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COHESION AND COHERENCE CHALLENGES IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING WITH SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Over the years writing has been acknowledged as an essential part in the acquisition of English as a foreign language. Its key features, cohesion and coherence, can be defined as the most essential elements which use ideas logically exposed on a sentence/paragraph level to convey information using developed argumentative sentences. Therefore, recognition and detection of cohesion and coherence problems is the first step towards minimizing writing issues which helps students to successfully develop their argumentative essay writing skills. This paper demonstrates challenges of cohesion and coherence that students meet while preparing for argumentative essay writing and offers suggestions based on examples of good practice from our classrooms.

Keywords: *cohesion and coherence problems, argumentative essay writing, argumentative sentences, classroom practice.*

1. Introduction

Writing skills are undoubtedly one of the most challenging skills to master both for language teachers as well as for students. As writing has become one of the most prominent language skills (Ariana, 2010) it has inevitably been implemented into State Matura Exam in Croatian educational system. Over the years it has become clear that students encounter numerous obstacles when having to organize and generate their ideas in an appropriate way and deliver a coherent set of ideas grouped within what is known as „argumentative essay“. In order for students to write this type of essay successfully, students have to be aware of all its components to make it clear and meaningful as well as understandable to the reader.

From our experience of vocational school teachers and in work with our students we have noticed that even the most skilled students who are highly successful in delivering speeches and are gifted with exceptional speaking skills are often confronted with not being as successful in achieving the same results in a written form. It is generally acknowledged that writing has been given a crucial role in the process of English language learning. As White (1986) states „because writing is a way of learning, you can actually achieve deeper

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insight into any subject by writing out your thoughts“ (p.18). Having spent years in teaching secondary school students, the authors of this paper have come to a conclusion from their personal experience that teachers may often feel pressed for time to complete a set programme, and may in many instances cut writing assignments or relegate them to homework. However, unlike all the other language skills, writing is permanent and should therefore be easier to follow and comprehend than speech (Hardaway and Hardaway, 1978, p.256). This can be achieved through numerous attempts (drafts) that derive from a long series of writing before the final draft appears. Teaching writing should consist of several stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising and proofreading. One of the more efficient methods of teaching writing might be found in process writing, since it enables students to aim their attention at stages of producing ideas, drafting, revising and editing in order to create a text (Reis Alves, 2008, p.5). For this reason we have decided to focus on improving writing skills with our vocational school students, while at the same time determining obstacles which prevent them from achieving better results in writing. In this regard coherence and cohesion have appeared as an important issue that needs to be addressed so we will look more detailed into this idea. We will present the analysis of the aforementioned subject carried out on students' argumentative essays and conclude with giving ideas and suggestions for improvements.

2. Coherence and cohesion in writing

Working as vocational school teachers and from our experience as moderators on State Matura Exam over the years authors have noticed that vocational school students generally face a problem of use and misuse of cohesive devices when expressing their ideas in a written form i.e. writing an argumentative essay, which in turn affects coherence of their text. To make a clearer distinction between coherence and cohesion, we need to look into the attempts of defining these two notions. The term coherence can be defined as a concept which does not exist in a written piece of work per se, but can rather be perceived, in the view of Tanskanen (2006), as the logical sequel of a correlation which arises between the text and its reader. It implies rational and well-organized connections within text on a topic level. Cohesion, however, presumes a variety of linguistic and lexical principles in a written text, which are essential for establishing these delicate connections within sections of a text (Tanskanen, 2006). It refers to the logical relation of a written text on a sentence level and students need to be aware of clear distinction between these two concepts in order for them to unambiguously convey ideas to the reader.

Therefore, overcoming main coherence and cohesion issues in a written work might become a possible solution towards delivering a successful argumentative essay. Clearly exposed arrangement of ideas is the one which helps readers understand the meaning and the value of written work, as it is quite often challenging to communicate your ideas and present your arguments to the reader in a clear and logical fashion. If a student fails to produce such arrangement, their meaning disappears and the ideas are lost. Therefore, the relation between the unity and coherence cannot be divided and should be observed as a whole to produce a coherent piece of written work. Coherence is basically the unity of text as a whole whereas cohesion relates to the micro level of the essay; they need to be perceived as a team working together to bring clarity and meaningfulness to an essay.

It is believed that well-constructed arrangement of sentences is a way to achieve coherence in a written work. One approach to accomplish coherence is to use examples in order to clarify abstract ideas or chronology when students write a list consisting of events arranged based on a time sequence (Arnaudet & Barret, 1984, p.460). As stated by Mali (2014) another approach is the use of causality to create a time relationship between two actions or events in such an order that one action leads to another one (p.25). Process can also be regarded as an idea which contributes to achievement of coherence through listing of steps or stages within a time frame to form a process relationship between the ideas. Relationship between ideas is easily recognized simply by paying attention to the type of a cohesive device a student has used. Also, students should be taught to recognize the pattern of ideas exposed and to produce ideas which are related to the topic of the essay. In order to demonstrate student's knowledge, students mainly approach argumentative writing by expressing facts, with little or no awareness of a logical arrangement between the ideas they have stated. They are primarily focused on grammar and vocabulary accuracy which they identify with the concept of successful essay writing. In relation to coherence and cohesion issue students face difficulties to achieve successful relationship between ideas and logical progression from one idea to another, obtaining an organized paragraph outline at the same time.

2.1. Coherence – argumentative sentences

Argumentative writing is a crucial skill during the school years and in later stages of life (Nippold, 2000, Crowhurst, 1990). Practice work with our vocational school students has made it clear that successful writing needs to have a good base and a form. A four-paragraph argumentative essay has become an exemplary model of successful writing in our educational system that students strive to; the first paragraph introduces the topic, whereas the „body“ of the essay is given in two following paragraphs: one discussing advantages and the other arguing disadvantages of a given topic. The last paragraph is conclusion which summarizes the main ideas expressed and states the author's opinion.

Since coherence by definition implies arranging ideas in a way that each idea submitted is connected to the other one, this implies that there needs to be connection of ideas on a sentence level as well as on a paragraph level. It is vital to teach students to recognize idea relationships in their essays to achieve coherence. Since the body of the essay is opened by a topic sentence it needs to be subsequently followed by its supporting evidence. Every argumentative sentence in the body of the essay should therefore be relevant to the thesis statement and the topic sentence written at the beginning of the paragraph.

It is important to recognize the relationship of ideas in the essay, whether they are in exemplary, chronological, causal or process-oriented relationship not only with the final goal of delivering a successfully written essay but also because argumentative writing requires students to embrace a particular point of view and try to convince the reader to adopt the same perspective or to perform a certain action (Nippold, Ward-Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005) later in their lives.

In its essence writing an argumentative essay means for the students to be able to provide clear and logical presentation of structurally developed sentences in order to submit a

valid conclusion to the reader by the end of the essay. Practice work in our classrooms has led us to conclusion that students still encounter numerous problems in writing a coherent argumentative essay. Organization and development of arguments become major challenges students need to cope with. It is especially difficult for them to come up with clear and strong arguments and consistently support these arguments utilizing a range of appropriate cohesive devices which, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976), encompass five major: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjugation, or lexical cohesion and to apply argumentative text structures, as well as produce valid evidence. To take a closer look into this matter we have decided to conduct an informal research - essay analysis and determine the most problematic areas our students encounter.

3. Essay analysis

Over the last fifteen years our classroom practice has shown that students generally meet major coherence and cohesion problems in essay writing, which is from the experience of this paper's authors primarily due to the fact that their students are unaware of distinctions between these two notions i.e. the fact that coherence refers to their ability to expose their flow of ideas in a fashion that the reader can follow them with ease whereas cohesion entails logical connections on a sentence level, employing an acceptable span of cohesive devices. Therefore, we decided to conduct a research and look into the specific problems our students have in connection to coherence and cohesion in their writing by analysing the use of cohesive devices and their impact on coherence of the argumentative essays they have delivered.

3.1. Task

The students were asked to write an argumentative essay, as a part of their regular classes. Word limit was set to 200-250 words and students were offered three topics to choose from:

Topic 1 – Smartphones - a blessing or a menace?

Topic 2 – Some people say that it is more useful to start a career after graduating from a vocational school. Others say it is better to enter university.

Topic 3 – Some people say that introducing higher tobacco taxes can improve health and save lives. Others disagree.

3.2. Participants

Data was collected from twenty five third grade vocational school students. All of the students in the classes that we teach in were obligated to write the essay, but for research purposes, only 25 randomly chosen essays were selected. Names were not used for data collection procedure.

3.3. Essay Analysis

The selected argumentative essays were analysed by the teachers using thorough scanning of all the essays written. Using cumulative experience as State Matura Exam moderators and following all the already known rules and structure of an argumentative essay (Jurković, 2005) as a written form, the following problematic areas have been identified as the most common:

1. Students have expressed their ideas in an illogical manner and the mere relationship between ideas has quite often been unclear. They tend to write as they speak or translate from their mother tongue (first language interference).

Example essay extract: „*Furthermore they can realise their ideas like going on some college, get on work, and their money. There is more opportunity to success and tell what they think. Thirdly they get some specific kind of freedom.*“

Example essay extract: „*Increasing of tobacco prices influenced the condition of poor people. They must do hard to have for their basic needs in life. It is hard because most of them are unemployment. Only some are working in company.*“

It is clear that the extracts from the essays number 1 and 4 did not include transitions and conjunctions that could signal a particular idea relationship since arranging sentences in a logical manner is a way to achieve coherence in a written work. Also, these extracts failed to provide any logical connection between sentences that should have been structurally more developed, whether using causality, chronology or contrast to create time relationship between events or concepts expressed.

2. Irrelevance of argumentative sentences which support thesis statements (topic sentences) is often present in their writing.

Example essay extract: „*Everybody's got a smartphone these days, to help them learn or talk to their friends. Many young people are spending more and more time online, which has got both positive and negative consequences.*“

Example essay extract: „*One good side of the Internet is that teenagers can find information at any moment they need them. They can also help them write the homework. Because students have problems at school. - This often helps teenagers to improve their grades. Another good side is that you can talk to friends and family in foreign countries. This is also a good way to stay in touch with friends and family around the world.*“

One of the key features of an argumentative essay is for it to be highly persuasive and logical. However, the given example shows that the author has encountered problems when formulating appropriate topic sentences that should have derived from a thesis statement by means of reason (thesis statement: „*Many young people are spending more and more time online, which has got both positive and negative consequences*“) which clearly causes incoherence in the essay. Instead of introducing a clear topic sentence which would announce the aim of the paragraph, e.g. obvious and undeniable benefits/drawbacks of the fact that many young people are spending more and more time online, the author has turned to „*one good side of the Internet*“ and develops a statement which is in no connection to the thesis statement written.

Also, argumentative sentences which follow the topic sentence are in no interrelation with either thesis statement or topic sentence whose affirmation they should be supporting;

they fail to provide clear and logical supporting evidence for the main idea expressed in the topic sentence as well. (Topic sentence: „*One good side of the Internet is that teenagers can find information at any moment they need them*“. Argumentative sentence to support the topic: „*They can also help them write the homework. Because students have problems at school.*“)

3. Irrelevance of supporting evidence in argumentative sentences

Example essay extract: „*One positive aspect of starting a career at 18 is an opportunity for gaining experience. In addition, during your work you earn money. You are independent and you can do whatever you want.*„

This example shows the irrelevance of supporting evidence which should clarify and explain why is the opportunity to gain experience a positive aspect of starting a career at 18. Also misuse of a cohesive device which follows („*In addition, during...*“) interferes with cohesion of a paragraph, as it has a relevant topic sentence but it does not provide a relevant supporting evidence to support the topic sentence.

In order to form a coherent paragraph and establish its unity the student should have provided primary elaboration of the opportunity for gaining experience by using appropriate initial cohesive device instead of a misused „*In addition*“, for example by giving evidence or relevant examples/data e.g. „*One positive aspect of starting a career at 18 is an opportunity for gaining experience. To begin with, starting a career at 18 means earning financial means to support yourself. In such a way you not only become independent but also obtain work experience, which is priceless.*“

Supporting evidence is an essential part of argumentative sentence which needs to be elaborated following a topic sentence to form a paragraph. Relevant and integrated supporting evidence whose relation to the sentence preceding should give a continuous line of thought and must represent a unity of coherent and well-connected thoughts. Therefore, the supporting evidence should support a topic sentence of a paragraph by providing evidence that is relevant to the topic. To put it another way, if a topic sentence in a paragraph discusses for example benefits and disadvantages of smartphone use, then the supporting evidence should also be focused on providing support for or against smartphone use.

4. Conclusion

It is clear that lack of cohesion and coherence in students' writing is a problem that cannot be ignored. The analysis of students' essays has revealed certain implications for English as a Foreign Language students. As seen in the example essays above, students need help coping with three situations that are most challenging for them to produce a coherent, organized and well-structured argumentative essay. It is therefore our conclusion that the following suggestions could offer solutions to these challenges thus helping students overcome obstacles in exposing their thoughts and ideas in writing and obtaining successful cohesion in essay writing:

1. Since students have expressed their ideas in an illogical manner and the mere relationship between ideas has quite often been unclear, we have decided to implement more writing exercises on a paragraph level in our teaching and help students learn how to use reference words to refer to an idea already mentioned before i.e.

pronouns. Also, students should be encouraged not to translate ideas from their mother tongue but to employ second i.e. English language when planning and generating ideas in a paragraph. Students should practise making use of transition signals in writing as much as they do when speaking; they can be used to give examples, to show a contrast or opposite idea or a result or to list the first argument mentioned. They should practise the skill of not repeating words, but support their ideas using different words (synonyms) and incorporate substitution for one more words used earlier in their essay to avoid unnecessary repetition. Also, it is essential for students to master the use of transitional words and phrases to achieve coherence in the given paragraphs where ideas should then flow smoothly one after another.

2. When students employ irrelevant argumentative sentences which support thesis statements (topic sentences), it might be helpful to explain the purpose of thesis statements and topic sentences through simple sentence exercises in which they will need to distinguish between the topic of the sentence and the main idea about the topic; this type of practise work could clarify the role of the topic sentence and help them learn the difference between the topic sentence which helps the reader understand what the paragraph is going to talk about and supporting sentences which come after the topic sentence and merely explain it more thoroughly: in this sense exercises containing mixed up parts of one paragraph might be useful as students will practise assigning roles to each of the sentences and ordering them appropriately within a given paragraph structure. Students should also be encouraged how and when to use ellipsis more frequently and leave out one or more words when their meaning is clear from the context.
3. In case of irrelevance of supporting evidence in argumentative sentences, we have decided to incorporate more writing practice: one of the easiest ways for students to keep their focus on the topic and provide relevant supporting evidence is for them to master the art of creating a paragraph. After setting a topic sentence they should give its details, an explanation of the details and a valid example. This can be achieved through paragraph exercises in which students will be asked to underline all the three parts of the paragraph and see the relevance of the argument that serves as additional support to make „the case“stronger; here we decided to implement peer feedback; providing students with clear feedback is one of the best ways that can facilitate students to be able to write well and notice whether their ideas contain relevance to support the arguments they have included.

There is no doubt that teaching students to improve their writing skills is a very hardworking and time consuming process. However, by implementing all the suggestions given above students can develop potential to enhance their writing skills thus becoming critical readers. This may help them learn how to become more self-reliant writers while having the capacity to self-edit and revise their piece of writing. Finally, even though our research did not analyse a large number of students' essays it still might be considered a valuable asset to teaching practice in our classrooms.

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Sažetak

**IZAZOVI KOHEZIJE I KOHERENCIJE U PISANJU ARGUMENTATIVNOG ESEJA UČENIKA
SREDNJE ŠKOLE**

Tijekom godina vještina pisanja prepoznata je kao bitan čimbenik u procesu učenja engleskog kao stranog jezika. Ključna obilježja pisanja, kohezija i koherencija, mogu se definirati kao najvažniji elementi koji koriste ideje izložene logičkim redoslijedom na nivou rečenice i ulomka kako bi prenijeli misao koristeći pravilno oblikovane i argumentirane rečenice. Stoga je prepoznavanje i otkrivanje problema kohezije i koherencije prvi korak ka prevladavanju problema koji pomaže učenicima da uspješno razviju vještinu pisanja raspravljачkog eseja na engleskom jeziku. Ovaj rad prikazuje izazove kohezije i koherencije s kojima se učenici susreću tijekom pripreme za pisanje eseja i nudi preporuke temeljene na primjerima dobre praxe iz naših učionica.

Ključne riječi: *problemi kohezije i koherencije, pisanje raspravljачkog eseja, argumentacija, dobra praksa iz učionica.*

