

Language Skills Assignment 2: Writing
Cambridge DELTA Course at International House Bangkok (Centre No. OO001)

Coherence for upper-intermediate learners
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1.0 Introduction

Coherence is the quality of a writing which makes its purpose and ideas easily comprehensible. It is what makes communication take place between the reader and the writer (Thornbury, 2005; Tanskanen, 2006; Harmer, 2004:24).

I have noticed that many upper intermediate learners think that coherence and cohesion merely constitutes of using paragraphs and sentence linkers. While it is true that cohesive devices aid coherence, they do not guarantee it. The overall coherence will depend on a range of factors (Thornbury, 2005; Tanskanen, 2006; Harmer, 2004:24), some of which will be analysed in this essay.

2.0 Analysis – Different ways of achieving coherence

2.1 Layout and style

Writers can achieve coherence by presenting the ideas in a way the reader expects it (Harmer, 2004:24). This will of course depend on the text type or the communicative purpose of a particular genre (Swales 1990, cited in Flowerdew, 2000: 369; Min, 2016). Thornbury (2005:55) terms this genre-dependent text-pattern as the “macro-script”.

For example, in case of a formal email, the familiar layout would be the salutation (Dear....) followed by separate paragraphs for the purpose, the details and the desired action from the reader. It would also include a polite sentence signaling the end followed by the farewell (Yours...).

2.2 Relevant and appropriate vocabulary

The use of topic specific vocabulary or “keywords” make texts more understandable (Thornbury, 2005:51) helping to activate the reader’s schema of the topic (Ibid:55). For example, while requesting a payment, it would be more meaningful to write “cheque leaf” than saying “a printed substitute of money”. Saying the latter might not be wrong, but can confuse a reader and compromise with the coherence.

2.3 Ordering ideas and overall progression in writing

Coherence can also be achieved by structuring and ordering sentences in a way which allows individual ideas to impact an overall progression. In an essay paragraph, this order would be to begin with a topic sentence followed by support sentences (Macquarie University ELC, 2013).

The progression from sentence to sentence is also achieved by following a “theme (topic) and rheme (comment)” pattern, where each topic is followed by a comment, which in turn becomes the topic of the following sentence. Thornbury (2005:38-39)

For example:

Topic	Comment	Comment
Every student		has a unique learning style.
The style	←	depends on the range of factors.
These factors	←	Include one's education, personality as well as

2.4 Dividing longer texts into clear logical sections or paragraphs

Longer texts, such as essays and letters, can be made coherent by paragraphing, or making logical divisions. This means ensuring that each part (or paragraph) has a clear theme or main idea, justifying the logic behind the paragraph which is supported by all the other sentences of that part. It would also mean avoiding irrelevant or “rogue” sentences within a paragraph which can make the main idea ambiguous (Thornbury, 2005:47; IELTS.org, 2015).

For example, in an essay on the harms of smoking, there could be two body paragraphs – one dealing with health harms and the other dealing with other types of harms (social, financial, etc.). Mentioning the examples of one of these main ideas in the wrong paragraph would dilute the overall coherence of the writing, as the reader will not be able to clearly identify the two main ideas of the essay.

2.5 Use of cohesive devices

Cohesion refers to the grammatical and lexical linkages of ideas within the text. When crafted properly, such linkages enhance coherence (Tanskanen, 2006) at the micro level where the ideas within and across sentences are logically connected (Mackenzie, 2007:79; Thornbury, 2005:36).

Although it is possible to write a coherent text without cohesive devices (Thornbury, 2005; Harmer, 2004), coherence and cohesion almost always exists together (Tanskanen, 2006).

Cohesive devices can be of two types – Lexical and grammatical (Halliday & Hasan 1976, cited in Tanskanen, 2006).

- Lexical cohesion between two parts can be achieved by repeating certain words or related words (Harmer, 2004).
- Grammatical cohesion, on the other hand is achieved in a number of ways (Harmer, 2004:23) such as:
 - Pronoun referencing: Using pronouns such as *this*, *these*, *they* to refer back to a noun previously mentioned.
 - Article referencing: Using the definite article (the) to refer to something previously mentioned. E.g. *Retired local officers* can be referred to as *the officers*
 - Tense agreement: Writers use the same tense for different parts of the text to show that they are connected. For example, while narrating a story, a writer would use past tenses. Using the wrong tense would disrupt the cohesion.
 - Linking words such as because, however, in addition, etc.
 - Substitution (i.e. using a short phrase instead of a longer one) and ellipsis (deliberately leaving out some words):
 - *I hope we can finish the work. If so.....* (Here, *so* refers back to *finishing the work*)

- *I finishes the work last night, but before I did, I had* (Here, before I did refers to before I finished the work)

3.0 Issues and Teaching Suggestions:

In each of the suggested procedures below, T=The Teacher; Ss= The Students

3.1 Not using the appropriate layout and style

3.1.1 Explanation of the problem:

Upper intermediate learners, as I have observed, are often not familiar with the format of even common text types such as formal email. The purpose is often hidden within details in the body of the email. Similarly, I have come across essays of higher level IELTS learners who have used 3 different paragraphs just to introduce to essay topic, without writing any thesis.

3.1.2 Teaching Suggestion:

Learners could be exposed to the format of a particular text type using awareness raising activities, before they produce that text. For instance, the sequence of tasks by Harris, Mower and Sikorzyńska (2006: 41) could be used where the learners can look at some sample paragraphs of a report and put them in the correct order. Next, they can analyse the linking words used in the sample. They can then make a sample plan for themselves before writing their own report following the model they already analysed. **(See 5.1 for the original)**

This activity raises their awareness of the format and introduces them to useful cohesive devices before having them plan or produce a “parallel writing” (Harmer, 2004:58). Scaffolding learners with a set structure can help them producing their own piece, as was seen in Cotterall’s (2003) study on intermediate learners writing essays.

A variation of the aforementioned activity can be used to teach the students the layout and style of a formal letter. **(See 5.2)**

Suggested Procedure:

- i. T shows the names of the different parts of a formal letter on slide 1 **(See 5.2)**
- ii. Ss work in pair/groups to sequence the names
- iii. The teacher shows the generic structure of a formal letter Slide 2 **(See 5.2)**
- iv. T sticks different parts of an actual letter on the walls
- v. Students move in pairs, quickly skimming each and matching with the names on slide 2
- vi. Students match their choices/notes with another pair
- vii. The group now orders the parts in the best possible sequence
- viii. T gives the answers
- ix. Ss discuss the logic behind such a structure – (What is the logic behind A coming first and D coming towards the end? Why is E important before F?) **(See 5.2 slide 2)**
- x. Ss share some of their points as a whole class, with the T making necessary inputs

In this variation, students will be cognitively engaged as they decide on the structure **(See 5.2 slide 2)**. The next task allows them to see samples of each part. In the following tasks, they will have to critically think of the logic behind the structure shown by the teacher. All these steps will facilitate the higher level learning and therefore make the format of the letter more memorable.

3.2 Illogical Paragraphing and paragraphs lacking focus

3.2.1 Explanation of the problem:

In the description of B2 level IELTS bands (i.e. IELTS Band 5, 6 and 7), The IELTS public version writing band descriptors (IELTS.org, 2015:13) mention the following:

“Uses paragraphing, but not always logically.”

“There may be irrelevant details”

This means that learners at this level may write visibly separate paragraphs. However, these paragraphs do not necessarily reflect the logic of paragraphing which is that each paragraph should have only one central theme. **Refer to 2.4 for the analysis.**

Illogical paragraphing is mainly due to lack of planning, or learner not knowing how to select, group and sort ideas in the pre-writing planning stage. Therefore, they might include irrelevant ideas, or use very similar ideas in two different paragraphs.

The following activities can help teach the learners’ how to plan and hence overcome their weaknesses in paragraphing:

3.2.2 Teaching Suggestion #1:

Materials: (See 5.3) Self designed tasks adapted from (IELTSBuddy.com, n.d.)

Suggested Procedure:

- i. Ss are taught the purpose of paragraphing (each paragraph has one central theme/main idea)
- ii. Ss are given a sample letter of complaint (**See 5.3 first letter**)
- iii. Ss identify that some sentences in each paragraph belong to another paragraph
- iv. Ss see the corrected letter (**See 5.3 second letter**)
- v. Ss discuss as a whole class why those sentences belong to the other paragraphs and how they can spoil the coherence.
- vi. T gives feedback (**See 2.4 for the analysis**)

In this activity, the learners get to see bad examples of paragraphing and think why these are problematic. Again, this makes them critically think of the logic of paragraphing. They can then contrast the faulty paragraphing with logical one

3.2.3 Teaching Suggestion #2:

Materials: (See 5.4) Crossing out irrelevant ideas, and then grouping the relevant ideas into paragraphs (Cullen, French and Jakeman, 2014: 120-122)

Suggested Procedure:

- i. Ss are given a sample IELTS task 2 Essay Question (**See 5.4 Exercise 2.2**) and some notes
- ii. Ss identify 4 irrelevant ideas
- iii. T gives feedback
- iv. Ss discuss as a whole class why they are irrelevant
- v. T gives feedback
- vi. Ss sort the relevant ideas into two paragraphs.
- vii. T gives feedback
- viii. Finally, T elicits what steps did they follow and how planning helps

This activity increases their awareness of how to plan and why it is important. The activity integrates several important steps of planning: selecting, discarding and grouping ideas. This activity will teach the students that valuable time and energy can be saved by planning which could otherwise be spent on writing an incoherent essay.

3.3 Not using the most logical order of ideas within a paragraph

3.3.1 Explanation of the problem:

This means that although the paragraph has a central theme, the sentences within are not ordered the best possible way. This can often be a difficult area to teach as choosing best possible order is more complicated than eliminating irrelevant ideas or group ideas together. The following activity can help raise the learners' awareness of the theme and rheme pattern and also provide them with some practice of using it:

3.3.2 Teaching Suggestion #1:

The activity described in 3.2.3 could be extended. The material(s) used would be the same (See 5.4)

Procedure:

- After step vii of 3.2.2, the Ss will do the additional step of ordering the ideas in each of the two paragraphs.
- Ss discuss their logic behind their choice in whole class
- T gives feedback
- Finally, T elicits what steps did they follow and how planning helps

In addition to the benefits of 3.2.3 discussed earlier, this activity will raise the learners' awareness of ordering ideas and how it relates to coherence. The practice and feedback will also help the students understanding that ideas are usually ordered in a general to specific format.

3.4 Inaccurate use of cohesive devices

3.4.1 Explanation of the problem:

In the description of B2 level IELTS bands (i.e. IELTS Band 5 and 6), The IELTS public version writing band descriptors (IELTS.org, 2015:13) mention the following problems:

“Makes inadequate, inaccurate or over-use of cohesive devices.”; “Uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within”

These descriptors highlight an overuse of cohesive devices, which could often be faulty. This might be a result of upper intermediate learners experimenting with their newly learnt linkers. However, it is essential that they see that while correctly using linkers improve one's writing, misusing linkers actually spoil its overall coherence. In other words, not using linkers is better for coherence than misusing them.

3.4.3 Teaching Suggestion #1:

Materials: (See 5.5) Choosing the correct linkers (Hopkins and Cullen, 2007:204)

Suggested Procedure:

- i. Ss will choose the correct linkers and check in pairs
- ii. T will read a sentence without the linkers and elicit that it does make sense
- iii. T will then use a wrong linker and elicit that the sentence doesn't make sense
- iv. Next the T will use the correct linker
- v. T will highlight that wrong use of linkers spoil coherence while using it improves coherence
- vi. Steps (iii)-(v) will be repeated for all the sentences.

This activity will make the learners aware that misusing linkers can adversely affect their writing. Hence, they should only use it once they are sure of the meaning. In some cases, both the linkers might seem to be correct. In these cases, the T will use a linker which is clearly wrong in step (iii)

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