



EFL Students' Voices on Coherence: A Classroom-Based Inquiry

Chirasiri Kasemsin Vivekmetakorn
chirasiri.kas@mahidol.ac.th
Mahidol University

Kankarn Kaewbangpood
kankarn_k@hotmail.com
Mahidol University

Abstract

Coherence is an essential concept in writing, but there are different perspectives on the concept and there seems to be little consensus as to what constitutes coherence. Moreover, in second and foreign language writing research, relatively less attention has been paid to coherence from students' viewpoint. Drawing on Lee's framework of teaching coherence (1998, 2002a & b) and the theoretical notion of students' voices, this study explored how EFL students conceptualized coherence. Data were collected from classroom observation throughout one semester (28 sessions, 25 students and 1 teacher), interviews with 12 Thai EFL college students, documents used in the class, and students' drafts. The triangulation of the data revealed that there was, to a large extent, a convergence between the students' conceptualization of coherence and the teaching although the word "coherence" was not mentioned in the class, the syllabus, or the teaching materials. However, there were contradictions between the students' understanding and their writing practices. The results suggested that learning to produce a coherent piece of writing may take longer than one or two writing courses and that training in both reader-based and text-based features of coherence was essential in enhancing the students' understanding of coherence and writing ability.

Keywords: EFL writing, coherence, students' voices

Introduction

Coherence is considered as an essential element in written discourse because it helps readers follow writers' ideas and meet what writers intends to convey (e.g. Bamberg, 1983; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Heffernan & Lincoln, 1990; Lee, 1998; Nadell, McMeniman & Langan, 1994; Reinking & Von der Osten, 2011; Wyrick, 2005; Yarber, 1989). However, there seems little consensus on what constituted coherence. As Johns (1986) stated, coherence is described as encompassing "a multitude of reader- and text-based features" (p.247).

On the one hand, from the textual linguistic point of view (e.g. Halliday & Hasan, 1976), coherence is described as progressive links between sentences that create the semantic relations within the text. Seen in this light, coherence creates a context of meaning and is achieved by linguistic means. That is, cohesive devices which consist of lexical and grammatical devices (i.e. reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion) help link and signal relations between propositions within and across sentences. These surface links are referred to as cohesion. With reference to the English language, Halliday and Hasan (1976) state that cohesion helps build coherence.



Closely related to the textual linguistic point of view on coherence is the discourse point of view in which coherence is described as “a semantic property of discourse” (van Dijk 1997, p.93). This property refers to how words and phrases are semantically related to one another and their relations contribute to the semantic interdependence of the text. Coherence is associated with topical development, and coherence in a text is described by means of topical structure analysis. (e.g. Connor & Farmer, 1990; Knoch, 2007; Lautamatti, 1978; Todd, Kongphut & Darasawang, 2007). In this point of view, a coherent text is characterized by topical progression—a discourse topic is developed or progress with subtopics that are in a logical sequence and semantically related to the topic.

On the other hand, according to researchers working in the schema theoretical framework (e.g. Bamberg, 1983; Carrell, 1982), coherence is achieved through an interaction between readers and texts. While reading a text, readers draw on their background knowledge including linguistic knowledge and the knowledge of the world or socio-cultural scripts to make sense of the text (e.g. Steffensen, 1981). As Carrell (1982) stated, “In the schema-theoretical view of text processing, what is important is not only the text, its structure and content, but what the reader or listener does with the text” (p.482). In the same manner, Bamberg (1983) maintained:

Meaning and coherence are not inscribed in the text, this research shows, but arise from readers' efforts to construct meaning and to integrate the details in the text into a coherent whole. Although readers are guided by textual cues, they also draw on their own knowledge and expectations to bridge gaps and to fill in assumed information. (p. 420)

These arguments were in line with the results of several studies on the quality of EFL and ESL learners' writing (e.g. , Chen, 2008; Khalil, 1989; Liu & Braine, 2005; Meisuo, 2000; Tierney and Mosenthal 1981), which revealed that cohesive devices or surface links could guide readers to the text but they could not be an indicator of textual coherence. In other words, coherence was not created only by textual or linguistic features.

The different perspectives on coherence have rendered coherence an elusive concept, and hence it affects how coherence is understood and how it is taught and learned (Johns, 1986; Lee, 1998, 2002a & 2002b). However, there have been a few studies that investigated pedagogical aspects of coherence (Conner & Farmer, 1990; Lingprayoon, Chaya & Thep-akkphong; Suraishkumar, 2004).

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on literature on textual linguistics, discourse and schema theory, Lee (1998, 2002a & 2002b) operationalized a more integrative definition of coherence and used it for pedagogical purposes in ESL and EFL contexts. Lee's operational definition of coherence consisted of six features as shown in Table 1.



Table 1: Lee's operational definition of coherence (1998, 2002a &b)

Features of Coherence	Explanation
Purpose, audience and context of situation (Coulthard, 1994; Hoey, 1983)	Communicative purposes of the text which are based on the writer's analysis of audience and context and the reader's understanding of the ideas written in the text
Macrostructure (Hoey, 1983; Martin & Rothery, 1986)	An outline of the main categories or functions of the text according to the communicative purpose of the text
Information distribution (Danes, 1974; Halliday	Ordering of elements in a text based on distribution of old (given) information followed by new information
Topical development, propositional development and modification (van Dijk, 1980)	Connectivity of the underlying content as evidenced by relations between propositions and elaboration of propositions
Cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976)	Relationships within and across sentences created by cohesive devices
Metadiscourse (Crismore, Markkanen & Steffenson, 1993)	Markers that help readers to organize understand, interpret, and evaluate information

Lee's working definition of coherence took cohesion as one component of coherence and incorporated in her framework other discourse and reader-related components. This suggested that in her framework coherence was an outcome of both textual features and reader-writer communication. In her study (2002b), each of these components was introduced to the students through reading handouts and analyses of given texts as well as revisions of their own drafts. The students' final drafts were more coherent as judged by three raters.

Student voices

Another issue that is of equal importance is how students perceive coherence. One approach to investigating this issue is by attending to students' views or listening to their voices. The concept of voice has been introduced to educational research in the 1910's as a factor contributing to collaboration between teacher and student which could potentially lead to teacher professional development and education reform (Cook-Sather, 2002; Hongboontri & Noipinit, forthcoming). Student and teacher voices have been researched on the premise that both parties have crucial perspectives on their surroundings and practices which can reveal dynamics of education—information needed to implement a policy or a change (e.g. Batty, Rudduck, & Wilson 2000).

According to Cook-Sather (2006), students' voice is associated with rights and respect. That is students have rights to give or share their opinions of what they want, feel about or think of their study, teachers, school or administrators or what problems they have. At the same time, teachers need to respect students' voices by listening to what they want or think as students show their respect to their teachers by listening to them and following teachers' instruction. Studies (e.g., Rodgers, 2006; Rudduck, 2007) underscored the growing significance of listening to students' voices which showed reciprocity in the student-schooling relationship.



Using Lee's working definition of coherence and students' voices as the conceptual framework, we ventured into a writing class to explore how a group of EFL university students viewed coherence and the extent to which teaching and students' views on coherence might be related.

Methodology

Following the notion of triangulation (Mathison, 1987), we gathered data from three sources i.e. classroom observation, interview and documents with aims to explain students' views on coherence and gain a better insight into teaching and learning this concept in an EFL setting.

Participants

An academic writing class which consisted of 25 second-year students (F=16 and M=9) majoring in English and a native speaker professor at *Prince University* (pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the university and the participants, according to Cresswell, 2008 and Merriam, 2009) volunteered to participate in the study. All were willing to be observed. Of the 25 students, 12 consented to interviews, and 11 out of the 12 students allowed us to access gather their drafts of written assignments. Altogether, 28 drafts were used in the study.

Observation

One of the researchers started observing the class from their first class to their last class, i.e. in one semester (beginning of November-end of February). The researcher attended the class for 28 sessions and each session lasted 1 hour and a half. The role of the researcher was a nonparticipant observer (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). That is, the researcher did not participate in any of the students' learning activities. The observation followed guidelines including topics of teaching, teaching materials, types of activities, time allocated for each activity, features of coherence, questions from the teacher and the students as well as responses.

Interviews

Semi-structure interview was used to gather data related to students' voices on coherence, their writing, and their experience as writing students. The interviews questions (Appendix A) were piloted with 15 English major students at another public university in a different region. Twelve students were individually interviewed in the final week of the course. The interview was audio recorded. Immediately after the interviews, the data were transcribed and then translated into English.

Documents

The third data source came from documents. The documents in the present study were the textbook *Reason to write: strategies for success in academic writing* which was used in every class, 29 pieces of students' drafts of five-paragraph essays on different topics and rhetorical patterns (e.g. description, compare-contrast, and cause-effect), and the course



syllabus of the academic writing class. The teacher's written feedback and end comments on the essays were also included.

Analysis

The classroom observation data and interview data were analyzed with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) concepts of open and axial coding. In this process, each source of data was examined in order to look for similarities and differences. Then the data were labeled and categorized to create a meaningful group of information and a relation between the categories to uncover the students' voices.

Lee's (1998, 2002a, 2002b) working definition of coherence shown in table 1 was used to guide the analysis of how any of the six components was mentioned in the course syllabus, the textbook, the students' drafts, and the teachers' feedback and comments.

The analyzed data were then triangulated to find out how the data converged, diverged, contracted or appeared inconsistent. The triangulation process was carried out with an attempt to meaningfully explain the reciprocity between activities in the classroom, information given by the students from the interview, and the students' writing assignments.

Results

The triangulation of the data revealed that the students' perceptions of coherence and the teaching were, to a large extent, related. Interestingly, the term 'coherence' was mentioned neither in the class nor in the documents, but the activities and the exercises addressed four main components of coherence. This converged with the student interviewees' perceptions of coherence as consisting of four elements, with ten out of the twelve students viewed coherence as topical development. The other three features of coherence as perceived by the students were audience, macrostructure, and cohesion. Table 2 below presents an overview of the results.

Table 2: The components of coherence according to the student interviewees' perceptions

Participants	Topical Development	Macrostructure	Cohesion	Audience	
				Reader Role	Reader Attention
Chaba	✓			✓	✓
Jantra	✓		✓		
Kamon	✓			✓	✓
Kumphi	✓				
Mali	✓				
Manee	✓				
Meka	✓				
Piroon	✓				
Sakda	✓			✓	✓
Suda	✓			✓	
Napa		✓	✓		
Koson		✓			



Topical development

Our analysis revealed that topical development was the first coherence-related component introduced and always emphasized through classroom activities. It was first explained to the students through reading models of writing in the textbook. The students were pointed out what the topic of the text was and were asked how the topic was introduced, mentioned, and elaborated in other parts of the texts. Sometimes, the students were asked to distinguish a developed topic and an undeveloped topic from the reading models. Moreover, there were exercises that engaged students to discuss in small groups how the topics in sample essays were developed. This corresponded with the majority of the student interviewees' perceptions of coherence.

Ten out of twelve interviewee students revealed that they thought of coherence in writing as topical development. According to these students, a piece of writing was coherent when there was a development of the topic or the main idea through the topic sentence in each part of writing with relevant supporting details. For example, Kumphi said:

... Speaking of coherence, my writing is quite coherent. That is when I write, I will focus only on one topic. Suppose that I write a paragraph. I will write what it is about. If I talk, I talk only about one topic. This leads to unity in my writing. It's the topic that I write and as I mentioned, when I write a paragraph, I will focus only on one topic.

Likewise, Kamon stated:

A piece of writing that is coherent comes from the fact that each of the ideas is related to one topic. For example, I talk about the causes of obesity. Relevant factors must lead to the causes, namely the first cause, the second cause and the third cause of obesity, something like that. I think that's all. Anyway, in a nut shell, coherence is each of the ideas that is written to constitute a topic, or there is relation [between the ideas].

Audience

The triangulation allowed us to identify a convergence of awareness-raising activities and our students' perceptions of coherence as audience which were divided into two sub categories: playing the reader role and taking the reader into perspective.

The analysis of classroom observation data showed that several activities gave the students opportunities to play the reader role. Every week, they were asked to read passages and model essays to answer questions based on the passages and identify rhetorical patterns, organization of ideas, the writers' intended messages, vocabulary use, and sentence structures. Furthermore, they were asked to read their peers' assignments and give comments. The analyzed interview data revealed that three students played a reader role in different ways. Kamon stated that he revised his own writing assignment after he finished writing by looking at his "ideas, content, and quality of language." He further said, "When I read my friends' drafts, I did the same thing [focusing on the three aspects] to make sure their writing was coherent." Suda's reader role was slightly different because she wrote two drafts of each



writing assignment and read them in order to “choose the best one.” The other student was Sakda who remarked, “I am communicating to my reader as I write, so I get to think how my reader is going to see my ideas.”

The other sub-category was taking the reader into account which was emphasized in the topic of writing hooks. The textbook advised the students to capture the reader with a question, a famous quote, a dialogue, descriptive language related to the topic or clues in their introduction paragraph. The students also practiced writing hooks in some exercises in the textbook and took turns to give comments on the hooks written by their classmates. The teacher used some of the students’ assignments as examples of “effective and ineffective hooks” and gave feedback to the whole class, explaining how each of these would affect the reader’s impression and understanding of the writer’s message. Three students (Chaba, Kamon and Suda) reported that they used interesting information or quotation, a question, a poem or statistics in their introduction part to draw the reader’s attention to their writing. Chaba stated:

I think a good piece of writing must include a hook. That is the reader read my first sentence and might want to read more. The reader feels that he/she wants to read more, something like that. A good hook is, suppose I tell [the reader] that my main idea is “there are three ways of eating good food”. I will change it into “Do you know how to enjoy good food?” The reader feels “oh! I want to read more,” something like that. I think to produce a coherent piece of writing is all about capturing the reader’s attention [smiling and laughing].

Similarly, Kamon acknowledged the importance of communicating to his audience which was achieved by using hooks in his essays. This approach was part of what he learned in the writing class although he admitted that he was not successful in his first attempt. He said:

What makes my writing coherent might also be a hook to catch the reader. My teacher suggested us in the class that we should write to hook the reader to read. We had to grab the reader’s attention from the start and to make the reader want to read our writing more, not like ‘so what, I’m bored or done.’ Not my first piece of writing [laughing] I only spent little time to write my first piece of writing. When I finished it, I handed in my writing to my teacher. I did not check if I had a hook in my writing. However, recently, I have hooked the reader with statistics to convince the reader.

Macrostructure

The triangulation of the data revealed that organization patterns or macrostructure was another component of coherence introduced to class and mentioned by two interviewee participants. Macrostructure was introduced to the class in terms of rhetorical patterns, namely summary and response paragraph writing, descriptive, classification, advantages-and-disadvantages, cause-and-effect, comparison-and-contrast and argumentative essay writing. These were mentioned in the course syllabus and presented to the students accordingly. The rhetorical patterns were introduced to the class through various activities in the textbook. The students were guided to pay attention to how ideas were organized and what each rhetorical



pattern consisted of when they read models of writing. Class activities involved an analysis of an outline or a block diagram of each rhetorical pattern, a discussion on each organization pattern as well as a demonstration of writing a rhetorical pattern on the screen by the teacher and several students. In addition, the students' were required to fill missing information such as the thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting ideas, the summary and the main points. Apart from these classroom activities, the students were assigned to write essays in three drafts using each of the rhetorical patterns (three drafts each).

The analyzed interview data offered glimpse into how two student participants thought of coherence as macrostructure. To illustrate, Napa, considered macrostructure as one aspect of "good and coherent writing." Napa said that good writing must have the pattern in writing and the pattern must be used correctly. She said:

Most of my writing now is divided into three parts. In introduction, I tell what it is about in general. Then ... What should I call? What is it? (laughing) "intro" and then yes it's thesis [statement]. After that, it's body. I organize each body. For example, the first body is less important and then it's more and more important, something like that. It must be the correct of the organization of writing in general. I know that it's coherence.

Koson, the other student, explained that a piece of writing was "coherent when there are an introduction, a body, and a conclusion."

Cohesion

The analysis revealed that reference (pronoun, demonstrative and comparison referents), conjunction and connectors, and lexical cohesion were introduced to the students. These three types of cohesion appeared in the textbook in the forms of exercises such as gap-filling, matching and sentence connection.

The interviews revealed the relation between teaching and students' views on building coherence. Jantra said she used words like "first, second, and last to connect ideas" and revealed:

The connection n between paragraphs is important. I have to choose words to connect the paragraphs. Suppose I finish a paragraph and in the next paragraph, I will use a phrase like "in addition" to make it relevant. There are also the easy words such as "first," "second" and "last," that I can use. This is coherence in my view.

It can be seen that the participant thought of coherence as connection between paragraphs which was achieved by using transition signals, conjunctions and connectors. The other participant who viewed that cohesion was the essential feature of coherence was Chaba. She acknowledged the use cohesive devices to link sentences. She said:

I use connective words to connect sentences. I might organize my paragraph and make it cause and effect. It must have words that tell this sentence is cause and this sentence is effect. If it's about the contrast, it will be "however." This can help the reader know that which one is cause, which one is effect, which one is the following, which one is contradiction,



something like that. They are “according to”, “however”, “moreover”, “consequently”, “so that,” “as the result of,” something like that. These make my writing have more unity. I mean my ideas go together. And that’s coherence.

All of these aforementioned components indicated the convergence between the teaching and the students’ perceptions of coherence. However, the analysis allowed the researcher to identify some contradictions between their perceptions and their writing practices.

Contradictions

The analysis of the students’ drafts revealed that the main ideas in some paragraphs were not adequately developed and all of the eleven students talked off their topics although ten of them perceived coherence as development of topics. The teacher’s written feedback such as “Where does this info come from? How is this related to your point?” and “You need to support your point with relevant details” indicated that the students had problems expanding their ideas. As the interview data revealed, this problem was attributable to a lack of background knowledge and the students’ lexico-grammatical knowledge. Despite the fact that the students were assigned to search for information about the topic and use at least three sources in their writing, Piroon said that familiarity of topics factored into her development of ideas. She said:

My writing certainly had problems. I have never experienced a situation, a topic about work or something like that. Sometimes, my opinion is not clear. It’s like, if I write the topic that I never experience before, I don’t write my opinion well. But if it’s like the cause and effects of obesity or health issues, it’s like I can see the picture clearly. I can connect the ideas. With this, there will be coherence. If the topic is difficult such as workplace monitoring, I will think about it for a while because it’s hard to connect when I don’t quite see the picture in my mind.

Napa, one of the two students who perceived a coherent piece of writing as having the introduction, the body, and the conclusion, received the same feedback on the introduction and the concluding paragraphs of her drafts (two out of four drafts): “You need to summarize the data of your essay in the conclusion.” Three more students, Manee, Saka and Mali, received feedback from their teacher regarding the content of the introduction and the conclusion. The comments “Introductions usually are organized general to specific and finish with a thesis statement” on Manee and Mali’s drafts revealed that their introductory paragraphs were not well-organized. Saka’s writing also received the comments “Conclusion could be stronger” and “Where does this come from?” which indicated that the student could complete the macrostructure of the essay but could not put his ideas together to express his stance.

Lexical problems were reported to be a cause of restricted development of ideas as illustrated in Chaba, who viewed coherence as topical development. Acknowledging her shortcoming in vocabulary and expressions which affected the clarity of her writing and the development of her ideas, Chaba said:

Because my English vocabulary can’t express what I really want to convey. I use easywords which might make my ideas confusing. I know should use words which are concise and the reader really understands. It’s language ... I often translate Thai to



English to make my ideas complete to convey them to the reader. Sometimes, I don't know how to translate in English, so I cut the idea off and write a new idea which is easier to explain. I want to develop this. That is, I want to keep the ideas I came up with and write them all in my writing.

Discussion and Conclusion

When put together, the results indicated a reciprocal relation between teaching and the students' understanding of coherence.. The teaching of topical development, macrostructure or rhetorical patterns, cohesion and audience through the textbook and the classroom activities, and receiving the written and oral feedback from the teacher converged with the four components of coherence found in the interview data.

The four components were in accordance with Lee's working definition of coherence (1998 & 2002b); however, the other two components listed in Lee's framework, i.e. propositional development and metadiscourse, were not mentioned by the students. It may be due to the fact that propositional development and metadiscourse were introduced in terms of relevant supporting ideas and adverbial phrases that expressed the writer's stance respectively. These features might not be salient enough for the students to notice and take into account as components of coherence. Furthermore, it was possible that the students had to cope with both content of their writing and their language barriers as reported in the interviews and shown in the feedback from the teacher, so the students paid more attention to development of topics, organization patterns, and surface linguistic devices that helped them connect the sentences or surface coherence.

However, the oral and written feedback on the development of the topics in the student writing indicated the students' struggle to write a well-developed paragraph, especially those who reported that coherence was a development of the topic or the main idea. This indicated that being able to define the concept of coherence might not guarantee that the students really understood what coherence was or were able to apply it to their writing. The results lent support to the claims that coherence was an elusive concept (e.g. Johns, 1986 and Lee, 1998, 2002a and 2002b). Apart from this, the lack of topical development or the development of the main idea in the student writing may have been due to their limited control over their English language and their limited reading experience as reported in the interviews.

Another aspect of coherence reported in this study was macrostructure or rhetorical patterns of writing. Nevertheless, the fact that some of the students received feedback on the content of the introduction and conclusion suggested that local coherence (Swales 1990) should receive attention as well as global coherence or macrostructure of the essays. That is, while the students were able to identify different rhetorical patterns as a component of coherence, the other components of coherence were not effectively operated within paragraphs or across the paragraphs.

Based on the results, two observations could be made. First, it could be seen that the students' use of cohesive devices and rhetorical patterns in their writing in the present study could not make their text coherent. This could lend support to Carrell's (1982) criticism on cohesion:



Cohesion is not the cause of coherence; if anything, it's the effect of coherence. A coherent text will likely be cohesive, not of necessity, but as a result of that coherence. Bonding an incoherent text together won't make it coherent, only cohesive. (p.486)

The same phenomenon was reported in EFL context (e.g., Chen, 2008; Khalil, 1989; and Meisuo, 2000). Second, and more importantly, the results of the present study elucidated understanding of coherence and, at the same time, causes of incoherence from the students' points of view. With the students' voices, it was possible to uncover the students' awareness of their own control of language and restricted or inadequate development of ideas which potentially led to misunderstanding or intelligibility for the reader. This point corresponded to Johns (1986) and Lee's (2002b) remark that the reader role was able to help their students to improve coherence; the results, therefore, could support the role of self-editing peer feedback and in teaching and learning writing.

Taken all of these into consideration, the present study served to promote the students' rights and respect between the teacher and the students as suggested in Cook-Sather (2006). Likewise, Dahl (1995) stated:

Learning from children's voices allows us to know at a deeper level who children are as learners and, because we have that knowledge, to expand and enrich our sense of what it means to teach. (p.130)

Implications

Although it was not possible to generalize the findings from this classroom-based inquiry, some pedagogical implications, which may be applicable to other EFL contexts, can be drawn. First, coherence should be dealt with explicitly and that students should be made aware of the relation between their understanding of the concept and their quality of writing. This may be achieved by training students to be aware of the interface both text-based and reader-based components of coherence as Lee proposed (see Lee 1998 for a full account of the activities) and to include these components in their self-editing and feedback-giving practices. Second, to augment the role of students in their learning, their voices on key concepts in writing, problems they have faced in their writing and their expectations should be attended to and can be integrated into learning outcomes. Our study demonstrated that learning to write a coherent piece of writing was likely to take longer than one or two writing courses; therefore, engaging students in determining learning outcomes and monitoring their own learning is likely to promote and sustain their understanding of a complex concept like coherence.

The study illustrated the significance of the reciprocity between teaching and learning through students' views. Future research should explore further how teacher's and students' understanding of coherence or other essential concepts in writing may be related, matched or mismatched and how these may affect learning. The role of students' awareness in their writing process and learning would be another interesting research theme, with current attempt to integrate SLA into second and foreign language writing research.



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Appendix A

Question 1-3 aimed to address research question2: To what extent are teaching and the students' perceptions of coherence related?

1. In your view, what is a good piece of writing?
2. What is coherence in writing?
3. How important is coherence in writing?

Question 4-5 aimed to address research question1: How do Thai EFL university students perceive coherence in their writing?

4. What do you think about your writing?
5. Do you think your writing is coherent?
6. How do you write your paragraph?
7. Do you have anything to add about paragraph writing in English?