

Investigating First-Year University Students' Challenges with Coherence Writing Strategies in Essay Writing in a South African University

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ABSTRACT The study sought to explore the challenges first-year student teachers experience in relation to coherence in writing essays in English in a South African university. A purposeful sample of 244 first- year students were used in this study. The respondents consisted of both males and females. Using a rubric the researchers analysed students' written argumentative essays in English. The results revealed that the students were experiencing challenges related to writing introduction, thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting sentences and conclusion. The recommendations were made in order to eliminate these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In most societies, the ability to write has become a significant criterion in judging one's success or failure in becoming literate (Abadiano 1995). However, mastering writing is the most difficult skill for first and foreign language learners. It is a complicated process since it involves a series of forward and backward movements between the writer's ideas and the written text (Harries and Cunningham 1994), and requires a high level of language control (Murcia and Olshtain, 2000). Additionally, Zheng (1999) points out that acquiring the writing skill seems to be more laborious and demanding than acquiring the other language skills. Furthermore, Nunan (1999) argues that producing a coherent piece of writing is an enormous challenge, especially in one's second language. Despite the writing challenges facing the Second Language (L2) students in writing, writing is an important skill to master at

university (Hyland 2003). In addition, Bazerman (1988) point out that academic writing skills are necessary for higher education students since much academic knowledge is constructed and available as written texts. However, Banda (2005), Niven (2005) and Van Schalkwyk and van der Walt (2009) paint a dismal picture of the writing preparedness of the students at higher education in South Africa. Therefore, understanding students' writing problems is crucial for improving the quality of L2 writing. According to Crowhurst (1990), writing affords the opportunity to thoroughly articulate ideas and synthesize a variety of perspectives allowing for persuasive communication that transcends both time and space. In addition, Rao (2007) states that writing motivates students' thinking, organising ideas, develop their ability to summarise, analyse and criticise. Rao further states that writing keeps students away from memorization, rote learning and plagiarism, that are much discouraged in the recent theories of teaching and learning. As such the ability to convey meaning proficiently in written texts is a critical skill for academic and professional success (Geiser and Studley, 2001). White and Arnt (1991) define writing process as a form of problem-solving which involves generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring and evaluating what has been composed.

A considerable amount of literature (e.g. Abdel Latif, 2009, 2012; Alsamadan, 2010; Brisk, 2011) has recently been written on the factors influencing L2 writing quality. According to the literature review, such factors include strategy use, cohesion and coherence, linguistic knowledge, and First Language (L1) transfer. The literature further reveals that many studies have focused on students' problems with cohesion and coherence (Ahmed 2010; Amir and Rahman 2013; Sadi and Othman 2012; Crossley and McNamara 2010; Leo 2012). Some studies have singled out the cohesion challenges experienced by L2 students in composing their essays in L2 (Sadighi 2012; Amir and Rahman 2013). Other studies have focused on the coherence problems facing the L2 students in composing their essays in the L2 (Todd, Thienpermpool, and Keyuravongo 2004; Hamzah and Karuppiah 2010). The aim of the current study is to explore the problems with coherence discourse strategies encountered by first-year student teachers while composing their essays in English. According to Enkvist (1990), the majority of L2 students feel that the only tool they can use in writing English essays is grammar and this causes them to have difficulty in making their writing coherent. Given the situation it is important that the students be taught alternative strategies to improve coherence in their writing. Additionally, Enkvist points out that focus on coherence can shift students' attention from sentence-level grammar to discourse features such as textual structuring and unity, which are crucial to creating meaning in texts. Coherence means

arranging ideas in a logical sequence (Medve and Takac, 2013), and cohesive ties including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions and lexical ties affect text structure (Brisk, 2011). In addition, Hinkel (2004) defines coherence as the organization of discourse with all elements present and fitting together logically. This denotes that a coherent essay consists of an introduction, a thesis statement, rhetorical support and a conclusion (Ahmed 2010). To the best knowledge of the researchers, the previous studies that focused on the coherence problems L2 students encountered in L2 essay writing are quantitative. Therefore, the current qualitative study aims at exploring the problems as well as the process of writing academic assignments of a particular L2 students studying in a South African university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite numerous approaches to the teaching of writing having evolved from different methods, tackling L2 writing is still one of the most challenging areas for teachers and students (Ahmed, 2010). Abdel Latif (2009) argues that for L2 writing to be developed, the factors like writing strategies affecting its process and product should be examined. The literature reveals that writing in the past has followed a product approach. Gabriellatos (2002) defines the product approach as a traditional approach in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, usually presented and analysed at an early stage. Additionally, Hyland (2003) states that product approach in writing deals with writing as a straightforward action, as marks on page, as related words, as clauses and as structured sentences. Hyland further states that according to this perspective, writing development is considered to be the result of structurally or rhetorically imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher. The literature reveals that there has been a move from the product to the process approach. According to Kroll (2001), process approach means that student writers engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than a single-shot approach. In addition, Zamel (1983) states that the process approach is a creative process by which writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning. Thus, writing is a nonlinear, exploratory and generative process. In order to explore the problems with coherence discourse strategies facing the students, the current study applied the process approach to the essay writing process.

Studies conducted on the writing problems encountered by university students in composing essays in L2 context have revealed that students experience a problem with a wide range of writing strategies. For example, Hammad (2013) conducted a study on the Palestinian

university students' problems with English Foreign Language (EFL) essay writing. The results revealed that the students experienced problems with grammatical errors, lexical errors, word-for-word translation, cohesion errors, lack of academic style, and lack of content knowledge. The results further indicated that the participants showed a poor level not only in their EFL writing strategy use but also in their EFL performance level.

Some studies have focused on the problems encountered by L2 students with regards to cohesion and coherence in essay writing. Cohesion is defined as referring to relations of meaning that exist within the text and define it as a text (Halliday, Hassan 1985). The results of a study conducted by Ahmed (2010) on cohesion and coherence of Palestinian students revealed that in relation to coherence problems in their English writing, some problems were revealed such as difficulty writing the introduction, the thesis statement, the topic sentence, writing concluding sentences and writing the conclusion. It was also indicated that Arab students tend to follow certain techniques in their written English that make their writing incoherent such as including a broad statement in the opening sections of their essays before introducing the topic sentence. Other studies conducted among the Arab students showed that Arab students experienced problems with repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices were major sources of incoherence and textual deviation. The study further revealed that with regards to cohesion, the students experienced problems with using cataphoric and anaphoric references, ellipsis, substitution and genre related cohesive ties (Qaddumi 1995).

Despite the fact that a number of studies have focused on cohesion and coherence, there are some that focused on either cohesion or coherence. For example, Zuhair (2013) conducted a study on the use of cohesive devices in descriptive writing by Omasi student teachers. The results showed that the students experienced a problem with repetition, use of references and use of cohesive devices. A similar study was conducted by Sadigha and Heydari (2012) on cohesion analysis of L2 writing of Iranian undergraduate EFL students. The results showed that the students experienced problems with the use of references, errors in lexical and conjunctive cohesion. On the other hand the other studies focused only on coherence writing problems experienced by L2 students. For example, Watson, Thienpermpool and Keyuravong (2004) conducted a study on measuring the coherence of writing using topic-based analysis. Their results indicated that there were similarities between topic-based analysis and the teachers' evaluations. Another study was conducted by Hamzah and Karuppiah (2010) on improving coherence in paragraph writing among ESL students. Their findings revealed that the students faced problems in relation to coherence while writing essays in English. Whereas

there is a strong assumption that coherence is an important aspect of writing, few studies have documented this assumption or tied the notion of coherence to explicit linguistic features of the essay (Crossley and McNamara 2010). Therefore the current study seeks to explore the coherence writing problems encountered by university students in composing their essays in English second language. Specifically the study seeks to address the following question:

- What problems do students encounter in applying coherence strategies to essay writing in English?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current study focuses on the organisational problems that the South African student teachers of English encounter when they compose their essays in English Second Language. Specifically, the study sought to explore the problems student teachers have in relation to coherence in writing essays in English.

RESEARCH METHOD

Design

The study utilised a qualitative research design. According to Best and Kahn (2006), qualitative research is usually concerned with the participants' perspectives and experiences. Since this study focused on first-year student teachers' problems in relation to coherence in essay writing, the qualitative design was seen as the most suitable.

Sample

Participants were 244 first year students registered at a university in South Africa for their Bachelor of Education course in 2013. The respondents consisted of both males and females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 45 years. The majority of the students speak IsiXhosa as their mother tongue and had been exposed to English as second language in the past twelve years. The participants were purposefully selected on the basis that they were all fresh from high school and could face similar writing problems.

Instrument

The source of data used to find answers to the research question was the written essays of 244 students. All the participants were required to write an essay of approximately 300 words on the following topic: “Write an argumentative essay in which you discuss the following assertion: The production and sale of alcohol should be made illegal in South Africa”. The participants were given two weeks to complete their task outside of class to give them enough time to think and write creatively. The marking rubric was discussed with the participants in advance. This rubric was designed by an experienced lecturer in the institution who holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics.

The rubric focused on the following aspects: 1. Introduction (Does it attract the reader; does it have a thesis statement; does the thesis offer a clear focused main idea for the whole essay?); 2. Body (Does each paragraph have a clearly stated topic sentence with a main (controlling) idea?; good development with sufficient supporting details (facts, examples, and quotations); Unity (one idea per paragraph); Coherence (logical organization, transition words and consistent pronouns); 3. Conclusion (Does it restate your thesis or summarise your main points?; Does it give your final thoughts on the subject of your essay?)

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the university authorities. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. They were told that participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study. They were also assured that their identities would be kept confidential. The participants were further informed that the research would be useful to them in that it would provide them with suitable feedbacks on the composition they would write in this study.

Data analysis

The data were analysed through appropriate procedures using qualitative methods. The most frequent coherence errors committed by students were identified.

RESULTS

The students’ essays revealed that they were experiencing coherence problems with writing their introductions. Some introductions were not attractive to the reader in that they were not preparing the reader about what is going to follow. They experienced this problem because some essays did not have thesis statement. Sometimes they would plunge into the topic

without sensitising the reader to what is to follow. The following excerpts testify to the problem:

Topic: Write an argumentative essay in which you discuss the following assertion: “The production and sale of alcohol should be made illegal in South Africa”

Excerpt 1. *“According to Kuumba (2001), the production and sale of this had been permitted under the 1923 Ordinance palm wine as native liquor and might therefore be sold by licence. The production and sale of the traditional homemade beer was essentially a method of culturally resistance used by South African women. According to apartheid law, South Africanmen were only allowed to consumed alcohol in municipal beer halls, the creation and sale of this home brew was, in and of itself as a protest and resistance strategy.”*

Excerpt 2. *“Although classified as a depressant, the amount of alcohol consumed determines the type of effect. Most people drink for the stimulant effect, such as a beer to loosen up. But if a person consumes more than a body can handle, they then experience alcohol’s depressant effect. They start to lose control of themselves and coordination. Alcohol overdose causes even more severe depressant effects.”*

The above two excerpts show that the participants were experiencing a problem with writing an introduction. In Excerpt 1, the reader could be confused by the use of “this” as if something has been mentioned before. Both excerpts reflect the participants’ inability to write a central idea or thesis statement in their introductions. Therefore, in their essays there is no clue as to what the essay will cover in the main body paragraphs.

The participants also experienced a problem with writing coherent paragraphs. Their paragraphs lacked topic sentences. In some cases there was no relationship between the topic sentence and the supporting sentences. The following excerpts bear testimony to that problem:

Excerpt 3: *“Jame et al. (2007) argued that in economic terms, it should be noted, their prohibition was on which affected men, rather than women, while pombe was women’s work, the ownership of palm trees and the work of tapping were male presence. In South Africa, the control and supply of labour was central to the making of policy, and African drinking of any kind was seen as a potential threat to the labour supply; the question of African alcohol product and consumption was inextricably linked to the difficulty in securing and adequate supply of African labour.”*

Excerpt 4: *“Based on research, South Africa falls to those of the highest countries that produces and sells the harmful patterns of alcoholic drinks. People take alcohol as a*

medicine to heal their stress and to reduce physical pains, without considering the consequences. An alcohol is a clear liquid that has a strong smell that is used in some medicines and other products.”

In excerpt 3 the first sentence is not a topic sentence. Even within the paragraph there is no topic sentence or main idea. The paragraph seems to be a collection of unrelated sentences that lack coherence. Excerpt 4 shows no unity among the sentences. For example, the sentences do not support the argument raised in the first sentence.

The essays also revealed that the participants were experiencing a problem with writing a conclusion. In some essays it was clear that the participants were simply continuing with the argument. In some cases they raised new issues. Thus, their conclusions did not summarise their arguments and themes. It was also noted that their conclusions were not related to their title or to the thesis statement to illustrate how the topic had been addressed.

The following excerpts reflect the participants’ inability to write a conclusion:

Excerpt 5:” *According to the Minister of Trade and Industries on her opening the Pretoria Sobriety week campaign, people abusing alcohol lose their jobs due to absenteeism at their work. She also claimed that traffic report say accident are commonly cause by alcohol abuse. Alcohol abusers also develop quarrels and injure people or each other.”*

Excerpt 6: “*In conclusion it is very important that people take good care of themselves as a person is only given one chance to live the life he or she needs to make sure that he or she does not die by alcohol because of not being responsible, as much as we think that alcohol cannot control our life’s we need to respect alcohol because a little bottle can change a person’s life or even put an end to it.”*

In excerpt 5, the participant did not conclude the essay; instead he/she presented a continuation of the argument. Although in excerpt 6 the participant began by “in conclusion” what he/she wrote is not conclusion because it did not link to the topic or thesis statement. In addition the participant used a long sentence that may confuse the reader.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The present study revealed that the university students in a selected institution in South Africa experienced problems with coherence strategies in writing essays in English. Specifically, the students encountered problems with writing introduction, developing coherent paragraphs and writing a conclusion. The essays written by the participants showed that their introductions did not comply with the academic way of writing. This finding is

supported by many studies that have been conducted on the problems encountered by university students with regard to coherence strategies. For example the results of a study conducted by Crossley and McNamara (2010) revealed that the students experienced problems associated with coherence in their essay writing. Specifically, they experienced problem with writing an introduction and a thesis statement. Similar to the participants' problems with regard to coherence in the current study, Ahmad (2010) reported that the Egyptian university students experienced problems with coherence strategies in their essay writing. The study further revealed that students encountered a problem with writing a thesis statement. This finding is supported by Ahmed (2010) who observed that the Egyptian students were experiencing a problem with coherence strategies, like a thesis statement.

The current study also revealed that the students encountered problems with writing coherent paragraphs and conclusion. This manifested itself where students developed paragraphs that had no topic sentences and paragraphs that lack unity. This finding is supported by Ahmad (2010) who also showed that the Egyptian university students experienced problems with writing the introduction, the thesis statement, the topic sentence, concluding sentences and writing the conclusion. Another problem related to coherence that was revealed by the study was the students' constant use of too long sentences that would lose meaning at some point. This finding was also observed among the Arab students by Qaddumi (1995). He observed that Arab students' written texts revealed that repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices were major sources of incoherence and textual deviation. In the current study it could be concluded that the students experienced problems with coherence strategies partly because of their education system. In South Africa, the tendency at high school is to focus on the language than on the structure of the essay. When students join the tertiary institutions they find it difficult to face the demands of academic writing, hence there is a high failure rate at first-year level (Strydom, Mentz and Kuh 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study has identified the main coherence errors made by a group of South African ESL students at university level in their written essays. Based on the discussion of the findings it could be concluded that the South African students involved in this study experienced problems with writing introduction, thesis statement, developing coherent paragraphs and conclusion. Taking into consideration the education system in South Africa it goes without

saying that these errors can be due to the students' high school experience with the writing process. The findings of this study are useful for the teachers of academic writing. It would be proper for them to design intervention programmes that will address the coherent problems identified in this study. Specifically, such intervention programme should focus on explicit instruction of the coherence strategies for the first-year students. It is envisaged that such intervention would improve the academic performance of the first year students across the curriculum, as the literature has already indicated (Geiser and Studley, 2001).

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