lapadat, & MacMillan, 2013: p. 187).

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According to Hyland (2009: 6) writing English for academic purposes generally requires students to be explicit about the organisation of their texts and cautious in making claims, to clearly signpost connections and generally to “take responsibility for the coherence and clarity of their writing.” The need to write coherently is especially important at the postgraduate level since texts at this level are typically long and complex. However, although students are expected to write coherently, many struggle to create text that is entirely coherent and well-connected (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Lorenz, 1999).

Responding to difficulties in the coherence of writing can present challenges for subject lecturers and EAP writing teachers. It can also present challenges for those assessing student writing. At the University of Auckland all students (both speakers of English as a first and as a second language) embarking on doctoral studies take a diagnostic English Language needs assessment (DELNA) and on the basis of the results, are advised of any areas that could be usefully addressed and made aware of appropriate sources of language support available within the University. (For further information on DELNA please refer to Read (2008) and von Randow (2013)). The writing component of the assessment is an argumentative writing task. Like a number of other grading schemes, the students' writing is assessed in part for cohesion and coherence. However, assessing these criteria, despite considerable developments to the grading scheme over the years, has remained less satisfactory than other criteria, such as grammar and lexis. Cotton and Wilson (2011) note that writing assessment schemes often include cohesion and coherence as criteria, however, assessors tend to find these criteria vague and more difficult to use than other criteria.

1.1. Cohesion and coherence

Since publication of *Cohesion in English* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), cohesion has become a well understood construct in language teaching. However, coherence has remained a relatively vague construct and has been under-theorised in the field of Applied Linguistics, although it is a term often referred to in writing instruction and in assessment of students' writing. Kern (2000: 80) distinguishes cohesion and coherence stating, “cohesion has to do with dependencies among the surface features of text... coherence has to do with unity and continuity of the discourse... the degree to which concepts and relations that underlie the surface text are mutually relevant”.

Coherence is not directly a property of text in the same way that cohesion is understood to be. It is “not texts but rather people that cohere when understanding texts” (Bublitz, 1999; Lorenz 1999: 2). Hoey (2001: 31) explains that “as readers interact with a text they formulate hypotheses about how the text will develop and ... these hypotheses help them understand and interpret the text as they continue reading”. The ability to make sense of a text derives partly from what the reader brings to the text, such as background knowledge of the topic, expectations and schematic knowledge of how texts are typically organised, either in terms of general text patterns (rhetorical or coherence relations), text types or genres. The organisation of ideas and information plays a key role as what is said sets up expectations about what will follow (Meierkord & Fetzer, 2002).

It is the reader who coheres often by making inferences about implicit coherence structures (Bublitz, 1999; Kehler, 2004). Nevertheless, generally speakers or writers help create coherence “by (more or less subtly) guiding their readers (or hearers) to a suggested line of understanding” (Bublitz, 1999: 2). Thus although coherence concerns the expectations readers bring to texts “this does not mean that what is actually in the text is any less important” (Jones, 2012: 39). Writers have means, such as, the use of signals or conventionalised text patterns, to enable them to guide their readers. One important means is the use of linguistic signalling of coherence relations, such as marking of *cause-consequence* relations with *that is why* or *because* to direct readers or listeners as to “how to connect the new discourse segment with the previous one” (Kamalski, 2007: 18). Coherence is understood to be medium and genre-specific, and the means by which speakers and writers “suggest coherence can (and often do) vary from spoken to written language, from genre to genre, from text type to text type” (Bublitz, 1999: 3).

In EAP, as in Applied Linguistics more generally, cohesion and coherence are often discussed in conjunction and the relationship between them has to an extent remained blurred. Cohesive devices can contribute to text coherence as they can guide the reader. For example, the use of cohesive conjunctions can signal logical relations and thus “signpost the path of coherence for the reader” (Lorenz, 1999: 55). Textual metadiscourse organises the discourse for the reader by “pointing out topic shifts, signalling sequences, cross referencing, connecting ideas (and) previewing material” (Hyland & Tse, 2004: 158). Although such devices can contribute to the coherence of a text, they do not necessarily do so. Generally writers (or speakers) endeavour to guide their readers' interpretation and can use cohesive devices to do so but the use of more cohesive devices does not necessarily result in more coherence (Bublitz, 2001). They may not be needed. For example, the sequence of information may follow a conventional pattern of organisation, such as problem-solution, and on that basis does not require the use of discourse markers (Hoey, 2001).

Research into students' writing has tended to focus on text surface features, such as cohesive devices. Findings from this research suggest English second language (L2) students may over-use certain cohesive devices, such as, linking adverbials (Shaw, 2009) or use them in different ways compared to English first language writers (Gardezi & Nesi, 2009). Corpus-based studies have been used. For example Hinkel (2003) investigated first-year native speaker and academically advanced non-native speaker students' use of adverbial markers in argumentative writing on placement and diagnostic writing tests. *Inter alia* the study (op. cit.: 1062) found that concession clauses, which function to “present ideational content in a balanced fashion to provide evidence of the writer's credibility” as evidenced by use of markers, including *although*, *even though*, *while*, *whereas*, were relatively scarce in both the written responses of both the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) students.

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