Investigating Coherence in the Performance of English Department Students

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Abstract

This paper is intended to assess the performance of Kurdish learners of EFL in the area of coherence. It is hoped that this assessment will help to diagnose the areas of strengths and weaknesses of the students' performance. To achieve the aim of the study, an achievement test has been given to a sample of fifty students. To analyze coherence in the students' writing, a model has been adopted. The study ends up with a number of conclusions based on a statistical analysis of the test results.

الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث الى تقييم اداء الطلبة الكورد متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في مجال التماسك المعنوي. ومن المامل ان يساعد هذا التقييم في تشخيص مواطن الضعف والقوة في اداء الطلبة ولتحقيق هدف البحث اختبر خمسون طالبا اختبارا تحصيليا. ولغرض تحليل التماسك المعنوي في الكتابات الطلبة تبنى الباحث انموذجا لهذا الغرض. وينتهي البحث بعدد من الاستنتاجات في ضوء التحليل الاحصائي للنتائج.

1-Introduction

No doubt, there has been a recent interest in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) at supra sentential level. FLT no longer aims at enabling students to produce single unconnected sentences. Instead, the aim is to enable students to communicate purposively. Purposive communication demands, among other

things, producing meaningful texts which should meet certain criteria among which is coherence with which the present study is concerned.

The recent aim of FLT necessitates new demands on the part of those concerned with FLT among which is the assessment of students' performance in this area. Such assessment can help to diagnose students' errors and their probable sources, and consequently to suggest remedial work. The present study is an attempt to assess the performance of Kurdish learners of EFL.

To achieve the aim of the study, two sorts of procedures have been followed: theoretical and practical. The former includes reviewing some related literature for the purpose of adopting a model for coherence analysis. On the other hand, the practical procedures include choosing a sample and constructing an achievement test to be given to the subjects to reveal their ability to produce coherent texts.

The test results have been analyzed statistically. The students' performance has been analyzed according to the elements of the adopted model. Students' errors have been recognized and their probable sources have been discussed. In the light of the test results, certain conclusions have been drawn and some recommendations have been put forward.

2-On Defining Coherence

Coherence, or texture, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976:26), is the combination of semantic configurations of two different kinds, register and cohesion. Register refers to the variety of language which is appropriate for the situation of the speech event, and is not of any particular relevance or interest here.

Coherence refers to the extent to which text segments are structurally linked to other segments (Schraw, 2002). Coherence in linguistics is what makes a text semantically meaningful. It is especially dealt with in text linguistics. It is achieved through syntactical features such as the use of deictic, anaphoric and cataphoric elements or logical tense structure, as well as presuppositions and implications connected to general world knowledge.

David Crystal (2003:81) defines coherence as an application of the general use of this term in discourse analysis, referring to the main principle of organization postulated to account for the underlying functional connectedness or identify a piece of spoken or written language (text, discourse). It involves the study of such factors as the language users' knowledge of the world, the inferences they make, and the assumptions they hold and in particular of the way which coherent communication is mediated through the use of speech acts.

George Yule (2000: 128) defines coherence as the familiar and expected relationships in experience which we use to connect the meanings of utterances even when those connections are not explicitly made.

On the other hand, Beaugrande (1980:18) views coherence as the procedures whereby elements of knowledge are made recoverable while Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:94) envision coherence as the outcome of combing concepts and relations into a network of knowledge space centered around main topics. In other words, Beaugrande (1980:18) views coherence as the procedures whereby elements of knowledge are made recoverable. These procedures subsume:

A-Logical relations such as casualty and class inclusion.

B-Knowledge of how event, actions, objects and situations are organized.

C-The striving for continuity in human experience.

3 -The Adopted Model for Coherence Analysis:

The model adopted in this study is quoted from Mahmood(n.d). The reason behind quoting this model is its suitability for the purposes of this study. Below is a brief account for the adopted model.

A-The Individual Identity Condition

According to this condition, determining the coherence of a text requires considering the type of relations between the individuals found in the text. In other words, it requires determining whether the movement from one individual to another is smooth, logical or not.

B-Ordering of Descriptions

Abdul-Razzaq and Al-Hassan (2000:30) and T. van Dijk (1977:105-6) shed light on certain orderings of descriptions. They hold that the normal ordering of state descriptions is determined by certain constraints such as:

General-particular

Whole-part / component

Set-subset-element

Including-included

Large-small

Outside-inside

Possessor-possessed

Familiar-unfamiliar

The normal ordering of descriptions in terms of the above constraints is not based only on constraints of semantic information distribution, but also on general cognitive principles of perception and attention. Human beings usually describe a whole object before its parts, a large object before a small one.

C-Normality Condition

The normality condition refers to the normality of the worlds involved in the text. That is, the reader's expectations about the semantic structure of a text are determined by his knowledge about the structure of the worlds in general and of particular states and events. This general knowledge is often referred to as (frame). Brown and Yule (1983:238) use the term 'frame' to refer to a 'fixed representation of knowledge about the world'. In other words, they view frame as a 'stable set of facts about the world'.

D-Scheme

Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:90-1) indicate that schemes are global patterns of events in ordered sequences linked by time proximity and casualty. This sort of knowledge about events enables the text reader to set up a hypothesis about what will be done or mentioned next in the text.

However, as for determining text coherence, it is significant to decide whether or not the events of the text are consistent with the scheme of the text that the reader sets when he first reads the text.

E-Plan

Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:90-1) indicate that plans are also global patterns of events or states, but they are different from schemes in the sense that a planner, a text producer for instance, evaluates events in terms of their advance towards his goal.

F-Condition-Sequence Ordering of Facts

This is another criterion for determining text coherence related to the ordering of events and states. According to this notion, initial states or events should be mentioned before the intermediary states or events and these, in turn should be mentioned before the final ones. Thus states and events are ordered according to what Abdul-Razzaq and Al-Hassan call 'time order'.

G-Computing Communicative Function

This notion is based on Labov's argument that a text can be interpreted as coherent or non-coherent on the bases of social rules of interpretation that connect what is said to what is done, and not on linguistics rules. To Labov, recognizing a text as coherent or non-coherent should be based on the relationship between the actions performed with the utterance, and not the relationship between the utterances themselves.

H-Inferences

Comprehending a text may require making inferences on the part of the reader. In this concern, Brown and Yule (1983:267) affirm that these inferences should not be equated with any form of connection between sentences in a text.

They emphasize that these inferences are connections which the reader makes when he tries to read a text. Such inferences enable the reader to answer the set of who, what, where, and when questions which are necessary comprehend a text.

I-Text Topic

Determining text coherence according to this notion requires making sure that there is no change in its topic. It is certain that such changes make the text incoherent.

4-Procedures

4-1 Administration of the Test

The test has been administrated twice. The first administration was a pilot one. It aimed at determining the practicality of the test and the time sufficient for answering the questions. At the end of the study, the final test was given to the subjects to diagnose the areas of difficulty in achieving coherence in narrative and descriptive tests by English Department students.

4-2 Population and Sample of the Study

The sample of the study consisted of 50 students (males and females) selected randomly out of 68 students from both third and fourth stages at English department, College of Education/ Kalar- University of Sulaimani for the academic year 2007/2008.

4-3 Description of the Test

As shown in appendix (1) the test consists of two essay-writing items. One requires the students to write a descriptive composition while the other requires the students to write a narrative composition. The reason behind including two types of texts is to find out whether or not students' difficulty varies according to text type.

4-4 Statistical Means

For the analysis of the result, the percentage has been used to find out the number of the students who managed or failed to achieve coherence in terms of the elements of the adopted model.

5-Analysis of Results

In the analysis of results, the percentage has been used to calculate the number of subjects who have managed to achieve coherence. To begin discussing the results, it might be useful to diagram the results as follows:

Table (2) Percentage of Students Who Achieved Coherence

Element of Coherence	Percentage of Subjects	
	Narrative Passage	Descriptive Passage
The Individual Identity Condition	40	40
Ordering of Descriptions	80	54
Normality Condition	74	48
Scheme	70	50
Plan	66	44

Condition-Sequence Ordering of Facts	72	50
Computing Communicative Function	66	44
Inferences	66	36
Text topic	68	44

It is obvious from the above table that students' ability to achieve coherence is influenced by the type of text. Generally, achieving coherence in a narrative text seems to be less problematic than a descriptive one. This can be due to the fact that students are more familiar with narrative texts and their style and techniques which are based on time order. Furthermore, students are usually more engaged with narrating their daily life events than describing them.

In addition to the text type, students' ability to achieve coherence varies from one elements of coherence to another within the same text type. As for narrative text, only 40% subjects managed to achieve coherence in terms of the individual identity condition. Sixty percent of the students failed to establish logical relationships between the individuals involved in the text, or move smoothly from one individual to another. Consider the example below:

….A soldier was killed in a war, he did not dressed his address chane, which was consist of the complete knowledge about the soldiers. So as his body not be lost, his friend put his chane address into his pocket.

Ordering of descriptions seems to the least problematic element. Eighty percent of the students managed to order description logically, either from larger to smaller, or from general to particular. Only 20% failed to order descriptions logically. Consider the example below:

....Being absent for two years, while everybody thought he is killed. One cold and rainy night Thomas came back home, with his bags reached his house and knocked the door.

His mother opened the door for him and asked 'how can I help you?' she was unable to recognize Thomas because of his appearance he has a long beard and hair.

Normality condition seems to be a little more difficult to achieve than ordering of description. Only 74% of the subjects managed to include normal worlds into the frame of the narrative passage. On the other hand, 26% of the subjects included some worlds which are not normal of the frame of the passage as in the example below:

...It was a hot day of summer. The mother and a son with a daughter of a small family were sitting in the garden.The garden was small and green and it was surrounded by red and pink roses. The boy was four years old. He was sitting beside his mother.

Scheme was not too easy for the subjects. Only 70% of the subjects managed to achieve coherence in terms of scheme, while 30% failed to do so.

Their arrangement of events and other details were not leading the reader clearly to the climax as in the example below:

……Before going to the battle field , he has some sick psychology, so their kens believe that he has committed suicide or he has been scarified after two years the war is over, he comes back from the battle field to home. At that time he is arriving at home his parents are very surprised after that they decide to make a party for their son. His father and mother are so happy, they invite their next door neighbors, relatives and their friends.

Plan seems to be more difficult than scheme. Sixty-six percent of the subjects managed while 34% failed to achieve coherence in terms of this element. Those who failed were unable to make all the events advance towards the goal of the text i.e. leading the reader gradually to the actions that happen when the soldier returns home. Consider `the example below:

…….Many years ago, a man enlisted in army. During the war which was very sever the armies of the two opposite side mixed together. Blood was every where bodies and part of bodies were spread in bombardment.

As for condition sequence ordering of facts and events, 72% of the subjects managed to order events and facts logically i.e, starting with initial events and status first, and then with medial and final ones. On the other hand 28% of the subjects failed to order facts and events in this way as in:

...He was coming towards his home in a high hesitant manner because he did not know anything about his family, his baby either he will introduce his father or not. He decided to go to his home in a sudden way but after that he had refused that idea because he was sure about its bad result.

As for computing communication function the statistical analysis shows that 66% of the subjects managed to establish logical relationships between actions and utterances. On the other hand 34% failed to achieve such relation as in the example below:

.....It was hard war, so many Iraqi soldiers capture and killed. The super power was against Iraqi army that is why great number of soldiers arrested even with out shutting one bullet.

As for inference 66% of the subjects managed to produce texts which don't require a lot of inferences on the reader's part. Their texts were coherent enough to be understood without many inferences. However, 34% of the subjects' texts required frequent inferences on the readers' parts as in the text below:

...He Drinks his tea and goes deeply in his little son's blue eyes, as if he loses something and he searches for then he looks at his wife and even all of the things inside his house.

Finally, 68% of the subjects managed to achieve coherence in terms of text topic. Their texts included almost no items irrelevant to the frame of the text topic. However, 32% of the subjects failed to achieve coherence in terms of text topic. Their texts included some items and details irrelevant to the frame of text topic as in:

...During one of their fighting with their enemy, most of the American soldier were killed and some were injured, Thomas was one of them, he was deeply injured to the point that he could not move, his friends obliged to leave him because they expected that he is died but he was not died and he saved by chance.

As for descriptive passage, it is clear that achieving coherence in such texts seems to be more difficult. For instance, only 40% of the subjects managed to establish logical relations between the individuals involved in the text and more smoothly from one individual to another. On the other hand, 60% of the subjects failed to achieve such relationship and movement as in:

.....Bas stations are transportation centers where people are transferred onto and off the bus. Bus is along vehicle with seats that carries passengers, of ten a long a specified route as part of public transportation.

Ordering of descriptions seems to be less problematic than individual identity condition. Fifty-four percent of the subjects were able to order their descriptions systematically and logically, while 46% failed to do so as in:

....When I was waiting for the bus in the bus station for along time. There is any bus appears because its afternoon most of them went home for dinner.

Achieving coherence in terms of normality condition appears to be more problematic than ordering of descriptions. Only 48% of the subjects managed to include normal worlds into the texts. On the other hand, 52% of the subjects produced incoherent texts in terms of this criterion, as in:

……..I saw people who one waiting for the bus, they carrying on bags and they read newspaper till they went into the bus then inside the bus there are air conditioner and TV so as not to be upset inside the bus.

As for scheme, 50% of the subjects managed to make the details and items consistent with the scheme of the text, while 50% failed to do so as in:

……I liked to talk to myself in English, and I saw lots of bight signs through the windows they were in all different colors. When I was in the bus, I introduced myself to a person that he could speak English every well, we talked to each other until we reached in a bus station , we spent a nice time. Finally we parted each other.

As for plan, 44% of the subjects succeeded in making the text details advance towards the text goal, while 56% of the subjects failed to do so as in:

The bus station is not clean and tidy. The bus stations are narrow. Inside or outside the bus also we have many problems that annoy you such as the smell of the cigarette by those people who did not pay attention to others. However some of the bus or some people inside the bus are helpless the young are not ready to give their seats to old in cases when they have no seats.

Fifty percent of the subjects managed to order the sequences of facts managed to order the sequences of facts beginning with initial and then medial ones, and ending with final facts. However 50% failed to do as in:

I remember when I was in New York City I and my boson friend waited for a bus in bus station. I shocked when I took a look I saw many beautiful things, there was a cinema exactly apposite to the bus station. I went to the office of bus station to take a ticket, I got ticket number 2. I arrived early so I should wait for a long time so I went to the coffee.

As for computing communication function 44% of the subjects managed to establish logical relationships between the actions and the utterances. However, 56% failed to do so as in:

…….I was away no one watered the trees also the ground yellow because of the yellow leaves. I went through the garden till I came and entered the house. I said 'hello' but no one answered.

Concerning inference, 36% of the subjects managed to produce texts with no missing connections, while the texts produced by 64% of the subjects had missing connections as in:

….One day I went to the bus station to travel and when I arrived to the station I see that it is very large station and contain many bus and shop to service the people those who are traveling from city to another also for each city specific a group of the bus for it.

Finally, 44% of the subjects managed to produce texts which contained no details irrelevant to the topic or the frame of the text. On the other hand, 56% of the subjects included into their text some details irrelevant to the frame of the text as in:

...The two ladies were also waiting; they bought tickets they saw an old lady seemed very tired. She wore a glass she was carrying heavy suitcase, they saw a small girl was selling flowers.

Note: The examples are taken from the students as they are without correcting their mistakes.

6-Conclusions

The findings of the study lead to the following conclusions:

1-The difficulty of achieving coherence depends, among other things, on text type.

2-Achieving coherence in descriptive passage is more difficult than that in narrative text. This can be due to the fact that the subjects are more familiar with narrating than describing in their everyday life.

3-Students' ability to achieve coherence differs from one element of coherence to another. For example, the individual identity condition is more problematic than other elements.

7-Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be put forward:

1-Encouraging EFL textbook writers and teachers to pay more attention to the concept of coherence.

2-Encouraging EFL teachers to use objective models to evaluate students' writings in terms of coherence. The model adopted in this study can be useful.

3-The same evaluation model can be used as a guide to show students how to achieve coherence.

Appendix 1

The form of the test:

a-Write a composition on describing the things you can see in a bus station and the people waiting for the bus.

b-Write a composition telling the story of a person who is presumed to have been killed in a battle returns home two years after the war is over. Give an account of what happens after his arrival.

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