

ESSAY-WRITING: COHESION AND COHERENCE

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The work of Widdowson on aspects of cohesion and coherence is well known and

respected. (i) The problem remains, as so frequently occurs with such ideas, of implementation with the minimum of cost and effort on the part of the teacher in the preparation of materials, and maximum flexibility and potential for the students. It is, of course, possible to minimise prepara-

tion by using commercially prepared texts, but these are doubly disadvantaged, by being relatively expensive and, furthermore, not designed specifically for the class you teach. The following paper is a brief presentation of a simple method to prepare, organise and use materials on cohesion and coherence to help students develop basic academic essay-writing skills.

The materials described are designed for use in E.A.P. writing classes, and are particularly intended for students with comparatively little English. Fairly extensive use of this technique has been made with mature students on six month or one year intensive English courses prior to attending post-graduate courses at various universities throughout England. The level of English of such students varies, but at the beginning is generally beginner to low intermediate. In some cases, the students are not conversant with the West European academic tradition, and essay writing is virtually new to them. The problem we often face is that the course is too short to allow us to wait until their English has reached what one might consider a sufficient standard before beginning to write academic essays. Some way has to be found to speed up the process. The intention is then, to enable the students to practise both cohesion and coherence in academic essay-writing and to make them aware of, and capable of using, appropriate registers. By *cohesion*, I mean the way separate propositions in a text are made to hang together within and between sentences to ensure propositional development within the text. Markers of this are usually overt, and include the use of linking words, ellipsis, pronoun reference, lexis and so on. By *coherence*, I mean something rather more general than Widdowson's definition. Here, I refer to the mode of discourse development, the rhetorical organisation. In most academic essays, certain acts are carried out, often at paragraph level. The writer makes use of certain logical orderings such as chronological or spatial order to describe events or places, contrast,

prediction, cause and effect, classification, generalization, and so on. It is the development of the discourse modes with which I am concerned when I talk about coherence. Finally, by *appropriate register* I simply mean the correct level and degree of formality that is expected in academic essay writing.

The Materials

The materials consist of sets of cards. On each card is one (in the Widdowson sense) proposition. The propositions are obtained by the simple process of 'discourse decomposition' (see Widdowson, 'Gradual Approximations' in H. G. Widdowson *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*, O.U.P. 1979). That is, a piece of text is selected and broken down into a set of independent propositions. As a proposition, the information on each card should be capable of standing alone with *no* coherence or cohesive devices. An example is provided in the appendix. The exact number of cards in a set will, of course, be determined by the original text.

Choice of text is determined by appropriacy of subject and discourse mode for the students. It is relatively easy to suit topics to student interests by either choosing subjects of general interest, or alternatively, over a period of time, using topics from all the relevant subject areas. Possibly of more importance than the actual topic of the material selected is its form of coherence, its mode of discourse development. If students need practise in writing using cause and effect, then the passage selected for decomposition should be one that itself uses cause and effect. Then, in the process of re-production, the students will need to use the devices concerned with this particular mode of discourse development.

Analysis of text into propositions is not without its difficulties, but it is relatively easy to handle them with a little practice. One problem is the degree of delicacy of the

(i) H. G. Widdowson: *Teaching Language as Communication*. O.U.P. 1978

analysis of the text. Does one, for instance, analyse a section of text such as:

the cortex consists of a thick, grey matter within each cerebral hemisphere.

into three propositions:

Prop 1) the cortex consists of a thick matter

Prop 2) the cortex consists of a grey matter

Prop 3) the cortex lies within each cerebral hemisphere

The answers to such problems are determined by empirical pedagogical considerations, i.e. if your students need practice in ordering adjectives, then take the opportunity to analyse the propositions in this way. If they do not, (and if this is the case, too detailed an analysis seems only to confuse) then analyse at a grosser level without distinguishing the first two propositions, into:

Prop 1) the cortex consists of a thick, grey matter

Prop 2) the cortex lies within each cerebral hemisphere

An obvious second problem is that it is sometimes rather difficult to analyse the texts. For example, perhaps the reader would like to try his hand with something like:

The corona evidently consists of very sparse ions and electrons moving at such high speed as to imply a temperature of 1,000,000°C.

which is part of a text I used on one occasion.

It is very important that the propositions are presented on individual cards. This enables the students to arrange the propositions according to the essay title, quickly and easily. My own experience is that propositions merely listed together on one sheet of paper are much more difficult to order. The students' attention is then totally devoted to ordering, and when this is satisfactorily completed, further work is difficult, as the students feel they have

completed the task. Also, further realism is added by the use of cards if the students have been taught in a study skills session to use a card-note reference system when collating information for essays, as the proposition cards can represent individual notes extracted from different sources whilst researching for the essay.

Making the cards

The actual production of the cards is relatively simple. A sheet of A4 paper is divided into six rectangles of equal size. One proposition is written in each rectangle. It is useful at this stage, in the top right hand corner, to arbitrarily number each rectangle for easy identification when sorting, or during discussion. The sheet is then photocopied onto card, a useful facility that many photostat machines have. The sheets of card are then laminated by hand or machine. This step is initially rather expensive, and if done by hand rather time consuming but, as well as protecting the cards and making them more durable and attractive, it dissuades students from writing on them, and thus, in the long term, is an economy in both time and money. (iii) Finally, the sheets of laminated card are guillotined into six separate cards, and are ready for use. One set of cards for every two students seems to be sufficient for classwork (and promotes discussion between students).

Implementation

How the cards are used depends, of course, on the students, their level and the teacher. However, as they are intended for students who are only at low intermediate or even lower level and furthermore, I am trying to provide a general guide, I will outline a rather highly controlled procedure.

(iii) To avoid expensive mistakes, it is wise to first have a pilot run with students using propositions duplicated on paper.

1

The students are presented with a set of cards, and asked to order them. As noted

before, one set of cards between two students is probably best at the beginning as this encourages discussion (and thought!) and removes the danger of any individual feeling 'on trial' if his ordering is 'wrong'. Basics, such as ensuring vocabulary and individual propositions are understood, can be taken at this point.

2

The students must be given a title, as frequently this will influence the ordering of the propositions by determining the main topic. Also, of course, it will add to the reality of any exercise in essay writing.

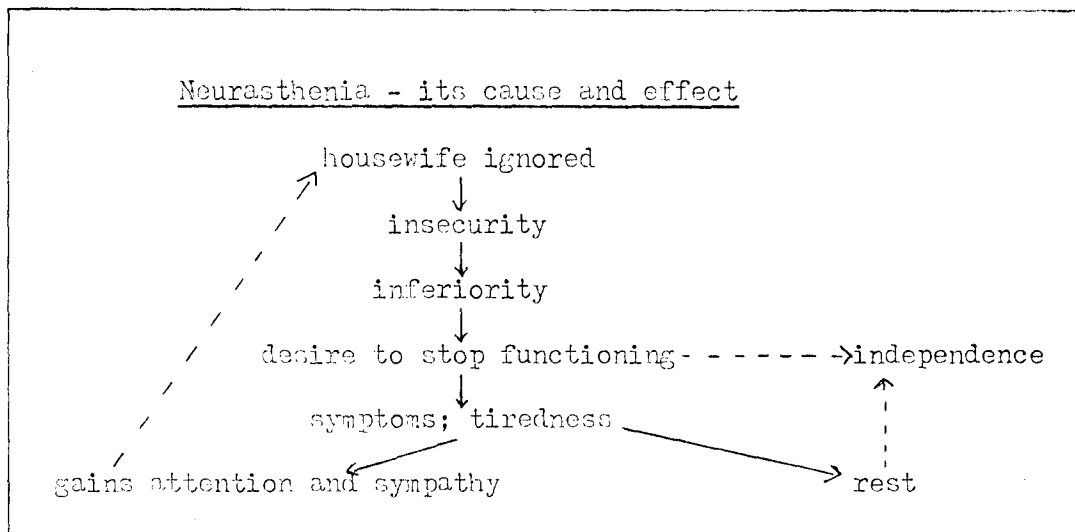
3

The various proposed orderings can be discussed. This can be very productive and, if at all possible, the teacher should assume a low profile here and let the students get on with the discussion. It should be emphasised that there are several possible orderings.

4

The students are now asked to write down very briefly the information on the cards in the proposed order. This can be done by diagram. For instance, the set of propositions on neurasthenia (see appendix) produced from one student the following diagram.

Diagram 1.



Alternatively, the propositions can be re-written by the students as notes. For instance:

One cup of tea contains 60 - 90 mgs. of caffeine

might be written as:

One cup of tea — 60-90 mgs. caffeine.

Another alternative is, of course, to permit the students to work directly from the cards, but this is not to be recommended except at the very earliest stages, as it tends to result only in the production of propositions copied from the card and linked by various cohesive devices. What we are really aiming for is a 'transmutation' of propositions into something that is originally expressed.

5

The students are now in a position to begin writing. Working from their notes or diagram, the information on the cards is written up as a coherent whole. To establish the correct attitude to essay-writing and to avoid plagiarism it is necessary to stress that the propositions only represent the core of the essay. The students are expected to add introductions and conclusions, linking passages, comments, criticisms and even further information of their

own if plagiaristic habits are to be discouraged. At this early stage, the result is likely to be about a page long, or even a little less, but of course this is entirely dependent on the number of propositions they are asked to handle. As this is increased, and as more material of their own is used to complement that provided, the work is increased in length. As the exercises are extended, as well as the number of propositions used being extended, so will the number of types of discourse organisation, so that in one piece of work instead of, say, just 'hypothesis' or 'cause and effect' being practised, these may be used in conjunction. Incidentally, it may be necessary for the students to discard certain propositions if they do not 'fit' naturally. If this is not done, the students tend to tack these on to the end of their essay and 'hanging propositions', with no coherence, occur.

6

After the students have written their first draft, I prefer to get them to exchange essays and correct each others work. In fact, I get each essay corrected by two other people. The students then write up their second draft (for homework) from the corrected first draft. This step is, of course, optional.

Some problems

My own experiences suggest that the first attempt will be enjoyed for its novelty, but the writing produced will be poor. Initially there is a resistance to adding 'original' material to the given propositions, and the essay tends to consist of the propositions simply strung together. Further, all propositions tend to be given equal weight. Two propositions such as

Prop 1) caffeine is harmless in small doses

Prop 11) caffeine is found in tea, coffee and cocoa

tend to be reproduced as two sentences:

"Caffeine is harmless in small doses. It is found in tea, coffee and cocoa."

rather than as a main and subordinate clause,

"Caffeine, found in tea, coffee and cocoa, is harmless in small doses."

The teacher has to be aware of such problems, and attempt to avoid them. The problem of subordinate clausing does lead naturally to exercises in avoiding such stiltedness.

Another common early fault is for the title to be ignored so that, regardless of whether the original title was 'Political and Social Conditions in the Balearic Isles' or 'My Holiday in Majorca', exactly the same essay is produced!

This can be countered by providing two titles with each set of cards and dividing the class. The resulting essays can then be compared and discussed, and the various divergences in theme and register noted and discussed. It has not been possible to consider all the ways in which these materials can be used. For instance, there is no reason why the cards should not form the core of work on seminar presentation, or if presented by the teacher as note-taking exercises (basically the student should end with one note for each proposition). However, I hope I have been able to indicate the simplicity of preparation, implementation and manipulation. The principle is not revolutionary, the idea of mixed sentences is common enough but by emphasising:

- a) the use of cards for easy manipulation;
- b) the importance of the students using the propositions only as a core idea for their own expression;
- c) the careful selection of appropriate texts for decomposition;

I hope I have been able to justify the use of an old technique within a modern methodology.

APPENDIX

Example 1

Supplies of missiles, aircraft, armoured vehicles and warships to Third World countries have been increasing steadily over the last ten years. Today the Third World accounts for 70% of the global arms trade. The biggest consumers are the Middle East (47%), the Far East (17%) and sub-Saharan Africa (12%). This increase — which had accelerated to a rate of 25% per annum by 1979 — puts a considerable strain on the budgets of recipient countries. Some Third World governments have now established their own arms industries. Notable among these are Israel, South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and India. There are good reasons for...

Subject: International Arms Supply. *Discourse Mode:* Presentation/Evaluation of Facts.

1. Supplies of arms to Third World countries has been increasing steadily over the last ten years.
2. Today the Third World accounts for 70% of the global arms trade.
3. The biggest consumers of arms in the world are the Middle East (47%), the Far East (17%) and sub-Saharan Africa (12%).
4. The increase in supply of arms to the Third World has put a considerable strain on the budgets of the recipient countries.
5. The supply of arms to the Third World accelerated to a rate of 25% per annum in 1979.
6. Some Third World countries have now established their own arms industries.
7. There are good reasons for...

Example 2

Subject: Neurasthenia. *Discourse Mode:* Cause and Effect.

1. The symptoms of neurasthenia lead naturally to periods of sleep.
2. A 'nervous housewife' is one who feels she is neglected by her family.
3. The symptoms of neurasthenia satisfy a desire to be independent.
4. A natural response to a feeling of inferiority is a desire to stop functioning.
5. The term neurasthenia was once applied to almost every neurosis.
6. The symptoms of neurasthenia win sympathy for the sufferer.
7. A natural response to a repressed feeling of insecurity is the desire to stop functioning.
8. Neurasthenia is most common in so called 'nervous housewives'.
9. The symptoms of neurasthenia lead naturally to periods of rest.
10. The term neurasthenia is now limited to a condition where the predominant symptom is continuous fatigue.
11. Neurasthenia is a repressed desire to stop functioning.
12. The symptoms of neurasthenia win attention.
13. The symptoms of neurasthenia lead naturally to periods of relaxation.