AN ANALYSIS OF COHERENCE IN THAI STUDENTS' SENIOR YEAR COMPOSITIONS AT ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This is a study of Thai students' senior year English argumentative essays focusing on their coherence expressions. It aims to identify and categorize coherence expressions in Thai students' senior year English argumentative essays at Assumption University. The data of this study consists of 30 Thai students' senior year English argumentative essays. The coherence expressions are judged on the basis of *Cohesion in English* (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) and *A Dictionary of Link Words in English Discourse* (Ball, 1986).

The findings indicate that, based on the data, six types of coherence expressions could be identified. The results show there are significant differences in those six types among the 30 Thai students in their senior year English argumentative essays. For example, the students tend to express their substitution and ellipsis less than other types of coherence expressions in their compositions. All 6 types of coherence expressions are found in the advanced level students' compositions. Substitution and ellipsis are not found in the intermediate level students' compositions. In terms of substitution and ellipsis, neither of them is found in the elementary level students' compositions.

**Key words:** cohesion, coherence, English argumentative essays
In order to provide useful information for English teachers and students, examples of their English argumentative essays and possible reasons for their choice of those expressions are given. Coherence problems of the students, for example, using excessive repetition, making extensive use of lists, not making conclusions etc, are also provided along with suggestions for teaching coherence.

In Thailand, most universities use Thai as a medium of instruction, even for English classes, except for a few international universities where English is used instead of Thai. This means that Thai students in these international
universities would need to prepare themselves to be able to use the English language for communication as an important skill for their learning and living in society. In other words, these students would need to be good at writing English argumentative essays at an advanced level which only a few students can reach.

It is obvious that culture can affect the way of using a language in all the four skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. This means that a person who is good at writing in one language may not be good at writing in another because their writing may be under the influence of their own culture. “The organization of written discourse in English is culturally determined in the same way as are eating habits and social interaction. How we write in English has as many conventions as how we use a knife and fork so students who write well in their first language can not simply rely on an accurate translation of their sentences into English” (Raimes, 1983:115). Knowing the way that Thai rhetoric influences Thai students’ English argumentative essays would help clarify the basis of their writing.

As writing English argumentative essays plays a key role in the students’ performance in their examinations at Assumption University, it can be useful to study Thai students’ English argumentative essays to see their coherence problems and understand the causes so that some solutions can be taken either by the English teachers or the students themselves. It is also evident that examinations at the primary and secondary education levels in Thailand are mostly in an objective form i.e. in multiple-choice questions and this may lead to some students’ poor writing skill in general. Writing an English argumentative essay is more difficult which needs ideas, grammar, and organization.

Rationale

There could be two causes of ineffective writing. One is that the writer is short of ideas in writing and the other is that the writer lacks the writing skills i.e. to use the appropriate vocabulary, to develop the same idea, to organize the ideas as aimed for or to realize the importance of coherence. For example, when one wants to show the contradiction between two ideas, to show the causes and effects, or to reflect on a description of something one does not know what kind of cohesive devices are to be used and if their writing creates any coherence. The result often is an incoherent essay.

It is undeniable that some Thai students may seriously encounter problems in writing English argumentative essays, as they are not taught to
write argumentative essays. An argumentative essay is essential in scientific, academic writing. This study focuses on one problem of the writing skills—aiming at coherence in English argumentative essays. English argumentative essays of senior year students at Assumption University will be analyzed to find out how they express their coherence in writing.

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the analysis carried out in this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How is the coherence in senior students' English argumentative essays expressed?
2. What kind of problems in creating coherence in their English argumentative essays do they have?
3. How do these coherence problems reflect the Thai language?

Theoretical and practical issues relevant to cohesion and coherence

Types of cohesion

Connor (1996: 83) points out cohesion is defined as the use of explicit linguistic devices to signal relations between sentences and parts of texts. Cohesive devices are words or phrases that act as signals to the reader in order to help the reader make connections with what has already been stated or soon will be stated. Connor also notes that cohesion depends on the lexical and grammatical elements of sentences in a text whereas coherence is focused on semantic relationships.

According to Halliday and Hasan, cohesion could be sorted generally into three different kinds of relations in language, relatedness of form, relatedness of reference, and semantic connection. Relatedness of form could be corresponded to substitution, ellipsis, and lexical collocation. Relatedness of reference could be pointed to reference and lexical reiteration. On the other hand, semantic connection is focused on conjunction.

Coherence

Reinhart (1980 cited in Gernsbacher and Givon et al. 1995: 162) specifies a coherent text should have three properties. Firstly, connectedness by which is meant the clauses of a text should be formally connected, in that each
adjacent pair is either referentially linked, or linked by a semantic connector. Secondly, **consistency**, that is, each sentence has to be logically consistent with the previous sentence. Finally, **relevance**, that is, each sentence of the discourse must be relevant to an underlying discourse topic, and to the context of the utterance.

Tanskanen (2006: 7) states that researchers mostly agree that there is a difference between cohesion and coherence, but there is considerable disagreement on what actually differentiates between the two. It is generally accepted, however, that cohesion refers to the grammatical and lexical elements on the surface of a text which can form connections between parts of the text. Coherence, on the other hand, resides not in the text, but is rather the outcome of a dialogue between the text and its listener or reader. Although cohesion and coherence can thus be kept separate, they are not mutually exclusive, since cohesive elements have a role to play in the dialogue. Tanskanen (2006: 21) also stresses that cohesion can be regarded as a property of the text while coherence depends upon the communicators’ evaluation of the text.

**Characteristics of Thai coherence expressions**

Bickner and Peyasantiwong (1988 cited in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 191) experimented with the rhetorical contrasts between English and Thai by getting the Thai students to write on the same topic. They highlighted five characteristics of possible coherence expressions and problems as follows:

a. Using more repetition: Students tend to use the same English vocabulary in their compositions.

b. Making extensive use of lists: Students try to link their contexts or show the parallel English vocabulary and give some examples by using the additive conjunction ‘and’ and the apposition link word ‘such as’.

c. Not making conclusions: Most of the students do not make conclusions in their English argumentative essays. In contrast, they take their other points of view at the end of their compositions. The causal conjunctions or the consequences link words ‘hence’, ‘therefore’, and ‘in conclusion’ are ignored.

d. Impersonal style: Most of students ignore the use of substitution and ellipsis in their English argumentative essays.
e. Lack of consideration or counterfactuals: This kind of coherence problem derives from not clearly making hypotheses in their English argumentative essays.

Methodology

Data collection

Thirty essays were collected from the Thai fourth year students’ English argumentative essays in their final examination at Assumption University. They consisted of students of mixed majors and genders. This research employed a qualitative method. That is, data collection was in the form of English argumentative essays for an analysis of coherence. To obtain the 30 essays, each student was required to write at least two hundred and fifty words in English during their final examination in the essay writing part. The essays were written about one specific topic, “Food stalls should not be allowed on the sidewalks or pavements.” as one part of the examination paper in the English IV course at Assumption University. Importantly, the essays were not edited in any way for analysis.

Data analysis

The analysis of coherence expressions and coherence problems analyzed in this research were mainly identified with the help of the Cohesion in English written by Halliday and Hasan (1976) and A Dictionary of Link Words in English Discourse written by Ball (1986). Many types of cohesion were found in students’ compositions, and classified in categories based on Cohesion in English (Halliday and Hasan: 1976). This also gives criteria for judging coherence. Moreover, many link words were found in students’ compositions as well, due to English argumentative essays, and identified in types based on A Dictionary of Link Words in English Discourse (Ball: 1986).
The result of the identification and categorization of coherence expressions in English argumentative essays

The following table (Table 1) shows the numbers and percentages of Thai students and their use of 6 types of coherence expressions in their senior year English argumentative essays. The first column on the left lists the types of coherence expressions found in Thai students' senior year English argumentative essays. The next column lists the numbers of students using coherence expressions in their essays. In addition, the third column also provides the percentages of students.

In order to analyze the coherence expressions in the students' compositions and compare the results with a representative data base of coherence expressions, Halliday and Hasan (1976) give six types of coherence expressions: 'substitution', 'ellipsis', 'lexical collocation', 'reference', 'lexical reiteration', and 'conjunction'. The six types of coherence expressions are analyzed for Thai student use, and are six types of coherence expressions listed in Table 1.

Table 1: The numbers and percentages of students in terms of coherence types found in Thai students' senior year English argumentative essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of coherence</th>
<th>Numbers of students</th>
<th>Percentages of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellipsis</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical collocation</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical reiteration</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the coherence types identified in 30 English argumentative essays. After checking the 30 essays with the help of Cohesion in English and A Dictionary of Link Words in English Discourse, six types of coherence expressions were identified and categorized. Among the 6 types of coherence expressions, lexical collocation, reference, lexical reiteration, and conjunction were found in all students' compositions. Nevertheless, in terms of substitution and ellipsis, it is found in only thirteen and sixteen students respectively in their compositions.
The differences in numbers and percentages of students of each type of coherence expression

First, a significant difference in numbers and percentages of student's use of coherence expressions can be seen in the type of substitution. The use of 'one' in the type of substitution shows a higher number and percentage than other types of substitution. It is probably due to their study process and their familiarity. They were taught to follow their study module and were familiar with that style of writing.

Second, there is a big difference in numbers and percentages of students' coherence expressions in using ellipsis. The use of 'ellipsis of the subject' in the type of ellipsis demonstrates a higher number and percentage than other types of ellipsis. It is probably due to their study process and their familiarity in using this substitution.

Third, a clear difference in numbers and percentages of students' coherence expressions can be seen in the type of lexical collocation. The use of English vocabulary 'sidewalk' in lexical collocation show the highest numbers and percentages due to the topic in their compositions, "Food stalls should not be allowed on the sidewalks or pavements."

Fourth, a big difference in numbers and percentages of students' coherence expressions can be seen in the type of reference. The use of 'the' and 'that' in reference presents the highest numbers and percentages compared to other types of reference. It is probably due to their study process. They write 'the' when they want to specify something or talk about something that is previously mentioned. Similarly, they use 'that' when they want to describe something or make it clearer. It is also probable that they have learned 'the' since the beginning of their English study and 'that' in their later English study.

Fifth, an obvious difference in numbers and percentages of students' use of coherence expressions can be seen in lexical reiteration. The use of 'repetition' shows a higher number and percentage than the other types of lexical reiteration. It is probably due to their lack of English vocabulary knowledge. That is to say, they use their English vocabulary repeatedly because they may not have much English vocabulary to use in their compositions.

Lastly, a clear difference in numbers and percentages of students' coherence expressions can be seen in using conjunctions. The use of 'and' (additive conjunction) in the type of conjunction which demonstrates the
highest number and percentage in conjunction. It is probably due to students’ extensive uses of lists in their compositions.

**Characteristics of Thai coherence expressions**

As analyzed earlier, 6 types of coherence expressions have been identified. The main aim of this study, however, was to give English teachers and students useful information and suggestions in order to explore the possible causes of Thai students’ choice of coherence expressions and the problems they have. The analysis of the characteristics of Thai coherence expressions in this study follows the framework of (Bickner and Peyasantiwong 1988 cited in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 191):

1. Using more repetition
2. Making extensive use of lists
3. Not making conclusions
4. Impersonal style
5. Lack of consideration or counterfactual

**Using more repetition**

Repetition refers to using the same items in compositions. When Thai students write English compositions, they tend to use the same English vocabulary in their compositions, thereby making a lot of ‘repetition’. This results in making lexical reiteration the main coherence strong point. As discussed above, there is a big difference between using repetition and the other types of lexical reiteration, synonyms, near-synonyms, antonyms, superordinates or general terms. A total of 29 or 96.6% of the students used the words ‘food stall’ and ‘sidewalk’ in the compositions, so simple repetition was the highest out of all five types of lexical reiteration. Some examples of typical repetition found in students’ compositions are: 1) A lot of people can find their jobs from the **food stalls** and it doesn’t make bad things or bad image to (sic) the city. **Food stalls** can be the center of the meeting that (sic) people can meet and join together. **Food stalls** make the city alive. The student repeated the word ‘food stalls’ (Student 1); 2) Customers who buys (sic) food from there will get risk (sic) from low quality and **dirty** product(sic). The next one is **dirty** location. The student repeated the word ‘dirty’ (Student 5); 3) According to the **government** laws (sic) can’t (sic) sell food on (sic) every Monday but I think it’s not enough. If the
Government can reduce the food stalls problem. I think Bangkok will be the best live city (sic) in the world. The student repeated the word 'government' (Student 6). These words are clearly related to the topic of the essays which is "Food stalls should not be allowed on the sidewalks or pavements." It is also probable that students may not know the synonyms or near-synonyms for those English words, so they simply repeat commonly used words in their compositions.

Making extensive use of lists

In their English argumentative essays, students try to link their contexts or show the parallel English vocabulary and give some examples by using the additive conjunction 'and' and the apposition link word 'such as', thereby making 'extensive use of lists', which results in this becoming a characteristic of Thai coherence in the type of conjunctions. Usually, the reason why students use 'and' and 'such as' is largely due to the need of giving some examples in their compositions. As analyzed above, there is a clear difference between using the additive conjunction 'and' and the apposition link word 'such as' and other types of conjunctions. All students used the additive conjunction 'and' and 12 or 40% used the apposition link word 'such as'. Here are some examples found in students' compositions: 1) There are also in Bangkok and other provinces of Thailand that crowed (sic) with the mini-shops or mini-restaurants and it's (sic) make many effects to (sic) Thailand. The student used the additive conjunction 'and' (Student 7); 2) The space to walk isn't enough for the consumers and visitors to use and some the sidewalks around Bangkok and other big provinces have not space enough because the sellers who sell on (sic) sidewalk have increase (sic) in every years (sic) and when they sell foods or convenient (sic) goods, they don't clean the street when they finish selling The student used the additive conjunction 'and' (Student 9); 3) Food are (sic) the basic need of all people in this world (sic). Thailand have (sic) many kinds of foods such as Thai food, Korean food, Japanese food and Chinese food. The student used the apposition link word 'such as' and the additive conjunction 'and' (Student 11); 4) Mostly, food stalls sell cheap foods with low nutrients (sic) but popular (sic) such as fried-chicken, fish balls, and some beverages. The student used the apposition link word 'such as' and the additive conjunction 'and' (Student 19) As can be seen, students use these conjunctions caused by extensive use of lists.
Not making conclusions

Most of the students do not make conclusions in their English argumentative essays. In contrast, they make their new points of view at the end of their compositions. The causal conjunctions or the consequences link words 'hence', 'therefore', and 'in conclusion' are ignored, resulting in 'not making conclusions', and leads to weak point in using this conjunction. Usually, the reasons why students do not use those conjunctions or link words to summarize the contexts in their compositions is because they are employing new arguments and do not know appropriate conjunctions or link words to be used for their conclusions. As analyzed above, there are few students who use the causal conjunctions or consequences link words 'hence', 'therefore', and 'in conclusion', only 1 'hence', 4 'therefore', and 5 'in conclusion'. Here are some examples of this weak coherence use found in students' compositions: 1) **Hence**, I agree that food stalls should not be allowed on the sidewalks. The student used the causal conjunction or consequences link word 'hence' (Student 3); 2) **Therefore, we should remove them out of the side walk to create the good image of business (sic) area or the public place look clean and beautiful (sic) in the view of foreign (sic) tourists or passengers who walk on the sidewalk.** The student used the causal conjunction or consequences link word 'therefore' (Student 21); 3) **In conclusion, we will see that there are more pros than cons to do (sic) not allow these food stalls on the walksides (sic) or pavements.** The student used the causal conjunction or consequences link word 'in conclusion' (Student 26) Here it can be seen, there is a low level of use of those conjunctions which reflects their lack of making conclusions.

Impersonal style

Impersonal style results in a failure to conceal a context. Most of students ignore the use of substitution and ellipsis in their English argumentative essays, thereby 'being more impersonal', (Bickner and Peyasantiwong 1988 cited in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 191) and result in weak coherence with substitution and ellipsis. Usually, the reasons why students tend not to use many types of substitution and ellipsis to make their contexts personal is because they are narrating for their compositions. As the analysis indicates, there is a slight difference of the numbers and percentages of students in using the types of substitution and ellipsis. The total use of 'do and no/not' is 2 or 6.6%, 'too' is 4 or 13.3%, and 'one' is 6 or 20% in
students' compositions in the type of substitution. Similarly, the total of using 'ellipsis of the subject and verb' is 3 or 10% and 'ellipsis of the subject' is 13 or 43.3%. Here are some examples found in students' compositions: 1) *It's show (sic) that everyone have (sic) to think before buying food and beverages from food stalls because one person do (sic).* The student substituted 'do' (Student 2); 2) *In Bangkok, some organizations thought that we should allow the food stall on the pavements but some said no.* The student substituted 'no' (Student 4); 3) *It make (sic) the sidewalk dirty and the insects will (sic) on the sidewalks too.* The student substituted 'too' (Student 22); 4) *The last one, food stalls make many kind of pollution like eye pollution, smell pollution or even water pollution.* The student substituted 'one' (Student 3). Some examples of typical ellipsis are: 1) *Thailand has a lot of food stalls (sic) as you can see they are around the Bangkok and also the other province.* The student left 'has a lot of food stalls' as of 'ellipsis of the subject and verb' (Student 30); 2) *The advantages of food stalls (sic) less than the disadvantages.* The student left 'of food stalls' as of 'ellipsis of the subject' (Student 2).

Lack of consideration or counterfactuals

This kind of coherence problem derives from not clearly making hypotheses in their English argumentative essays, resulting in 'lack of consideration or counterfactual' (Bickner and Peyasantiwong 1988 cited in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 191). The use of hypothesis and inference link words is a weak point in coherence. The reasons why students are weak in this kind of coherence problem is that the students do not think about realistic and possible concepts in their real lives to be applied for their compositions. They also do not give possible conclusions or recommendations in their compositions. Few students use these types of conjunction or link words. The total of using 'if' is 14 or 46.6% in the type of hypothesis link word. Similarly, the total of using 'so' and 'then' is 5 or 16.6% and 1 or 3.3% respectively. Here are some examples: 1) *It can increasing (sic) traffic volumes (sic) because if one car (sic) parking may effect (sic) directly to (sic) traffic jam and accidents.* The student hypothesized 'if' as of 'hypothesis' (Student 2); 2) *And they didn't care anything (sic) they care only (sic) themselves so, that the economic crisis was (sic) happened and a lot of people lacks (sic) of job. The student inferred 'so' as of 'inference' (Student 6); 3) *Buyers wanted to buy food or beverages, then they parking (sic) cars nearly (sic) the sidewalks.* The student inferred
‘then’ as of ‘inference’ (Student 2). These advanced students tend to give a hypothesis or possible conclusions in their compositions.

Conclusion

The results show that participants used a wide range of coherence expressions, and totally 6 types of coherence expressions were identified and categorized. An analysis of the major characteristics of coherence expressions and coherence problems – using more repetition, making extensive use of lists, not making conclusions, impersonal style, and lack of consideration or future possible conclusions, may be useful for both English teachers and students to help them focus on teaching and learning to write English argumentative essays more effectively.

Figure I: The English vocabulary network with ‘food stalls’

References:


http://www.roe30.k12.il.us/lsAT%20Writing/Cohesion%20and%20Coherence.doc