

CONTEXTUAL COHERENCE IN RECOUNT ESSAYS

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Abstract: Writing is one of the most difficult aspects in language skills. In fact, for some learners writing could be the most difficult skill compared to other language skills. This skill requires precise grammar, appropriate uses of cohesive devices, capability to choose the most suitable vocabulary, and the ability to maintain the coherence. Maintaining the coherence, especially the contextual coherence in recount essays is not easy. Learners often have problems with the use of cohesive devices, grammatical structures, and the schematic structure of a recount. In fact, those three problems are the components that support contextual coherence. When there are problems in those components, contextual coherence cannot be achieved.

Key words: Contextual coherence, schematic structure, recount.

BACKGROUND

Writing skill is important but it is also one of the language skills which may cause problems to the learners. It has been known that writing is a complex process that requires a lot of practices and there is no formula that can guarantee a solution. Writing has always been a difficult task; in fact, for some learners it is the most difficult task of all, compared to speaking, listening and reading tasks. Many students have written incoherent assignments. They may not pay attention to event sequences and grammatical structures that can enhance the overall writing quality. Therefore, when students write essays or passages, they often make a lot of errors.

Students of English often produce incoherent writings. The worse thing, unlike grammatical errors which can be easily corrected, errors in coherence are often more difficult to handle as they involve chunks of units, such as series of sentences or paragraphs. The students may not know how

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to write effective writing, how to structure and sequence ideas with logical consistency, how to use linguistic creativity, and how to write a text that shows coherence. Mostly, the students cannot develop the internal structure of the sentence on the one hand, and can not handle the structure development of the sentences on the other hand. In addition, the grammar which the students use might be inadequate. When the grammar is not appropriately used, the sentences or ideas in a text may disrupt the flow of the text and cause incoherence.

Writing essays can cause problems to many students of English as a second language. Most students' writings are not in good textual organization and incoherent ideas. The students often misuse functional connectors. When writing lacks coherence, the reader is forced to stop and reread. Occasionally, the readers may just give up because of frustration. In addition, the deficient content of lexical phrases in students' writing that causes incoherence of ideas often lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

Another problem is that students' writing is often ineffective or unsuccessful. Ineffective or unsuccessful writing is in terms of rhetorical and textual inadequacies and linguistic deficiency. It is ineffective because their paragraph writing lacks unity and coherence. Ineffective or poor writing is manifested as coherent gaps, ambiguity of reference, weak cohesion, absence of transition and reorienting signal in the paragraph (Chandrasegaran, 1999).

CONTEXTUAL COHERENCE

According to Collin Cobuilt (1996) coherence refers to the quality of a text when it makes sense or is pleasing because all the parts or steps fit together well and logically. The readers will judge whether a passage is coherent or not. It is coherent if the reader can easily comprehend its meanings.

Meanwhile, coherence, according to Halliday and Hasan (1994:23), refers to the way a group of clauses or sentences relate to contexts. Eggins (1994) explains clearly about coherence in the systemic model that coherence is a unifying element in good writing. It refers to the way a group of clauses or sentences relate to the contexts. There are two levels of context : the context of culture, (i.e. genre), and the context of situation, (i.e. register). She states that coherence that relates to those two contexts is known as *contextual coherence*. An example of a text that lacks contextual coherence

is:

- * Once upon a time there was a little white mouse called "Tiptoe". It's very rarely hot in Paris. When does the race start? It does so. No, I don't know how to make chocolate crackle (Eggins, 1994:87).

The example above shows that the text lacks contextual coherence. Firstly, it lacks situational coherence for the reader cannot think of one situation. There is no coherence of field (the writer jumps from a field of white mice to Paris to chocolate crackles), nor coherence of mode (some clauses are obviously written language, others responses from conversation), nor of tenor (the reader can not determine what role the writer of this text is playing). Secondly, there is no identifiable generic structure: each clause seems to come from different genre. The lack of contextual coherence shows a reflection of lack of cohesion. The example contains clauses that are unrelated to the others. None of the sentences contributes to the interpretation of the others.

Coherence is also established by the mutual interaction of the writer and reader to make sense of the text based on the shared background knowledge outside the text. (Renkema, 1993). Let us look at the following example used in Enkvist:

- * The net bulged with the lightening shot. The referee blew his whistle and signalled. Smith had been offside. The two captains both muttered something. The goalkeeper sighed for relief (Enkvist, 1990:12).

This text consists of five sentences that can only have the meaning intended if they act together. Any reader or listener would be able to define the situation as a goal disallowed in a football match, but only when these sentences appear together. Therefore, we can only understand the text if we have same background knowledge of what football is (Langer, 1984; Lee, 1986). The text becomes coherent when certain knowledge of the world, that is, knowledge of a soccer game, in this case is applied. Hence, a coherent text confirms to a consistent world picture for the reader, and therefore the meaning in such a text is summarizable, comprehensible and interpretable.

Contextual coherence is the unifying element in good writing. It refers to unity that can be created between ideas, sentences, paragraphs and sections of a piece of writing. Contextual coherence is what gives a piece of writing its flow. It also gives the reader a sense of what to expect and, therefore,

makes the reading easier to follow as the ideas appear to be presented in a natural, almost automatic, way (*English Language Centre, HKPU, 1998*).

RECOUNT

It is one of story genres within various types of spoken and written texts. Recount has the social function that retells events for the purpose of informing or entertaining and tells the reader about the personal experiences. (Gerot and Wignell, 1995: 194). The schematic structure of recount consists of three steps:

1. Orientation which provides the setting and introduces the participants
2. Events which tells what happens and explains in what sequence
3. Re-orientation/coda which is optional.

It is the closure of events. It returns the reader to the point of departure or closure of events. For instance:

* Earthquake

Orientation:

I was driving a long the coast road when the car suddenly lurched to one side.

Event 1.

At first I thought a tyre had gone but then I saw telegraph poles. Collapsing like matchsticks.

Event 2.

The rocks came tumbling across the road and I had to abandon the car.

Event 3.

When I got back to town, well as I said, there wasn't much left. (Gerot and Wignell, 1995:195)

The example shows that the bold types are the words used to refer to the specific doer. The italics refer to the material processes. Material processes are processes of material doing. They express the notion that some entity physically does something which may be done to some other entity (Gerot and Wignell, 1995: 55)

The underlined words refer to circumstances of time and place. They also indicate temporal sequence with the term "then".

Compared to other language skills, writing is relatively more difficult. It is not easy to make a good writing. In fact, we often find most of our students spend too much time writing their composition while the results are not as good as we expect. Since a good writing is the one which is coherent, students need to maintain the coherence in their writing. However maintaining coherence, especially the contextual coherence in writing a recount essay is not an easy task for the students. Celce- Murcia (1995) and Eggins (1994) say that contextual coherence has some relation with cohesion and grammatical structures. Dealing with maintaining contextual coherence, there are some problems often occur in students' recount essays, such as the followings:

1. What cohesive devices are used in the students' recount essays?
2. How do the students use finites to make grammatical sentences in their recount essays?
3. How do the schematic structures of a recount essay help the students write their essays?

What problems in items 1, 2, and 3 hinder the contextual coherence?

LEARNERS' PROBLEMS IN MAINTAINING CONTEXTUAL COHERENCE

A. Cohesive Devices

The students often get problems with the use of cohesive devices such as reference, ellipsis and conjunction. They are often inconsistent using the reference. Here are some examples from the Writing 2 class at the Faculty of Letters Soegijapranata Catholic University):

1. *Mr. Brown* left his car but *she* forgot to bring *his* key.
2. *He* was *the woman* I saw last night.

In those examples, the students are not consistent in using the referents. In (1), *she* should be changed into *he* since it refers to *Mr. Brown*. In (2), *He* should be changed into *She* because it refers to *the woman*.

Sometimes the uses of ellipsis are not appropriate due to the finites used. Students often forget to include the finites when they write in ellipsis. Below is an example of an ellipsis from a student in a writing class (from Writing 2 class at Faculty of Letters Soegijapranata Catholic University):

3. But he still afraid and the woman too.

This sentence consists of two clauses. Both of the clauses miss the finites. The last problem of cohesive devices is the logical relation which is realized through conjunctions. The improper use of conjunctions is often confusing. Examples (from Writing 2 class at Faculty of Letters Soegijapranata Catholic University):

4. Jean's son was sick, *instead* she delivered his newspaper for him.
5. Most people can do without food for a month, *and* they need two quarts of water a day to survive.

In example (4) and (5) above the students used the wrong conjunctions. Instead of using connector *instead*, the student should use *therefore* in (4) and *but* in (5). Some students cannot well manage their essay because the transitions/conjunctions that link sentences or ideas were not appropriately used. Transitional expressions help the coherence in writing because they tie ideas together. The inappropriate uses of conjunctions can cause unnatural or awkward writing. Neglecting the use of transitional expression results in hard to follow or choppy writing (<http://planet.tvi.cc.nm.us/ba122/writingunity>, 2003).

B. Problems in Grammatical Structures: Problems of Finites

In a recount essay, students should use temporal past FVO (Finite-Verb-Object). However, students often use the wrong FVO. For instance:

One day, Mr Bean goes to swimming pool. He dives the car into the parking place. He change the clothes. He want to jump in the pool, *but he afraid* and the guard was in. Mr Bean *must be move* in the other pool. *He interesting* with jump board and want to try. After he *was arrive* to the top, *he afraid* to jump. Mr Bean was hurrying up in the jump board, but the children *were help* him to jump in the pool. So, finally he jumped scarcely. When he was jumping in the water, he lost the underwear and a little child took the underwear. Mr Bean was panic because the time is up to swimming.

(from a student of English class at STIKUBANK Semarang)

The underlined words are not acceptable. The student mixed the uses of finites. The student is supposed to use the finites in temporal past FVO,

however, he or she used temporal past and present FVO. In addition, in some parts the students did not include the finites (the italics phrases *he afraid, he interesting*). Therefore, he or she should add the temporal past FVO : he *was* afraid, he *was* interesting. Meanwhile, in other parts, the student overused the temporal FVO like in these two clauses : *After he was arrive... and but the children were help...* The finites *was* and *were* should have been deleted, and the verbs *help* and *arrive* should have been changed into the temporal past FVO.

C. Problems of Schematic Structure of Recount

When writing a recount essay, the students should understand that they have to use the past FVO, however, usually students use both past & present FVO. The students are also often trapped to use the procedure type that is written in present FVO.

D. Problems of the Hinder Contextual Coherence

It has been mentioned previously that there are three potential factors for maintaining contextual coherence:

- shared background knowledge of the world between the writer/reader
- cohesive markers and grammar
- frames underlying genre expectation.

When writing an essay, a writer is supposed to understand who his or her readers are. He or she must include information that will help the readers understand what he or she wants to convey through his or her essay. If the writer and the readers do not share the same background knowledge, the message is sometimes misunderstood by the readers.

The roles of cohesive devices and grammar in determining the quality of the essay is very vital. The inappropriate uses of cohesive devices and inadequate grammar will result in confusion and misunderstanding. Finally, contextual coherence has something to do with plot-motivated overall structure and the frames underlying genre expectation such as setting and introduces the doer, topic continuity, and a coda (conclusion). A coda can be optional in recounts. The ability to close the essays with an explicit ending is relatively less developed since in a recount type, a coda is optional.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, maintaining contextual coherence is difficult to sustain for coherence itself is the product of many factors: top-down organization (paragraph unity), sentence cohesion and the grammatical structures. The problems are so complex that most students have difficulties in maintaining discourse coherence. The participants cannot use neither the correct field nor the correct mode.

The writing teachers cannot avoid coming across some students who use wrong cohesive devices, such as the wrong uses of reference, ellipsis and conjunction. The teachers cannot avoid the wrong use of grammar. Thus, when writing a recount essay, some students are not consistent in using the tenses.

However, sometimes the schematic structures of a recount are not used properly. So, the students combine the schematic structure of a recount with the schematic structures of a narrative and procedure. Therefore, it is advisable for writing teachers to give more and more practices on paragraph unity/ organisational unity, sentence cohesion, the use of transitions/ conjunctions and the use of FVO.

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