

Writing

A FIRST LESSON IN DISCOURSE WRITING

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The lesson described below was given by the author during his practical assessment for the RSA Cert. TEFL in June 1980.

When I asked my adult intermediate class to write an evaluation of various advertisements appearing in the local press, one of the essays I received contained the following paragraph:

"I think that this kind of advertisement is very appealing. The outline of the Earth looks like an Easter egg. The message says about having holidays at Easter. There are many countries we can visit."

While this style of writing may not receive a great deal of literary acclaim, it is evidence, however, that the student is at least aware that a paragraph should contain a single theme or topic. Furthermore, the opening sentence declares this topic quite well, i.e. we expect him to explain why he finds that kind of advertisement so appealing, and the subsequent sentences more or less expand this. It could be argued, then, that it is at least coherent: the sentences are related to each other and the topic sentence. In other words, there are no irrelevant ideas expressed in the paragraph. However, the question is whether or not coherence is all that is necessary for good paragraph writing.

The student can easily be criticised for simplistic expression and brevity of sent-

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ence length for discourse writing. Moreover, further examination of this text also reveals that it contains very few linguistic items to determine the order in which the sentences should appear. Those following the opening one could have been written in any order. It is for the reader to assume that each sentence refers to the preceding one, but this is by no means clear. They have very little cohesion; there is almost nothing in each sentence to show that it has to follow the preceding one. One consequence of this is that any reader could misinterpret the writer's intended meaning by incorrectly assuming that one written phrase refers to a certain other phrase, when, in fact, it may not.

In order to clarify the point of cohesion in writing, compare the student's original paragraph with the following rewritten version:

"I think that this kind of advertisement is very appealing. It shows an outline of the Earth looking like an Easter egg. Next to this is a message about having holidays at Easter. It tells us that there are many countries we can visit at this time."

Although still not the most desirable piece of writing, the paragraph now contains pronoun reference, a cohesive device which gives the sentences a definite sequence. The pronouns, and the nouns or noun phrases to which they refer, are shown boxed and connected by lines. The sentence arrangement of this paragraph cannot be altered; it now has more cohesive elements in addition to coherence, which help to bind the sentences together.

Having identified this lack of cohesion in writing as being a general class problem, the task was then to devise a way of teaching this, preferably incorporating some logical connectors for use within a paragraph so that the students could present their ideas in a much clearer fashion. Pronoun reference and noun repetition, although not the only cohesive devices, provided a good starting point, and the logical connectors chosen were: *In the first place*; *Secondly*; *Finally*; and *Consequently*.

Also, since the lesson was going to be for a class of adults, their analytical and deductive abilities could usefully be exploited in a discussion on cohesion.

What follows now is the fifty-minute lesson which I gave to teach the above points; it contains some ideas which other teachers may wish to develop and use in their own classes as a part of their writing program. The lesson divides into four main parts:

- 1 Making the students aware that cohesion in writing actually exists.
- 2 Practice in cohesion using pronoun reference.
- 3 Brief practice in using the stated logical connectors.
- 4 A context in which the students can use the above writing techniques.

The lesson

The class is told that they are going to be read a story. The teacher then reads out the first sentence of a story from the American cartoon 'Broom Hilda' (i): *Once upon a time there was a lovely young princess who lived in a castle in a far-off mythical kingdom.* The class is then divided into pairs and asked to guess the next sentence of the story. The brief feedback showed that the class generally expected the story to continue with the princess's father finding a handsome prince for marriage, or something similar. The teacher then reads the second sentence: *The castle was designed by her Uncle Hernando who was an architect in a nearby city.* The now bewildered students are asked to speculate as to the contents of the third sentence. This is also read out: *He was also a fine family man and was once an excellent swimmer.*

The class is divided into groups of three or four. Each group is given a photocopy of

(i) 'Broom Hilda' by Russell Myers. Copyright the Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate.

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the cartoon with the frames cut up separately. They are then asked to put them into what they think is the correct order. Almost all the groups succeeded in arranging the frames into the actual order, as it originally appeared. The students are asked the reasons for their choice of order, since the ideas expressed in the cartoon story appear to have little coherence. The teacher emphasises the point of cohesion in

written work, explaining why the frames cannot be in any other order. This is reinforced by asking the class the following questions:

- 1 Who is 'he' in picture three?
- 2 Who do you think Johnny Weismuller was?
- 3 Who are 'these same young men' in picture five?(ii)



(ii) For a more comprehensive dissection of this story of 'Broom Hilda', see the article by Joe D. Palmer, 'How a Paragraph Hangs Together', *FORUM* Volume XVIII Number 2.

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The students are then asked to read paragraph A, which is similarly confusing, and invited to give their impressions of it as a paragraph. They are then asked to draw networks of pronoun references/noun repetitions for:

- 1 John
- 2 University
- 3 mother

on paragraph A. When this is finished, each student is given the correct networks drawn on a sheet of tracing paper. They then place this over their own attempts for comparison.

Next, the students are asked to look at paragraph B and, in pairs, fill in the empty boxes on each network. There are three networks: 'John', 'University' and 'job'. Class feedback allows students to check their work with that of others.

As a class, the two paragraphs are compared. The teacher asks which one is the better paragraph and why. The point is made that a paragraph should contain

coherence *and* cohesion. The use of the logical connectors is pointed out to the class.

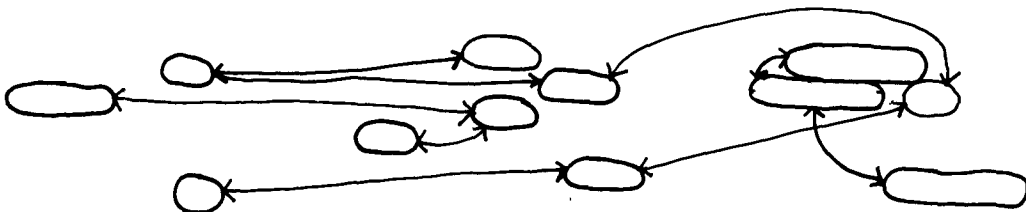
The students are asked to look at paragraph C and, in pairs, mark the places where the same logical connectors should appear. Class feedback.

After this, the class is divided into groups of three or four, each student being given a copy of worksheet 1. This contains an "advertisement" by the European Investment Bank inviting applications for the vacant post of Agricultural Economist. Beneath this are the curriculum vitae of two applicants. This worksheet can, of course, easily be adapted for classes in countries other than Greece. The students are asked to read the advertisement and underline the five points demanded of applicants. They then check their results with the others in their group. They are asked to put a tick or a cross in the appropriate boxes to indicate as to whether each applicant has what is required.

Paragraph A

There are three reasons why John is not going to University. In the first place his father is dead and if John went to University, his mother would be left all alone. She has a few friends, but they do not live very near, and she would probably have to spend most evenings alone. Consequently, although John wants to go to University very much, he is going to get a job near home instead.

Paragraph A — networks (to appear on tracing paper)



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Paragraph B

There are three reasons why John is not going to University. In the first place, his family is quite poor and, since he has four young brothers and sisters still at school, he feels he should help his family financially as soon as possible. Secondly, if he went to University, his mother would be left alone to look after the young children. Finally, he has been offered a good job with excellent chances of promotion. Consequently, although he wants to go to University very much, he is going to take the job instead.

Paragraph C

A solution to the problem of pollution in Athens must be found soon for three main reasons. Chemical action on the marble of the Parthenon is causing it to crumble. Its white marble columns are now yellow. It is making people ill because they have to breathe these chemicals every day. Some small animals cannot live in Athens. They do not have enough oxygen. The enjoyment of life in Athens is slowly disappearing.

Worksheet 1

Advertisement:

The European Investment Bank in Luxembourg invites applications for the post of AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIST to work in our Greek Department. Applicants should be between 28 and 35 years of age and be able to speak and write fluently in Modern Greek (Demotiki), English and either French or German.

In addition, they should have a post-graduate qualification in Agricultural Economics and at least five years experience of working with bank finance in Agriculture.

<p>Curriculum Vitae</p> <p>Name : POLICHRONOPOULOS, Andreas <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date of Birth : 14 April 1948 <input type="text"/></p> <p>Languages : Greek(native); <input type="text"/></p> <p>English(fluent);French(fluent) <input type="text"/></p> <p>Qualifications :</p> <p>B.A.(Economics)-University of London. <input type="text"/></p> <p>M.A.(Agricultural Economics)-University of Cambridge. <input type="text"/></p> <p>Professional Experience :</p> <p>1972-1976: English Bank of Agriculture. <input type="text"/></p> <p>1976-present: Agricultural Bank of Greece. <input type="text"/></p>	<p>Curriculum Vitae</p> <p>Name : VATRAKOS, Athanasios <input type="text"/></p> <p>Date of Birth : 28 January 1953 <input type="text"/></p> <p>Languages : Greek(native); <input type="text"/></p> <p>English(fluent);German(beginner) <input type="text"/></p> <p>Qualifications :</p> <p>B.A.(Economics)-University of Thessaloniki, Greece. <input type="text"/></p> <p>M.A.(Economics)-University of Birmingham, England. <input type="text"/></p> <p>Professional Experience :</p> <p>1976-present : National Bank of Greece. <input type="text"/></p>
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Each student is given worksheet 2, an 'internal memo'. They are asked to imagine that they are the Head of the Greek Department (in this case) and to write a paragraph recommending the applicant they have identified as being the most suitable for the post. The first sentence is given. After some class feedback, they write another paragraph outlining the reasons why they do not recommend the other applicant. Again, the first sentence is given. The students work in groups to write these paragraphs.

For homework, the students are asked to imagine that their sponsor (for my class of Greek Civil Servants, their immediate boss) has told them that they must stop the English classes (a hypothetical situation for my class, I must add). They then write a paragraph in reply, as if on a memo, stating all the reasons why they should continue (hopefully, this should meet with a positive response!).

To summarise, the design and execution of the above lesson utilised the following points which seem to form a useful basis for teaching discourse:

- 1 A sharp, amusing presentation (in this case a contrast between coherence and cohesion).
- 2 Some reading exercises (in this case including information matching).
- 3 Student criticism of their own and each other's performance.
- 4 Students analysis and discussion of the aspects of written work under consideration.
- 5 Transfer exercises to which the students can easily relate, although hypothetical in this case.

