

# IDENTIFYING AND REPAIRING COHERENCE BREAKS IN FL STUDENT WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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## 1. Introduction

This article reports on a study devoted to an analysis of the instances of coherence breaks found in the expository essays produced by university students of English as a foreign language. The textual manifestations of miscommunication, which disturb both the global and the local meaning of a text, result from L2 (second language) writers' inept use of the linguistic and rhetorical devices that are required in English for making texts coherent and are apparently different in their own L1s (first languages). The major purpose of the inquiry was to find out whether the kind of remediation training the students received helped them align with the requirements of Anglo-American writing convention.

The relationship between language and the perception of reality was well captured long ago in the Whorfian hypothesis, which proposes that language and thought are inextricably tied together, determining the categories of perception open to the individual in a particular culture. Given that identity, language and written expression are inseparably bound together, the central question of the proposed study was the one formulated by Pavlenko (2005): is the first language always the language of the heart? Inspired by this question, the inquiry aimed to investigate how Polish and Ukrainian student writers balance their L1 and L2 linguistic and rhetorical standards when writing in English.

Since L2 writers' experience of their native literacy practice influences their linguistic and organizational choices while writing in a foreign language, the

writing instructors are challenged with the preconceptions or presuppositions related to writing that students have developed in their own cultures. These are often inappropriate and inapplicable in English-speaking settings and cause communication breaks. This is also the case of academic texts produced by Polish and Ukrainian students: their texts differ significantly from Anglo-American standards in the ways that native writers achieve textual coherence. This is particularly transparent in their ignorance related to the use of such reader-friendly devices as, e.g. explicit thesis statement, metatextual cuing, careful and logical paragraphing, and the use of precise and adequate vocabulary. In consequence, their texts are intricate, incoherent, and difficult to read for native and other users of English. Therefore, there is an obvious need for identifying the most frequent and typical linguistic and structuring devices that make those texts blurry and incoherent on the one hand, and for designing and developing effective practice to eliminate barriers to unequivocal comprehension of texts, on the other.

It has been noted (Cumming and Riazi, 2000: 57) that the field of L2 writing undoubtedly lacks a unified understanding of “how people learn to write in a second language” and how teaching could facilitate this process. Unfortunately, *coherence* in particular has been seen as the “step child” of the writing instruction: actually, practical implications of coherence theories can rarely be found on academic curricula. One of the reasons for this situation is that *coherence* is not a well conceptualized phenomenon. There are at least two competing approaches to the concept of *coherence*: one that emphasizes the reader’s interaction with the text and the other that focuses on the text itself (cf. Johns, 1986c). Despite the recent focus on the interaction between reader and text, for the purpose of our study we decided to adhere to both aspects of *coherence*. We believe that *coherence* should not only be viewed as a successful interpretation of linguistic messages by the reader (semantic perspective), but also as a function of the text itself in which the signals of surface cohesion (structural perspective) are necessary for easy processing. Then for successful interaction to occur between text producer – text – and recipient, it is necessary to understand how an individual’s first language and culture (which constitute their **autobiographical selves**)<sup>1</sup> influence their L2 writing (expressed by their **performative selves**)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> **‘Autobiographical self’** can be the closest representation of what writers mean by their authorial identity (since it relates directly to each author’s life history) and has certain affinity with Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of ‘habitus’: an individual’s disposition to behave in certain ways (see Lehman, 2015a).

<sup>2</sup> **‘Self as performer’** is to a greater or lesser extent the product of a writer’s **‘autobiographical self’** and is evidenced by the particular stylistic choices a writer makes to express their authori-

Admittedly, even though our research is only meant to be an issue-raising study, it nevertheless attempts to reveal the complexity of the factors involved in teaching both semantically and structurally based models of coherence to ESL students. Our purpose is to provide the readers with some assessment tools for evaluating textual coherence in academic texts produced by L2 writers.

## 2. Background

The Institute of English, part of the University of Social Sciences in Warsaw (a private university), offers both BA and MA programs in English studies. As is typical of similar studies in Poland courses combine intensive practical language teaching, linguistics, literature and culture of English-speaking countries. About 30% of the students who enroll at the Institute come from Ukraine. Admittedly, a considerable number of them are quite proficient in English and the same assessment applies to Polish students. However, both groups display serious inadequacies in their writing tasks and prove that their writing skills are not properly developed. This is clearly manifested in their evident violations of some writing principles that normally make texts cohesive and coherent.

The appreciation of the importance of writing for students' future professional careers has made us decide that this skill must be focused on in the didactic work at the Institute. For this reason we are developing a writing intensive program that will allow us to achieve our teaching objectives. Our conviction that the goal is feasible is based on the results of a pilot study we have recently conducted on an admittedly small population of Polish and Ukrainian students.

There is no denying that coherence breaks interrupt the smooth processing of the flow of information in the text. Also everyday experience provides ample evidence that the commonest breaks include the following ones:

- 1) on the global level – inept rhetorical structure
- 2) on the local level – non-parallel structure, inappropriate use of tenses, key nouns and pronouns, transition signals, erroneous word choice, word order and word form, as well as such errors as sentence fragments and run-on sentences.

However, the intensity of these disturbing factors varies between the groups. Some of these errors tend to occur more frequently in one group, while other errors are more frequent in the other group. Our experiment revolves around the claim that coherence breaks are due to inadequate schooling and the suggestion that they depend on the cultural variable. Therefore, our research objective was

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tativeness, linguistic finesse and to establish successful communication with the readers (see Lehman, 2015a).

also to find out which types of coherence breaks are more persistent in the essays of Polish subjects and which are more common in the essays written by the Ukrainian subjects. A comparison of coherence breaks made by students of two different L1s provides some evidence to support the suggestion mentioned above.

### **3. The experiment**

Sixteen expository essays written by Polish and Ukrainian students in the fourth year of their full-time English Philology studies (the first year of the master's program) were selected for detailed scrutiny. Of a gamut of actual coherence breaks found in the students' texts the following were selected for evaluation by the descriptors geared toward measuring the linguistic and rhetorical skills specified in the practice objectives and for subsequent submitting them to remedial practice: inept rhetorical pattern of the written work, inappropriate use of parallel structure, tenses, key nouns and pronouns, transition signals, erroneous word choice, word order and form, run-on sentences and sentence fragments (incomplete thoughts).

#### **Essay production situation**

Assigning the writing task in the form of a common prompt seemed to be a logical consequence of our choice of a trait-based scoring guide for data analysis. Prompt-response writing differs from other forms of academic writing mainly in two aspects: it is not interactive and is not completed over time because it is done solely by the student in one sitting and serves as a test. The students, working alone, read the prompt and then responded in writing. The writing task was completed in the classroom within the allotted amount of time (90 minutes).

#### **Rationale for prompt**

– What is a prompt?

A prompt is a written instruction for writing a paragraph or essay on a specific topic in a specific writing mode. It is a writing test, administered in a group situation. Specifically, the student must go through the following steps:

- read the prompt independently
- create an outline from the prompt information
- create a first draft independently from the outline

- revise the first draft independently
- produce the final draft
- exercise effective time-management.

## Description of the writing tasks

### Common prompt # 1

The students were asked to read the passage about certain people who made a difference in their lives, process the prompt content and identify useful information. The prompt contained **a general description of the topic** and did not include background information or the key points for the body paragraphs. The students had to independently identify and organize useful information. They used the prompt to produce organization plans and finally moved from their outlines to the complete development of their ideas. Their actual task was to discuss the reasons why they admire a person of their choice in three hundred-word expository essays. In order to minimize stress, the students had practised the above skills in various activities prior to the testing day.

### Instruction for students

*Read the passage below about important people in your life. Then follow the instruction for writing a “cause-effect” essay.*

In our lives, there are certain people who made a difference to us, who have taught us a lesson or who have done something extra that meant a lot to us. Think of a specific person in your life who has made an impression upon you or whom you admire. This person can be a friend, a co-worker or even a parent.

*Your purpose is to write a five paragraph essay (300 words), in which you provide reasons why you admire that person. Pay careful attention to how you organize your support.*

### Common prompt # 2

The students were asked to read the passage about the poverty in the U.S individually, process the prompt content and identify useful information. The prompt featured **a detailed description of the topic** which included background information for the introductory paragraph and the key points for the body paragraphs. The students had to identify and organize useful information in response to **the predefined pattern**. Their actual task was to discuss the effects of poverty on its victims in three hundred-word expository essays.

Although the reasons for poverty were mentioned in the task description, the students had to independently identify and organize useful information.

**Instruction for students**

*Read the passage below about poverty in the U.S. Then follow the instruction for writing a “cause-effect” essay.*

According to the U.S Census Bureau, the percentage of the U.S. population below the poverty line at the end of 2013 dropped to 12.7 percent. However, 12.7 percent of the U.S. population equals 34.5 million people, including 13.5 million children. These are very large numbers of people. What effects does poverty have on their lives?

The effects of poverty in the U.S. are varied. Higher crime rates and poor housing are common in low-income areas. School dropout rates are also higher, and those students who remain in school often do not receive as good an education as do the students in higher income areas. Being badly educated usually means that low-income people have few job skills. Other effects of poverty include a lack of money to pay doctor and dental bills. Many poor people do not have medical insurance. Low-income people may also eat foods that are cheap but not nutritious. These conditions all lead to more ill health. Because poor people are often the victims of crimes, live in rundown housing, have few job skills, and frequently have poorer health, it is hard for them to climb out of poverty. It is not surprising that the poor often suffer from depression and hopelessness when their present lives and their future possibilities are both so bleak.

*Your purpose is to write an essay (300 words) in which you examine the effects of poverty on its victims. Pay careful attention to how you organize your support.*

**4. Task objectives**

The task objectives were set to help students practically remedy the problems related to the three selected coherence breaks, i.e. rhetorical structure, focus and development, and language use found in the students’ written work. To identify the errors that lead to coherence breaks and then to measure the level of remedying them, we designed a scoring guide which featured the descriptors geared toward measuring the linguistic and rhetorical skills specified in the practice objectives.

**Descriptors in the scoring guide**

The scoring guide comprises five bands. Using this five-level scale, the rater assigns a single score to each trait to determine a cumulative score of 0 to 15 which can be divided by three to arrive at a mean score on the scale from 1 to 5.

### Primary and multiple trait scoring

Score	Rhetorical Structure inept rhetorical organization	Focus and development	Language Use sentence fragments, faulty word choice, lack of parallel structure run-on and choppy sentences
5	The essay is organized and logical; it features explicit thesis statement and clear paragraphing; the writer demonstrates the effective use of cohesive devices such as transition signals, repetition of key nouns, and pronoun/antecedent agreement.	The essay is fully developed with university-level content; the essay is unified and focused; the writer sustains a thoughtful argument.	Language is direct and generally accurate; there are no errors in parallelism, tenses, word order, choice and form; there are no fragments and run-on sentences in the text; vocabulary use is sophisticated and varied.
4	The essay is organized and logical, the thesis statement is sufficiently explicit but could be stated more clearly, each paragraph is governed by one controlling idea, for the most part the writer demonstrates the sufficient use of cohesive devices such as transition signals, repetition of key nouns, and pronoun/antecedent agreement.	The essay is adequately developed with quality content; the essay is unified and focused; for the most part the writer sustains a thoughtful argument.	Language control is good; there are very few errors in parallelism, tenses, word order, choice and form; there are no fragments and there may be one run-on sentence in the whole text; vocabulary use is nicely varied.
3	While the essay is organized and logical for the most part, some relationships between ideas are illogical; the essay features clear thesis statement but arbitrary paragraphing (illogical division of the text into paragraphs or presence of more than one main idea in a single paragraph); the writer makes little use of cohesive devices.	The essay is not sufficiently developed; some arguments are weak (trivial and cliché evidence), need more support or the supporting points are unclear; the essay is unified for the most part; the argument is partially sustained.	Language shows inconsistent control; there are some errors in parallelism, tenses, word order, choice and form; there are two or three fragments and one or two run-on sentences in the whole text; vocabulary use shows a lack of variety.
2	The essay lacks organization; there is no thesis or the thesis is inappropriate or confusing; the paragraph divisions are difficult to understand; the writer demonstrates hardly any use of cohesive devices.	The essay is not adequately developed; the essay lacks unity and focus is unclear; the support is irrelevant or it is insufficient to explain the supporting points; the argument is not sustained.	Language shows inconsistencies that distract the reader; there are several errors in parallelism, tense, word order, choice and form; there are three or more fragments and two or more run-on sentences in the whole text; vocabulary use is highly restricted and/or inaccurate.
1	Non- ratable	Non- ratable	Non- ratable

#### The prompt and the scoring guide have been thus constructed to reflect key dimensions of the assignment:

- its genre type and **the rhetorical pattern** related with it (e.g., explicit statement of the thesis statement, proper paragraphing, transition signals typical for cause/effect type of essay organization)
- **the goals of the assignment** (measured by the category ‘focus and development’ which required writers to sustain thoughtful argument)

- the formal features elicited in the prompt (measured by the category ‘language use’ referred to the appropriateness of language and effective lexical use)

## 5. The evaluation of the results of the first prompt

### Polish sample

Descriptors	Olga	Katarzyna	Patrycja	Albert
Rhetorical structure	5	4	5	5
Focus and development	3	3	3	4
Language use	3	3	3	3
Score	11	10	11	12

### Ukrainian sample

Descriptors	Oleksandr	Rostyslav	Nadiya	Mariana
Rhetorical structure	2	3	4	3
Focus and development	2	3	3	2
Language use	3	3	4	3
Score	7	8	12	8

**To remedy the coherence breaks in the organizational and sentence structure, the exercises designed to eliminate the following types of errors were administered:**

1. inept rhetorical organization
2. sentence fragments
3. faulty word choice
4. lack of parallel structure
5. run-on and choppy sentences

## 6. The evaluation of the results of the second prompt

### Polish sample

Descriptors	Olga	Katarzyna	Patrycja	Albert
Rhetorical structure	5	5	5	5
Focus and development	4	4	4	5
Language use	4	3	4	4
Score	13	12	13	14



**Ukrainian sample**

Descriptors	Oleksandr	Rostyslav	Nadiya	Mariana
Rhetorical structure	4	5	5	4
Focus and development	4	4	5	3
Language use	3	4	4	3
Score	11	13	13	10

**7. Analysis and conclusions**

The experiment that the students were submitted to suggests that appropriate training can increase their understanding and implementation of the basic rules for appropriate writing. A comparison of the results obtained before and after the training clearly shows a considerable improvement. Even though it was not equal with regard to the particular imperfections that were examined, progress is undeniable. It is most visible in the case of rhetorical structure. Polish students did not commit any mistakes in the organization of their written work in the final task, which indicates this type of coherence break has been permanently eliminated. Also, the Ukrainian students made a significant progress here: their score in this band raised from the initial 12 points to 18 points, and overall from 35 to 47 in all bands. The initial disparity between the two groups diminished remarkably, too. The initial overall score of Polish students was 42 points vs. Ukrainian 35 points and it was raised to 52 and 47 respectively in the final writing samples.

The results of our experiment demonstrate clearly that due to appropriate training coherence breaks can be successfully repaired in L2 written discourse. It is our strong belief that, if applied widely and consistently throughout curricula, writing would have a profound effect on students' overall communicative competence in a second language. Writing assignments not only strengthen writing skills, but also provoke critical thinking, and above all, enhance cultural interaction among students. Therefore, new curricula and teacher training will be important elements in the successful implementation of writing for the development of academic communicative competence.

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