

Losing and finding coherence in academic writing

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream academic writing classes at Australian universities typically attract a very diverse enrolment. Students are of different ages and cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. In the case presented here, there is a further complexity. Most students have a history of poor performance, even failure, in their subjects, clearly as a result of their poor command of the written language and in particular the great difficulties they have with the genres of academic writing. A single overwhelming challenge confronts the majority of these students: an inability to construct a coherent argument in response to a given question. An analysis of samples of students' writing reveals two interesting results: that native and non-native English-speaking students were sometimes indistinguishable in their quality of writing, and both groups tended to suffer from a loss of coherence in argument. This paper probes the nature of non-coherence in these students' writing, suggests reasons for it and proposes some remedies.

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“Most of my writings have a beginning, middle and end, though not necessarily in that order”.

Attributed to Alain Robbe-Grillet

INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt of the huge importance of writing skills in university study, because, mostly, it is by one's writing that one is assessed. Thus the stakes are high. Life chances depend on one's level of writing skills -- the extent to which one can write coherently, and with as few grammatical and lexical errors as possible, in one or more of the several academic genres. Yet universities all over the English-speaking world admit students, both native (NS) and non-native English speaking (NNS), who have inadequate writing ability and suffer in their assessment as a result of it. For these students, institutions often provide assistance in the form of shorter or longer courses to raise their standard of writing and prevent them from failing or performing poorly in their studies just because of the quality of their writing.

Broadly, this paper reports on an investigation of one such course, a university subject for credit, and is ultimately about helping students succeed in academic writing. The students of the subject who are the focus of this study were at undergraduate level and enrolled in mainstream disciplines; some had failed one or more subjects in their field, others were passing but without high grades. All felt that their low standard of writing played a part in their lack of success and were seeking ways of improvement. By analysing their writing, the research tries to penetrate to the causes of the students' inadequate writing ability and propose plausible remedies.

It was expected that NS and NNS students would display very different sets of difficulties and so require different teaching approaches. However, the differences were found to be much less marked than anticipated, and in fact there were times when it was hard to distinguish NS from NNS. The two groups within the class

were united in their tendency to lose coherence in argument. It is this tendency that the research specifically seeks to probe.

RESEARCH ON ACADEMIC WRITING: GENRE STUDIES

The abundance of genre theory today underlines the great importance of genres in the practical business of writing. They are, after all, “resources for getting things done, and we all have a repertoire of resources we can call on for recurring situations, from shopping lists to job applications” (Hyland, 2003:19). In writing courses at English-speaking universities the notion of genre is hugely influential, where “genre” is understood to be a text type incorporating specific features that users recognise as serving a particular purpose. “Exemplars of a genre”, says Swales (1990:58), “exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience”. In the teaching of academic writing, the genre-based approach encourages the study of text models, thus helping the students to understand and write in the genres that are crucial for success in academic and professional fields. This close attention, in class and homework, to the sort of prose that students desperately require may be a reason why the genre-based approach remains strong. Indeed, researchers’ and teachers’ awareness of the characteristics of genre has been refreshed by the corpus studies that have appeared in recent years (for instance Hyland, 2000, and Swales et al, 1998).

Comprehensively and critically reviewing genre studies, Cheng (2006) claims that genre-based research in ESP writing has given disproportionate attention to analysing characteristics of genres that student writers have to acquire, for example the organisational and stylistic features of academic texts, and on pedagogical proposals. This is pursued at the expense of how learners develop as writers. According to Cheng (2006: 5), there is still a great need “to study learners and learning”.

The research reported and discussed in this paper is in a sense a sympathetic response to the need that Cheng expresses. It focuses on

the learners' efforts to master the features of the genres. By analysing samples of students' work, pointing out the precise difficulties that the students have in conforming to the genres of academic writing, this research claims to throw new light on coherence in academic writing. Coherence suggests that the ideas in the writing "stick together"; they flow smoothly from one sentence to the next in logical order. From the reader's viewpoint, coherence makes the writing easier to follow. When the writer introduces an idea that appears to be unrelated to the general topic or the local context, coherence is threatened.

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO ACADEMIC WRITING

Informing the analysis of the writing samples quoted in this paper is a belief in the importance of planning in the writing process. The writer plans at a global level, shapes an argument or defines a problem, marshals the parts of the discourse and provides evidence and a reasoned conclusion. Such elements of planning are the evidence of coherence which the analyst or assessor hopes to find in "good writing".

Insofar as the above is a theory of writing, it may be said to fit into the cognitivist view, first propounded by Hayes and Flower (1983), where planning entails higher-order thinking skills. Among the characteristics of the teaching model that springs from cognitivism are two that are significant for the present research. One is the "reader-based awareness" (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 26), the sense of audience that the writer needs to cultivate; the other is the process approach to composition that the student writer needs to adopt, that is, preparing multiple drafts of a passage, and revising language and ideas, often through pair and group work. Both these concepts reappear later in the paper.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Academic English

This enquiry centres on a single class of undergraduate students studying a subject called “Academic English” in the first semester of 2006. The duration of the semester was 15 weeks, with a “semester break” of two weeks in the middle. Each week the students took one one-hour lecture and one two-hour workshop for which they were divided into two groups.

The subject, which is open as an elective to all undergraduate students, is intended to enhance students’ skills in academic communication, both oral and written. According to the syllabus, the subject “will focus on developing productive strategies for reading and critically appraising academic texts, and using these texts as a basis for successful academic writing”. During the semester, students also learn about making effective oral presentations and have to give a presentation as an assessed task. As far as written communication is concerned, on completion of the subject, students should be able to write a well-structured and logical argument, using appropriate style and sentence structures.

A total of 41 students were enrolled in the subject at the time of the research, of whom 23 were Australian native speakers of English, four were Australian students of non-English-speaking background and 14 were international students. The first languages in the class, apart from English, were Spanish, Serbo-Croat, Japanese, Thai, Chinese and an indigenous language of Papua-New Guinea. There were 16 males and 25 females. NNS students required a minimum overall score of 6.5 in IELTS to gain entry to the university. The age distribution of the class is set out in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Distribution of students' ages

Age			
17-24	25-34	35-44	44+
22	9	6	4

Table 2 shows the various disciplines in which the students were enrolled. Students of the subject came from all four years of undergraduate study, with the majority from third- and fourth-year.

TABLE 2
Distribution of students' disciplines

Degree	No of students
Architecture	2
Arts (International Studies)	2
Arts (TESOL)	1
Arts (Education)	6
Arts (Social Sciences)	2
Community Education	11
Community Ed/Counselling	1
Graphic Design	3
Human Nutrition	5
Science (Psychology)	3
Science(Psychology)/Laws	1
Laws	2
Tourism	2

Merely skimming the above data is sufficient to recognise the remarkable diversity of this group of students. As far as cultural background and age are concerned, this subject enrolment might represent the true diversity of Australian universities today; and the

fact that students joined the subject from such a range of disciplines suggests how widespread the need for improved writing skills is. In the light of such diversity, the general finding that the large majority of students have difficulty with the same crucial feature of academic writing is all the more surprising.

Methodology

Evidently this is an example of small-scale classroom-based research. To a certain extent it resembles action research, since its ultimate purpose is to bring about change (Nunan, 2001). Another of its characteristics is collaborativeness, also taken as an essential feature of action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Here the collaboration is between two colleagues, the class teacher and a researcher. However, this study departs from the conventional action research model in the sense that it did not require intervention directly in the classroom, or involve "taking action and systematically observing what happens" (Allwright & Bailey, 1991:42). It fits ultimately into the category of ethnographic research: relatively long-term, collaborative and non-interventionist, with generalisations drawn from the data rather than predetermined by the researcher (Nunan, 1992:56).

Data for this study were gathered, overwhelmingly, from the students' writing, samples of which were selected for close analysis. For the purposes of this paper, three essays were chosen, as they were, in the eyes of the teacher and researcher, "typical" examples of the tendency to lose coherence and in particular stray from the topic; further, they were the writing of native- and non-native English speakers, representing the range of students in the class. The essays were the normally prescribed homework tasks of the subject, not the result of special elicitation by the researcher.

It is worth pointing out that, for the writing part of the subject, "the argumentative essay" had to be the genre in which the students expressed themselves. Because of the diversity of students in the class, it was not possible to accommodate discipline-specific genres, except in the final assessment tasks. That said, the essay form was in

no sense a compromise choice of genre: the fact is that most students had to write argumentative essays of one kind or other in their disciplines. If they did not write essays as such, they often still had to write in “essay-like” ways, expressing a degree of critical thinking and sustaining a coherent, reasoned argument.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Native- and non-native English speaking students

Observations about the writing of the NS and NNS students in the class do not advance a “problem” for resolution but serve to establish a basis on which generalisations about the class as a whole may be made. In the light of the composition of this class, where 40% were NNS (international or resident), the diversity of the group must be a variable that would threaten any generalisation about the quality of writing. Indeed, the literature on ESL writing, from contrastive rhetoric to the current debates on critical literacy, reinforces the difference between the NS and NNS writer. The differences are seen in such features as levels of grammatical and syntactic control, writing strategies, choice of content, and rhetorical organisation. Summarising such differences, Canagarajah (2002:12) concludes, “we shouldn’t be surprised that L2 students fall short when L1 writing is treated as the norm or point of reference”.

In the case of the class under study, it must be said that the differences were not marked, and in that sense contrary to expectation. To illustrate the “unexpected”, consider the two fragments below that reflect the occasional difficulty in discriminating between L1 and L2 students. Which text was written by a NS and which by a NNS?

Text 1

Firstly religion, central to some cultures values and traditions. It is common knowledge that religions has had a great impact on societies over the years, destroying values and traditions by superimposing their own on colonised societies. This religious imperialism could be argued that it was very destructive and immoral. Consequently, similar values and traditions spread around the world, in other words encouraging globalisation.

Text 2

In recent years, there has been a great deal of discussion about the issues of globalisation, how is it threatening developing countries and what types of repercussions are created. However when it comes to research on such a broad topic and especially to find whether globalisation has changed the lives of people form third world countries, the answers will be many and again negative and positive. This essay will discuss to what extent globalisation is threatening the traditions and values of developing countries and western nations.

In fact, Text 1, which contains three striking errors of grammar and sentence structure, was written by a native speaker. Text 2, free of such errors, was written by a NNS who had lived in Australia for less than five years. Reviewing the work of the class as a whole, however, the teacher and researcher found that the NNSs did make more errors at sentence level. When we came across NNS writing linguistically superior to NS writing, as illustrated above, we had a hint that conventional generalisations about “NS versus NNS” might not apply to this group.

On the discourse level, within and between paragraphs, a distinction between NSs and NNSs was often hard to perceive. Loss of topic control, to be discussed in the following section, was common to both groups of writers.

Loss of coherence and relevance

Firstly, with regard to the class as a whole, it became clear that grammar and syntax were not major pedagogical challenges. Stu-

dents certainly made errors at this level and were expected to work to overcome them. Those in Text 1 above were probably among the most serious. Likewise, problems of quoting, citing and plagiarism turned out not to occupy a great deal of the students' or teacher's time.

The overwhelming issue was lack of mastery of the demands of the argumentative essay writing, in particular a difficulty in realising specific essential abstract aspects of the genre: coherent argument and rhetorical organisation. The flaws in this area could be narrowed down to one phenomenon, loss of coherence and lapse into irrelevance. This phenomenon was very widespread in the class, to the extent that the teacher felt that if she could help the students recognise and resolve the difficulty, their chances of success in the subject would be greatly improved; further, their performance in written assignments in the mainstream would be significantly enhanced too.

Analysis of texts

Framework for analysis

According to the definition set out earlier in this paper, writing is coherent if the ideas flow smoothly from one sentence to the next and the parts of the text logically relate to one another. One framework for the analysis of monologic discourse that focuses on relations between parts of a text is Rhetorical Structure Analysis (RST), so the application of this approach suggests itself as a useful way of interpreting instances in which the organisation of relations fails in some manner.

Advanced by Mann and Thompson (1989), RST is a theory of text organisation that emphasizes hierarchical relations between portions of text where, typically, one is the "nucleus" and the other the "satellite" that supports or strengthens the nucleus. There are some 20 such relations, for example antithesis, concession, elaboration and evidence. Applied to writing, RST describes the process in which the writer has a purpose and assumes that the reader will

relate the nucleus and satellite elements in order to grasp such a purpose. As Hatch (1992:191) points out, this type of rhetorical analysis includes the writer and the reader. The reference to the role of the reader in perceiving coherence correlates with an aspect of the teaching model derived from cognitivism, as mentioned earlier, the “reader awareness” that the writer should cultivate.

There is another facet of RST that the writing teacher can exploit. The teacher could use its concepts as a way of identifying faulty or missing relations and describing the non-coherence, so far as the text allows, and then potentially as a basis for explaining the non-coherence to the student writer. Indeed, the approach could not be regarded as useful unless it resulted in practical advice that the teacher may offer the writer.

Evidence of loss of coherence in texts

Extracts from three essays, all addressing the same topic, are presented here in response to the question of how non-coherence is manifested. The topic and the three extracts are set out as follows:

Essay topic

To many people, the term *Globalisation* means *Americanisation*. This is because modern technology has allowed American products, including food, clothing, music and films, to reach people all over the world. Some people see this aspect of globalization as a threat to their traditions and values.

To what extent does globalisation threaten the traditions and values of some countries?

*Essay extracts**Text 3*

The undeveloped countries are affected by globalisation, more than any other country. Through lack of technology, poor economic growth and not enough education. The richer countries take advantage of the undeveloped countries and if one country tried to raise costs, the richer country would use another supplier from another undeveloped country. Undeveloped countries have access to little or no medical advances and are more prone to diseases and do not live as long as developed countries (Doorman, 1998).

A simplified illustration of globalisation comes from the movie "The Gods Must Be Crazy" when a Shona found a coke bottle in the desert. The bottle was used for many uses but eventually was the cause of fights and changed the tribes' whole values (Vys.J., 1980). The movie is a small example on how globalisation can have a huge effect on the traditions and values of people.

In conclusion, globalisation has a negative effect on the traditions and values of developed and undeveloped countries. American companies and products have been spread throughout the world and can be seen in most countries whether people like it or not. ...

*Text 4**(single paragraph)*

When looking at some of the advantages of globalisation in the context of transport in developing countries like Malaysia where the creation of new technology such as the digital train, where western countries like Australia still new in this kind of technology. In relation to mobile phones nowadays, they contain many features that hold different media such as internet, video, camera, recording, etc, using these kinds of high technology can also be misused.

Text 5

Akande, (2002) argues that such a radical undermining of individuals' existing cultural and traditions values have a corrosive threat and impact of who they are, what they want, and what they respect. The threats of globalizations are more evident because attacks spirituality, values and faint and cultural and traditional values worldwide. Globalization is driven by western adventurers had made a conscience efforts to undermine the cultural and traditional heritage of various countries around the world. The extent of the threats of globalization is not only for African societies but also to countries like Australia.

Australian society has being seduced by new technologies, which have being introduced by the new free economic market of globalization. The introductions of the latest technology is threatening Australian society as having access to services like more expensive mobile phones, Internet, latest music, and fast foods undermining family and relationships, religion values, respect and dignity. Ganz (2006) argues that Australian societies in particular youth people are spending more time with the electronic gadgets than socializing. Access to new mobile technologies is addicted and high costly is predicted that youth Australian will built a significant debt in the next 10 years. This new trend of communication based on peer pressure of consumerism latest mobile phones, digital TV, iPods and other electronic gadgets are health hazards threatening not only youth Australians' health, and income but also impacting on relationship with parents, grandparents and peers.

Text 3 is a stark example of a failure of transition or linking between paragraphs. The first paragraph sustains general relevance to the topic. After the nucleus sentence at the start, which is the proposition that "undeveloped countries are affected by globalisation", sentences elaborate on the vulnerability of those countries to the harmful designs of richer, more technologically advanced ones. There is a lack of linguistic transition between sentences, but thematically they are linked as instances of the opening generalization. Coherence drops after the first sentence of the second paragraph, causing some disorientation for the reader. It appears that this second paragraph is supposed to support the first with an important example. The writer

proposes a meaningful “illustration of globalisation”, but what follows is not clearly such an illustration. The middle sentence of the paragraph is a satellite serving the nucleus at the start of the quoted text, and the relation seems to be one of “evidence”. To provide evidence that would satisfy the reader and thus give the text discourse coherence, the writer has to explain what the Coke bottle represents, presumably in terms of globalisation and Americanisation.

Text 4 offers an example of *loss of coherence within a paragraph* that has no transition between its two sentences. The first sentence explains one sense in which a developing country has benefited from globalisation and technological advance; the second points out the various sophisticated features of modern mobile phones and suggests that “this kind of high technology” may be misused. The only clue about the writer’s purpose is that “technology” in the first sentence relates to “mobile phones”, an aspect of technology, in the second. But, from a reader’s point of view, the two sentences are unrelated and the paragraph in itself is not coherent. Approaching a solution to this non-coherence, the writer could be advised to refer to the previous paragraph in his essay, which is about the erosion of traditional values brought about, in part, by the advent of high technology from the West. He could re-shape that paragraph in a relation of “antithesis”, making an assertion, as a nucleus, about the advantages and disadvantages of technology and integrating the two sentences of Text 4, as respectively evidence for and against. It would be a job of significant revision. A further alternative is that the student abandons the paragraph and its content altogether as not adding much to his argument.

Text 5 illustrates *loss of coherence within and between paragraphs*. There is no clear link in theme between the first and second paragraphs: the first is about the menacing effect of globalisation on traditional society, African in particular; the second on the threat to Australian society of the new technology. However, the writer does form a bridge between the two paragraphs with the last sentence of the first paragraph (which would be better placed at the start of the next). This latter sentence, a nucleus, proposes that Australia is

vulnerable to threats from globalisation and is followed in the second paragraph by sentences that are elaborations on this theme, statements that globalisation has brought technology and Australia is being seduced by it. The connection between globalisation and technology is not established, though an assumption of such a connection might originate from the terms of the essay question. If the writer could explain how globalisation, through “the new free economic market”, introduces the “new technologies”, she would create a plausible thematic link with the preceding paragraph and with the essay topic itself.

Within the second paragraph, the writer suggests that the proliferation of electronic gadgetry is causing an undermining of family and values. She does not make a claim as such, does not mount an argument, but rather lets the reader infer the causality. However, her assumption is too bold to be left as it is, relegated to participial clauses (“undermining family ...”; “impacting on relationship with parents ...”). The writer’s purpose in this paragraph, after all, is to emphasise the threat. In her rewriting, she could respond to the nucleus more argumentatively and with attention to evidence. How, for example, do “latest music and fast foods” undermine “family and relationships”?

Possible reasons for the loss of coherence

In each case there is a “sense of an answer” in progress, but meaning seems to come through only in fragments, not in an internally consistent whole. In not relating the part to the whole, these writers are apparently not taking a global view of their work; they are not “planning” in the cognitivist sense referred to earlier. According to Pogner (2004:675), “Skilled writers plan at the global level; less skilled writers plan at the local level”. The “less skilled writers” here seem to be unable to see that the individual points they make are sometimes too “local” and do not fit into the global progression of their essay.

Since the three writers submitted their essays to the teacher as finished products, we must assume they read their own work as

coherent and not straying from relevance. In their view they were still maintaining topic control and reader's comprehension. It has been said of writing conventions in some cultures and languages that "explicit signals are not necessary; the writer shows respect for the reader's intelligence to make inferences" (Tegey, 2001). This characteristic that L2 writers might transfer to English could be shared by L1 writers to a greater extent than we believe. The writer of Text 3 is the sole NS of the three but, like the others, expects the reader to make inferences on the basis of the slightest of cues. She assumes that the simple mention of "a coke bottle", in the context she evokes, makes a link to globalisation.

Perhaps these writers little consider the readers' needs because they are not "readers" themselves. The routine class questionnaire, administered at the start of the course by the teacher and designed to elicit data on students' perceptions of their study habits and skills, revealed that the majority were averse to voluntary reading. Although newspapers and magazines occasionally figured in their reading choices, it was clear that generally they only read when they had to, that is, for their studies. We might speculate that they did not come into contact with models of "good writing" as much as their teachers would like.

There might be a sense too in which "they write as they speak". This perception does not refer to an oral quality in the tone of their writing or to a degree of informality that is more characteristic of speaking. In fact, most of the students adhered to an appropriate register for academic writing. Rather, it refers to the way in which their writing may be said to jump from one subtopic to another, as people's conversation often does, failing to make transitions between ideas but assuming that hearers catch the relations and continue to follow. According to Wertsch (1991, cited in Ivanic, 1998:209), the "voices in the mind" that come to us while we are writing are often spoken voices: "This is particularly true of written argument".

POSSIBLE REMEDIES

The very least that would happen, as a result of this research, would be heightened awareness on the part of the writing teacher of the nature and prevalence of the problem that the research has revealed. Effectively, this entails offering the writing teacher the results of the research, exactly as demanded by classroom-based research. The researcher did so but only at the end of the semester under study. The following suggestions therefore apply to future delivery of Academic English. They should also be of interest to any writing teachers who confront in their classes students similar to those who have been the focus of this study – NSs, NNSs or a mixture.

1. It is important to raise the students' sensitivity to the danger of loss of coherence by discussing it explicitly at the start of the course of learning. Simply telling the learners about the danger will not stop them falling into it, but they will be prepared to recognise loss of coherence when the teacher points it out to them in their work.
2. The presence of coherence in the assessment criteria should be enhanced. In the subject description of Academic English it was "buried" among several criteria under the heading of "Content" and fell within "Addresses the question" and "Argument and ideas logically developed".
3. It would be wise to adopt some of the practices of process writing, even if these are not normally associated with the product-oriented genre approach. The student would, for example, be encouraged to produce two or more drafts of an essay in response to feedback. This was done to a limited extent in the semester under study, and the teacher felt that the multiple drafts played a part in the high pass rate in the subject. But, in addition, group discussion and peer editing and peer assessment could be introduced to enrich the feedback, with one of the focuses on relevance. The benefits of this are well recognized in the literature; however, as Rollinson (2005) emphasises in his review of the value of peer feedback in writing, it should

be undertaken with learner training: learners should not be left without teacher's guidance.

4. In the matter of guidance, the writing teacher might consider adopting the concepts and tools of RST as a way to identify and interpret instances of non-coherence and then as a basis for giving advice, in non-specialist terms, to the student.
5. The teacher has to press the students to read more intensively and widely, not only with a view to locating sources and citations but also for the generally helpful influence that reading may have on all language skills, writing in particular: "Good things happen to students who read a great deal. ... Research studies show they become better and more confident readers, they *write better*, their listening and speaking abilities improve and their vocabularies get richer" (Bamford & Day, 2004:1 [italics added]). Reviewing the research on the specific effect of reading on writing, Canagarajah (2002:144) reports: "Proficient L1 and L2 writers are more likely to have read extensively for school and/or pleasure than their less proficient counterparts".

However, since, as the class survey shows, students seem disinclined to read more than they have to, the teacher can more purposefully than before exploit oral tasks as a means of informing content and organisation of writing projects. Peer discussion and feedback as suggested above, would respond to this idea. The teacher of Academic English who participated in this study introduced seminar presentations, on the same topics that the students chose for their writing, to promote academic speaking; but she placed these presentations *after* the submission of the major essay. As a result of the research probe into her class, she regretted this sequence. Reversing the order, she would have hoped to see that the discipline of oral presentation, enforced by a responsibility to a potentially critical audience, would be reflected in the writing that followed it. If the audience, including the teacher, failed to see a relation between ideas or noted an apparently irrelevant example, they would

point it out to the speaker, who would have to “repair” on the spot.

Both group discussion and seminar presentations on topics that turn into writing assignments have the merit of giving the students an active sense of responsibility to an audience which they would transfer to their writing, where hitherto such responsibility has not been well developed.

These suggestions above may be among the very few at hand for the teacher who wants her or his students to learn to maintain coherence and relevance, for textbooks on academic writing do not appear to offer much help.

A noticeable feature of such textbooks is the tendency to regard coherence as a linguistic construct. For example, Hennessy (2002), in *Writing an Essay*, emphasises that unity and coherence can be maintained principally by “using a network of connectives” (p.71). Likewise, in *Writing Clear Paragraphs*, Donald *et al.* (1995) insist that “coherence is achieved through transition”, that is, “a transitional word or phrase” (p.270). Oshima and Hogue’s (2006) *Writing Academic English*, widely used in ESL courses, advises students that the way to gain unity and coherence is through skilful use of key nouns, pronouns and transition signals. These latter show how “one idea is related to the next” (p.41).

The authors cited above seem to be referring to the linguistic ties in a text that are grammatical and lexical. But are these the elements that constitute coherence? According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), such linguistic ties would be “bottom-up” connections that are more characteristic of *cohesion* (p.8). Similarly, McCarthy (2001) insists that “the study of cohesion is concerned with the surface linguistic ties in the text” (p.98). Coherence, meanwhile, is top-down, refers to the sense in which the parts relate to the whole, and is achieved through judicious organisation and planning.

It is true that the students’ writing samples quoted earlier lack “transitional words and phrases”, particularly Texts 4 and 5; how-

ever, merely inserting them would not necessarily enhance coherence. Consider the following example, drawn from an essay by a NS (not one of those quoted previously) in the subject Academic English:

In recent years a considerable amount has been written in relation to the concerns of plagiarism within academic institutions. Further, some note that this practice is more evident among ESL students, that is, students from non-Western backgrounds (Sowden 2005; Hayes and Introna 2005). However the uncertainty surrounding the definition of plagiarism is not new. In 1941 Lowenthal wrote "... but its application and interpretation is not at all simple and uniform as its definitions might lead us to believe" (1941 p146). Nevertheless, plagiarism is an issue of concern within non-Western cultures ...

Here the student has made an effort to use transition signals, but sentences are not linked in a relationship of meaning. The sentence beginning "However" does not offer a contrast to the previous one and embarks on a different subtopic. The sentence beginning "Nevertheless" is also no contrast to what precedes it and picks up a subtopic from earlier in the paragraph. Thus with or without the transition signals, there is little coherence in the paragraph as the writer unsuccessfully juggles two competing main ideas. As Canagarajah (2002:60-61) points out, "texts that have the appropriate devices to build cohesion may yet fail to generate meaning".

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Since the number of samples for chosen for analysis in this research is small, an obvious pathway for further research in general would be a study on a larger scale as a means of gaining generalisability. Coherence is known to be an elusive and abstract concept (Connor 1990), for students and teachers alike, so any further research towards pinning down its definition would beyond doubt be useful, especially as it may offer benefits for both teachers' and students' understanding of how texts are constructed. Two of the "possible remedies" mentioned above could also offer worthwhile research

topics: the extent to which process writing and a program of extensive and intensive reading contribute specifically to the improvement of coherence in students' writing. Both topics could be undertaken through action research. Finally, although RST was conceived for comprehensive analysis of texts rather than selective commentary, it is worth promoting its concepts and tools for application in future research on coherence in writing. It has proved to be an illuminating approach in the present study.

CONCLUSION

The broad context for this research is political, for it is set within two national debates about literacy in schools and universities. The debates focus on young native English-speaking students and on students whose first language is not English. The latter may be immigrants or international students who pay full fees for what they hope is education superior to what they would have in their countries of origin. In both debates the phrase "falling standards" seems to recur.

This paper does not contest the claim that standards of academic writing among university students have fallen. It provides evidence, unfortunately, that such standards are not high enough and that NSs and NNSs alike have difficulty meeting the challenges of effective communication in writing. The difficulty lies not so much in grammar and sentence structure as in the ability to fashion a coherent argument where sentences and ideas relate to one another without missing links of meaning.

As mentioned at the outset, the stakes are high. Assessment, and thus success, in university courses depends to a great extent on writing skills, and prominent among those skills is the capacity to sustain argument. Such skills are crucial not only for academic attainment but also for the professional settings that students hope to enter.

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