

Coherence in the University Freshmen Liberal Arts Argumentative Essays at De La Salle University: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates five textual features of coherence in the students' argumentative essays for text comprehensibility and overall writing quality. Specifically, it examines how comprehensible the students' argumentative essays considering the following: focus, organization, cohesion, support and elaboration, and conventions; and the relationship between the textual features and the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays. The data consists of 13 argumentative essays written in ENGLCOM class first year College of Liberal Arts students of De La Salle University. Two techniques were used to analyze the data. First, an analytic and holistic scorings using a four-point writing rubric were used to evaluate each of the textual features of coherence and comprehensibility, respectively. Second, correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between the coherence features and the comprehensibility of the students' texts and between the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays.

Keywords: writing essay, coherence

I. INTRODUCTION

Part of the role of English teachers is to ensure that the students gain competence in the four macro skills in communication: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. In the four macro skills, writing is a common link to the rest of the macro skills. Written text are delivered through speaking, and heard by someone who is reading the text. This is one of the main reasons why students are expected not only to read authentic text, but also to produce comprehensible texts that effectively communicate certain information and ideas to others. However, it is common to hear teachers complain that although the students are taught the basic techniques of writing in great detail, they still do not know how to write coherently. In this case, how can teachers adequately deal

with students' difficulty producing comprehensible texts? What are the best ways to respond to the students' writing? What procedure do teachers need in handling the subject?

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) stress that a text is a communicative occurrence which has to meet seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. Cohesion and coherence are text-centered notions, involving operations directed at the text materials, whereas the other five standards of textuality are user-centered, entailing the activity of textual communication by the producers and receivers of texts. Cohesion concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text are mutually connected within

a sequence, while coherence concerns the ways in which the components of the textual word, i.e., the concepts and relations which underlie the surface text are mutually accessible and relevant. Both cohesion and coherence indicate how the components of the text fit together and make sense. Intentionality pertains to the producer's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer's intentions. Acceptability, on the other hand, relates to the receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use of relevance for the receiver. Meanwhile, informativity refers to the extent to which the occurrences of the text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown/uncertain. Situationality includes the factors which make a text relevant to a situation of occurrence, whereas intertextuality comprises the factors which make the utilization of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts. All these definitions of the seven standards of textuality are provided by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981, pp. 3-10). Accordingly, if a text does not satisfy any of these standards, it is treated as a non-communicative text or non-text. This approach on the standards of textuality, known as a theory of text linguistics, has emerged as one of the most influential textual analysis techniques.

In the more recent development, text linguistics further clarified how coherent text is structured and some of the ways in which it might be produced. Although coherence is of increasing interest to researchers around the world, they often consider coherence as a complex phenomenon, involving a variety of facets within the text as well as requiring an integration of reader expectations and text realization. They also regard coherence as an abstract, elusive, and controversial concept that is difficult to teach and difficult to learn. Enkvist (1990) also maintains this view and

further remarks that coherence is very difficult to study and to teach because it embodies a large number of variables. He specifically identifies seven areas that pose problems to the study of interpretability of coherence in discourse: the relation between cohesion and coherence; messages and metamessages; inference in interpretability; text strategies, text categories, and patterns of exposition and argument; and strategy, structure, and process. Likewise, Nunan (1999) also expresses the view that producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language.

Davies (1996) conducted a study to determine the presence of particular language features that characterize the quality of examination essays of first and second year dental students and to identify the features of text that contributed to non-formation of coherent text. This study shows that high-rated essays displayed a clear global strand of coherence, depending on an organizing introductory statement that functions to refer forward in the text (with overt and/or overt forward reference), whereas low-rated essays had a significantly greater number of new sentence topics (the number of sentence subjects whose referents have not been previously mentioned in the text). Furthermore, this study reveals that the barriers to coherence identified in the low-rated essays could mostly be attributed to problems relating to the organization of the writer's thoughts, demonstrated in the presentation of information and the introduction and maintenance of successive topics.

Meanwhile, Govardhan (1994) studied the quality of 30 ESL graduate student essays on the English placement examination. They represented five each of high-rated, intermediate-rated, and low-rated essays for 1992 and 1993. The results indicate that high-rated essays were generally longer and had longer sentences with embedded clauses and

longer and larger numbers of error-free T-units than the other two groups. They addressed the task adequately, developed ideas maximally, and presented a discernible pattern of organization appropriate to the task. The results further indicate that intermediate-rated essays were longer than the low-rated essays. They exhibited good command of English, but they had underdeveloped topics and lacked organization and presentation. The low-rated essays, were short and lacked organization, identifiable theme, and fully developed ideas. The study presents evidence about the clear differences in the quality of the essays that had been rated high, intermediate, and low.

In the study conducted by Angeles (2005), 30 argumentative essays of the freshman students of Ateneo De Zamboanga University were evaluated using the analytic and holistic scoring (IGAP, 1993; Beers, 2000, PALS, n.d.) to check the student's quality of writing. The results indicate the students' argumentative essays that were considered comprehensible employed different characteristics of good writing and that they were mostly rated as moderately comprehensible based on their obtained mean score points. The result further reveal that the textual features of coherence (Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, Conventions) showed significant positive correlations with comprehensibility. Of the five features, conventions received the highest correlation with comprehensibility while cohesion had the lowest.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to provide evidence of the efficacy of the ENGLCOM subject in terms of affecting students' writing comprehensibility. In particular the study aimed to determine how comprehensible the students' argumentative essays in terms of focus, organization, cohesion, support and

elaboration and conventions; and to test the relationship between the textual features such as focus, organization, cohesion, support and elaboration, and convention and the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays.

III. MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study employed the descriptive-correlation method of research since its major purpose was to describe the writing quality of students' argumentative essays by examining the different textual features of coherence. Furthermore, these coherence features were used to determine the degree of comprehensibility of the students' written texts.

The participants in this study were thirteen (13) first year college students of De La Salle University. They were taking AB courses under the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) and were enrolled during the third trimester of academic year 2011-2012. ENGLCOM was particularly chosen since this is a three-unit course on English Language Communication for first year undergraduate students. Also, this English course aims to develop the four macro skills in communication. The researcher considered the ENGLCOM class under the CLA since the courses in this college requires students to be competent in English communication.

Thirteen (13) compositions by first Year College of Liberal Arts (CLA) students enrolled in one ENGLCOM class in the third trimester of academic year 2011-2012 were collected. Since this study aimed to describe students' writing, it was appropriate to use only the first draft since it reflected the actual writing of the students without much revision/editing and any teacher intervention in terms of feedback and/or evaluation.

As for the writing task, the researcher provided the writing prompt with the subject "Should De La Salle University increase the

tuition fee for AY2012-2013” which is a timely issue during the period of writing. The students were specifically asked to take a stand whether they agree or disagree with the increase of tuition fee and to present their arguments.

As regards the selection of topic, it was of critical importance to ensure that students were able to write something on the topic they were given. In order for them to attend to the topic as intended, the researcher made sure that the writing task was as realistic, appropriate, relevant, and feasible as possible. Moreover, the choice of the writing topic was guided by the principle of schema building. The researcher believed that familiarity with the topic and structure helped the students in their writing of argumentative essay since the respondents may have heard the topic from their peers or professors, or may have read the topic in the campus paper.

The writing activity was conducted in class by the students’ respective ENGLCOM class teacher, and the writing session was good for 45 minutes only. The corpus of data consisted thirteen (13) argumentative essays written in class by first year college students based on a given writing situation: topic with expected content, purpose and prospective readers.

The researcher preferred to gather data on the last day of the ENGLCOM class since the aim of the study is to reveal the extent of students’ quality of writing after taking the ENGLCOM class. In the actual gathering of data, the researcher adapted the procedure used by the previous study of Angeles (2005). However, some modifications were done because of time and respondents considerations. The researcher gave the students some briefing before the beginning of the writing task. Copies of the essay answer sheet where the students will write their essay were distributed. After gathering the necessary data, the researcher gathered the raters to explain the procedure for rating. They were

also given a copy of the criteria and scoring guide for the argumentative essays. The compositions were analyzed individually by two independent raters using analytic scoring (IGAP, 1993; Beers, 2000) to account for the presence of the different features of coherence – Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions. Furthermore, based on holistic scoring taken from Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS, n.d.) of Fairfax County Public Schools, these essays were collectively rated for overall text comprehensibility by the same inter-raters – all English major graduates who had experience in teaching and evaluating writing. To insure reliability, each essay had received two independent scores varying by no more than one point (e.g. 3,2) within a 1 to 4 point range. In this study, holistic scoring scheme was used to rate the overall essay comprehensibility (the writing quality reflected in a given student writing). Both analytic and holistic scorings were useful; the first one provided diagnostic information useful for improving writing performance, and the other gave the global judgment of the writing performance. Likewise, both scoring rubrics (scoring guides) consisted of one to four levels or bands, each of which corresponded to a score and a set of descriptors. These descriptors in the rubric can be either general or fairly specific. Scores for each writing sample were entered into Statistica software.

To answer the first research question, each writing sample was scored by two independent raters using two different measures: analytic scoring for each of the features of coherence and holistic scoring for comprehensibility of the students’ essays. Analytic scoring procedures involved the separation of the various features of a composition into components for scoring purposes. The argumentative essays in this study were rated on such features as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and

Elaboration, and Conventions. On the other hand, holistic scoring was based on the view that the construct of writing was a single entity, which can be captured by a single scale that integrated the inherent qualities of the writing, and that this quality can be recognized only by carefully selected and experienced readers using their skilled impressions (White, 1985). In other words, it was assumed that good writing is more than a sum of the individual elements that go into writing and that holistic scoring captures this total impression of the work.

Key considerations for scoring Focus in writing included clarity of subject or topic, clarity of position or point of view, clear presentation of major divisions and subpoints, preview of reasons, sufficiency, and closure. For Organization, the criteria were explicitness of overall plan/structure, logical flow of ideas, transitions between sentences and between paragraphs, and paragraphs logically supported with relevant evidence and adequately developed with specific details. Cohesion required smooth and logical transition between sentences and/or paragraphs. Support and Elaboration, on the other hand, required sufficiency, specificity, relatedness or relevance, significance, and building support through depth and breadth of examples, descriptions, explanations, etc. As for Conventions, the emphasis was on correct sentence structure, word usage, grammar, and mechanics. On the other hand, the main criteria for rating comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essay were readability/understandability, superior completion of the writing task, and relevant and adequate response to the writing prompt.

The analytic scoring rubrics for the different coherence features, adapted from Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP, 1993) Persuasive Scoring Guide and Beers' (2000) Evaluating Student Writing Guidebook, reduced the original rating scale to 1 to 6 to 1 to 4 to simplify some categories for the present

study and incorporated a set of descriptions for each of the features, specifically for Cohesion, which is not included in the said sources.

Meanwhile, the holistic scoring scheme for comprehensibility of students' argumentative essays taken from Fairfax County Public Schools Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS, n.d.) also included some characteristics for task completion found in the same source (PALS). To answer the second research question, a correlational analysis was conducted.

IV. RESULTS

The argumentative essays of the First Year College of Liberal Arts students manifested varying levels of the textual features of coherence such as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions. Table 1 shows the ratings of each textual feature of coherence.

TABLE 1
Ratings of each textual feature of coherence
N=13

Variable	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Focus	2.46	1.5	3.5	0.594
Organization	2.46	1.5	3	0.519
Cohesion	2.42	1.5	3.5	0.672
Support and Elaboration	2.19	1.5	2.5	0.325
Convention	2.85	2	3.5	0.516

Based from the ratings of textual features of coherence, convention received the highest rating among the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students with the mean score of 2.85 and with a standard deviation of 0.516. Ratings from the inter-rater results of convention textual feature of coherence show that the minimum rating average of convention is 2 which is considered as the highest minimum rating among the textual features of coherence. The student essays which received the minimum rating

under convention are student essays number 8 and number 9. However, the convention textual feature of coherence received the highest maximum rating of 3.5 which are evident in students essay numbers 1, 2, and 10. On the other hand, support and elaboration received the lowest rating among the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students with the mean score of 2.19 and with a standard deviation of 0.325. Moreover, support and elaboration textual feature of coherence received a minimum rating of 1.5 which is evident in student essay number 8 and the maximum rating of 2.5 which can be seen in student essay numbers 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, and 11.

Meanwhile, Table 2 shows the correlation analysis of the textual features and the comprehensibility of the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students.

TABLE 2
Correlation between textual features of coherence and comprehensibility of text

Textual Features	Comprehensibility r- value	Interpretation
Focus	0.876	High
Organization	0.878	High
Cohesion	0.927	very high
Support and Elaboration	0.576	Moderate
Convention	0.492	Moderate

$p < .05000$ N=13

Among the textual features of coherence, Cohesion received a very high relationship with comprehensibility with the value of 0.927 while Support and Elaboration and Convention received a moderate relationship with comprehensibility with 0.576 and 0.492 values respectively. In terms of comprehensibility of the argumentative essays of students, Table 3 shows the inter-rating holistic rating of comprehensibility based from the holistic rubric (PALS, n.d.).

TABLE 3
Inter-rater rating of Comprehensibility of Student Essays

Student Essay Number	Mean
S1	2.5
S2	2.5
S3	3.5
S4	3.5
S5	3.5
S6	2.5
S7	1.5
S8	2
S9	2
S10	3
S11	3
S12	2.5
S13	2
Total Mean	2.62

Among the students' argumentative essays, the student essay numbers 3, 4, 5 received the highest inter-rater rating with the mean of 3.5. The mentioned student essays are leaning High Comprehensible but are considered as Comprehensible. However, only student essay number seven received the lowest inter-rater rating with the mean of 1.5 which is considered as Incomprehensible yet leaning towards Moderately Comprehensible. The overall mean which is 2.62 indicates that most students' argumentative essays are gearing towards the Comprehensible yet considered Moderately Comprehensible.

V. DISCUSSION

The results show that all the textual features of coherence are correlated with the comprehensibility of text. Support and Elaboration and Convention are the only textual features of coherence which achieved the moderate relationship while Focus and Organization received a high relationship and Cohesion got the very high relationship.

The ENGLCOM class focused more on enhancing mechanics (grammar, vocabulary,

etc.) rather than creating meaningful communication. Other textual features of coherence especially Support and Elaboration should be considered in aligning the revision of the ENGLCOM program or subject. ENGLCOM should gear to authentic teaching of communication especially in writing to make it more meaningful for the students. In connection with authenticity, activities in ENGLCOM should relate to the community of the students to make it more authentic (i.e. issue on classrooms, tuition fees, etc.). According to Purcell-Gates & Duke (2004), teachers that use authentic writing activities find that their students experience greater growth in the ability to write and comprehend new genres.

VI. CONCLUSION

The textual features of coherence which consist of Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Convention were analyzed in the argumentative essays of first year College of Liberal Arts students at De La Salle University. The Convention textual feature which consists of the command in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, usage, and sentence structure received the highest rating among the argumentative essays of the students. However, the Support and Elaboration textual feature which consist of the thoughtful or insightful presentation of ideas received the lowest rating among the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students. On the other hand, the students' argumentative essays holistic rating are leaning towards Comprehensible but are considered Moderately Comprehensible. Since textual features of coherence can affect the comprehensibility of students' essays, the ENGLCOM program should consider the areas to improve in order to promote higher comprehensibility among student writers.

VII. RECOMMENDATION

The next researchers who will adopt the study should consider conducting the study in a large sample size (i.e. to a whole college or department). Future studies related to the present study could also focus on finding out the relation of comprehensibility to a particular textual feature with other textual features. The present study focused on the product of the argumentative essays which leads to the suggestion of conducting a study which would also focus on the process of writing in relation to comprehensibility. Future studies could also verify the findings of the present study and likewise re-conduct the study to a different college (i.e. college of business, college of engineering, etc.). Aside from textual features and comprehensibility, the future study could also explore other indicators influencing the text. Aside from examining argumentative texts, future studies could also dwell on other forms of writing in relation to Comprehensibility.

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