Problems with Coherence in Writing

in the Thai Context

Nattha Kaewcha

บทคัดย่อ

การเขียนถือว่าเป็นทักษะที่ค่อนข้างเป็นปัญหาสำหรับผู้เรียนส่วนใหญ่ ปัญหาหนึ่งที่มักพบใน การเขียนก็คือการเขียนเรื่องราวให้เนื้อหาสอดคล้องกลมกลืนกันทั้งเรื่อง สาเหตุที่ทำให้ข้อเขียนขาด ความสอดคล้องต่อเนื่องก็คือการขาดประโยคที่สรุปใจความสำคัญของเรื่องราวทั้งหมด(Topic sentence) การอธิบายขยายความประเด็นต่างๆจาก Topic sentence ไม่ชัดเจน การขาดโครงร่างงานเขียน ที่ดีตลอดจนการเรียบเรียงเนื้อหาไม่เป็นไปตามลำดับที่เหมาะสม ทำให้เนื้อความไม่ราบรื่นและสละ สลวยสำหรับผู้อ่าน วิธีการแก้ไขข้อบกพร่องดังกล่าวในงานเขียนทำได้โดยผู้เรียนควรได้รับการ ฝึกฝนการเขียน Topic sentence ที่ดี และการอธิบายขยายความประเด็นต่างๆในงานเขียนให้ชัดเจน การปรับปรุงงานเขียนตามคำแนะนำของอาจารย์ผู้สอน การอ่านงานเขียนประเภทต่างๆเพื่อเรียนรู้ วิธีการเขียนที่หลากหลาย ตลอดจนการใช้สื่อคอมพิวเตอร์ในการเรียนการสอน

Introduction

Writing seems to be a difficult task for Thai learners as the writer must be concerned with organization and content as well as grammaticality. Regarding organization, a passage should be composed of an introduction, a body and a conclusion. In terms of content, it should maintain coherence for the whole passage. Additionally, grammaticality of the whole text is another aspect that cannot be neglected. Therefore, writers should take into account all these elements. However, coherence seems to be the most important problem when it comes to writing a passage as "it is the product of many different factors which combine to make every paragraph, every sentence, and every phrase contribute to the meaning of the whole piece" (Kies, 1995).

Also, coherence is dynamic in nature, having "to do with movement of information and ideas, movement of the reader's changing perceptions and knowledge" (Word Works, 1999). In this article, the main purpose is to give an explanatory account of problems of coherence in writing in the Thai context. Some of my students' writings from my writing class are analyzed here as examples for discussion.

What is coherence?

Coherence refers to a certain characteristic or aspect of writing. Literally, the word means "to stick together." In coherent writing, all the ideas in a text "flow smoothly from one sentence to the next" (Walters, 1999) so that the reader can understand the ideas expressed in the text easily. Coherence can be derived from two factors: paragraph unity and sentence cohesion (Kies, 1995). However, in this article only paragraph unity will be discussed as I would like to focus on the whole picture of the content (how all the ideas are organized into a paragraph) rather than how one sentence links to another.

Paragraph unity

A good piece of writing should contain paragraph unity. A writer achieves paragraph unity through two mechanisms in a paragraph: there is a single main focus of the content and attention to the focus is maintained all through the paragraph. The first aspect can be derived from a topic sentence which sums up the main idea of the whole paragraph. It will inform the readers of the idea that the writer would like to discuss in his or her writing. The second aspect can be achieved through supporting sentences with specific examples supplemented in order to make the content clear and finally with a concluding sentence added at the end to properly finish the paragraph.

Problems on Coherence in Writing

Coherence is a difficult concept for most student writers. According to Tshotsho's study (2006), incoherent essays written by not-so-competent students lack paragraph unity because they discuss many points within a single paragraph. Furthermore, the points discussed in each paragraph are not related to each other (cited in Coskun, 2009, p.683).

This lack of coherence seems to be universal regardless of ethnic backgrounds as Jones (2007) reveals in his study on coherence problems in an academic writing class of undergraduate students in the University of Canberra. There were 41 students in this study. They were from various backgrounds: 23 Australian native speakers of English, 4 Australian students of non- English speaking backgrounds and 14 international students. The analysis of the students' writing in this study indicates that native and non-native English-speaking students are sometimes indistinguishable in their quality of writing and both groups seem to lack coherence in their writing.

As far as I see, the following are common problems that make written texts incoherent.

1.   There is no topic sentence. Sometimes students write straight from their minds without planning. They do not have a clear point for their discussion in a text.

2.   The main ideas in the topic sentences are not developed. There are no supporting sentences which include details such as facts and opinions to illustrate the main points clearly.

3.   The text is not written in a logical order. Sometimes there is a topic sentence; however, all the ideas in the topic sentence are not developed logically. The writer may shift from one point to another inappropriately; one idea may not be related to the following one. Therefore, this can cause confusion to the readers.

4.   Transitional words are not employed to relate one idea to another. In some cases transitional words are used inappropriately in the text.

5.   The text lacks a rhetorical pattern. Generally, the essay should include an introductory paragraph, a body paragraph and a concluding paragraph while a paragraph will contain a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. If any part in an essay or a paragraph is missing, the text will not achieve good organization.

6.   The text contains some grammatical errors that may hinder understanding of the text.

Some examples of text analysis

The following students' texts are employed to illustrate the aforementioned problems in coherence.   The examples are taken from some pieces of my writing assignment in the Basic Writing class of the first year students.   The topic is **How to Improve Bangkok to be a Nice City to Live.**

Text 1

> *Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, which I live since I was born. When I was young it was surrounding by many skyscrapers. A few years later, it became more modern and convenient when the sky train was built. Nowadays I still live in this city and look how it is changed. Everyone want to live here; some needs a job but some just need to travel. Few people care of the city. There are many problems in Bangkok such as the garbages, many people who are unemploy, the children who don't get education, even animal are left. Even if Bangkok is more modern and more convenient but this thing can't stand forever, so we have to protect or improve it. I used to think to stop any buildings which are planning to construct. Do you mention it? They are covering the city instead the trees. I want to plant trees and tell everyone to do so. Taking the public transportation to go for study in addition to decrease the pollutions and traffic jam. Using the recycled bag to decrease the garbages in the city. All of the cars need to use the natural gas to protect the natural. I believe that if all I said are existed not only Bangkok will be a nice city, but also the country; or maybe the whole world will be nice to live in.*

In the text, there are some weaknesses which make it incoherent: there is not a clear topic sentence, no transition signals are employed to address the points, and there are some grammatical errors.

According to the text, the writer begins with an introductory part:

> *Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, which I live since I was born. When I was young it was surrounding by many skyscrapers. A few years later, it became more modern and convenient when the sky train was built. Nowadays I still live in this city and look how it is changed. Everyone want to live here; some needs a job but some just need to travel. Few people care of the city. There are many problems in Bangkok such as the garbages, many people who are unemploy, the children who don't get education, even animal are left.*

And then it is followed by the topic sentence: Even if Bangkok is more modern and more convenient but this thing can't stand forever, so we have to protect or improve it. Finally, the paragraph ends with the concluding sentence: *I believe that if all I said are existed not only Bangkok will be a nice city, but also the country; or maybe the whole world will be nice to live in.*

When considering its organization, the paragraph contains an introduction, a topic sentence and a concluding sentence. However, it seems that the topic sentence is not well written as it does not contain controlling ideas which will give a clue to readers about the number of points that the writer will discuss next. The writer just proposes the ways to improve Bangkok by stopping constructing buildings, planting trees, using public transportation, using recycled bags, and using natural gas for cars. The ways to improve Bangkok are briefly proposed and there is no explanation in details which will make readers understand the points clearly. It seems that the introductory part is quite long when compared to the topic sentence and supporting sentences which are the important parts of the text. Also, transition signals such as first, second, next, in addition and last, etc. are not employed to introduce each solution. In fact if transition signals are used to address the measures to improve Bangkok, the readers will see the number of points proposed by the writer more clearly and the ideas will be presented with logical continuation. Apart from these, the text contains some grammatical errors. Even though most of the writing is understandable, grammatical errors hinder coherence of the text as the content does not smoothly flow and thus impedes the reader's reading of the text.

In short, this paragraph has certain weaknesses hindering its coherence: there is not a clear topic sentence, no transition signals are employed to introduce the points, and it contains some grammatical errors.

Text 2

Bangkok is the capital city of Thailand. Everybody comes here for a better life, but not everyone gets what they are wishing for. In Bangkok, there is a lot of problems such as crime, pollution, unemployment, and so many other problems. It's not a dreamland as we used to think. I think I have some tips to improve Bangkok to be a nice city. First, start from the root. To improve Bangkok, you should start from the beginning of the problem which is people who live in this city. All the problems we have today are started from the consequence of our actions. We should implant the good value to our kids. Start right now, so it wouldn't be too late. Second, fix the leader. If the first step is completed, but the politicians and people who have power are still corrupt. It would be useless to do all this things because the leader of this country are still them. Finally, all people who want to improve this city should unite to work together and become the main force for this. You can't do all this thing by yourself.

When analyzing the text, the text seems to contain a topic sentence, a concluding sentence and transition signals to address the ideas; however the thing that should be improved is elaboration of the ideas.   The writer intends to address problems that exist in Bangkok. The writer firstly brings up problems in Bangkok such as crime, pollution and unemployment. However, later the writer does not propose solutions to each problem.   Instead he gives a general solution to all the problems as a whole. In fact, the writer should discuss each problem together with its solution. By doing this, the readers will clearly understand the cause of each problem and the way to solve it. Therefore, the ideas about the problems are not elaborated and explained in detail. In addition, there are many parts in the text that should be explained more for better understanding. For instance, in the sentence *All the problems we have today are started from the consequence of our actions,* the writer should explain more about what actions cause problems rather than abruptly propose the idea to implant good values in our kids. The text is not well illustrated as there is no example to support each point made in the paragraph.

In brief, the paragraph needs some improvement; it still lacks elaboration of the ideas. If the ideas are well illustrated with supporting details, it will address a clear picture of how to improve Bangkok to the readers.

Text 3

> *Bangkok is a capital city of Thailand. It is a big city and very important for Thailand's economic. There are many people in Bangkok so there are a lot of pollution. If Bangkok is not a nice city to live. It is useless. In my opinion government should make more basic demand for population. Transportation is the most thing that cause pollution. I think it should has more park or growing up trees for reduce pollution. Population should use public transportation. It can reduce traffic jam in Bangkok and decrease pollute. The most important thing that make Bangkok to be a nice city to live is people who live in Bangkok if they have common sense to live together, keep clean, don't destroy public thing and the last thing for nice city is people in city are friendly same as " Smile of Siam".*

According to the text, there are many things that make it incoherent: there is no topic sentence, there are no transition signals to address the ideas and the text contains some grammatical errors. The writer begins the paragraph with some introduction and later on discusses the problems of Bangkok together with the solution. However there is not a topic sentence to address the main idea to readers. The readers may be confused about the number of problems and solution that the writer would like to propose. It seems that the main problems of Bangkok and the causes are proposed confusingly. From the text, the readers may be uncertain whether the main problems of Bangkok is only pollution or both overpopulation and pollution. In fact, the writer can discuss the points more clearly by using some transition signals to guide the readers through the number of problems and the ways to solve them. By doing this, it is easier for the readers to follow the text. Apart from these matters, some sentences are written incorrectly which convey wrong meaning to the readers. For instance, in the sentence *In my opinion government should make more basic demand for population,* the readers may be confused with the meaning of this sentence and have to guess what the writer intends to say.

All in all, with no topic sentence and transition signals and with some grammatical errors, the text has some weaknesses which make it lack coherence.

Text 4

Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand is the center of everything. It has been greatly developed from past until the present. It is modern and civilized; however, there are many problems arising from its civilization. The main problems are traffic jam, air pollution, overpopulation and crime. The ways to solve these four problems are as follows. First, in order to solve the problem of traffic jam, people should use public transportation. By doing this, there will be fewer cars in the street and this can help save energy as well. Second, for the problem of air pollution, people should plant more trees in order to increase more oxygen to Bangkok. Also, they should use public transportation in order that there will be fewer cars in the street which can help decrease air pollution. Third, at the present, the population in Bangkok is around 6 million. Therefore, it is very crowded here. To solve this problem, the government should make other provinces developed like Bangkok. They should provide more jobs, universities, government offices in other provinces in order that people need not to come to study or work here. This can help solve the problem of overpopulation. Lastly, since a lot of people came to live here, this leads to a lot of crime in Bangkok as well. To solve this problem, the government should provide jobs for people in order that they can earn their living and will not commit a crime. Besides, everyone should help to take care each other in order that there will be fewer crimes. All in all, if all the suggestions above can be completed, Bangkok will become a nice city.

This text seems to be better written when compared to the three previous ones. We see that it is well written with a proper rhetorical pattern and good elaboration of all the ideas. The text begins with some introduction and then continues with the topic sentence

The main problems are traffic jam, air pollution, overpopulation and crime. The ways to solve these four problems are as follows.

The topic sentence above mentions four main problems of Bangkok which are traffic jams, air pollution, overpopulation and crime. Then the writer discusses and illustrates each problem together with proposing its solution. The problem of traffic jams is firstly discussed and then followed by the problems of air pollution, overpopulation and crime respectively. Furthermore, transition signals such as first, second, third and lastly are employed to introduce each point to be discussed. This can help the readers follow the text easily and it also makes the text run smoothly. Furthermore, the text is well organized within a proper rhetorical pattern as it contains a topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. The last sentence which is a concluding sentence emphasizes the ideas that all the suggestions should be taken into account in order that Bangkok will become a nice city. Also, even though there are a few grammatical errors, the errors do not hamper the readability of the text. Therefore, when compared to the three other texts, it is the best one.

On the whole, with its proper organization as well as good development of the ideas, this piece of writing is considered to be a coherent one.

Some suggestions to address the problem of incoherent writing

Coherence in writing can be improved following these recommendations.

- In the writing process, revision is necessary as it helps to improve the text from the first draft. Coherence problems may arise from not knowing how to organize the text or how to arrange the relevant information. Therefore, revision is needed as it involves definition, evaluation, strategy selection and modification of text in the writing plan and the ability of students to analyze and evaluate the feedback they receive on their writing (Grabe & Kaplan,1996)

- Generally, a topic sentence indicates the main idea of a paragraph. The way to write a good topic sentence and develop a paragraph should be emphasized in the writing class. As we have seen, most students' paragraphs still lack topic sentences, or although there is a topic sentence, it is not a good one that helps control the idea in the paragraph. A topic sentence which is either too broad or too specific makes it difficult for students to develop a good paragraph. Therefore, students should

practice how to write a good topic sentence in order that it can be elaborated into a good paragraph.

● Being exposed to various types of writing is one way that can help students improve their writing. Swales (1990) and Raimes (1998) believe that students may be able to write well if they are exposed to various genres of writing which include, for example, flyers, magazines, articles and books. Being exposed to a variety of written texts, students may realize how words, structures and genres contribute to purposeful writing. Similarly, Rivers and Temperley (1978) explain that students ought to read widely in order to write well because familiarizing themselves with the way recognized writers write in English helps to enhance their ability to write as they can assimilate information directly in English and think in English through much experience of written texts. Moreover, the students may acquire rhythms and associations of the recognized English-language writers.

● Using technology is one of the most effective ways to teach a text structure. Computers can assist writing activities as some websites provide exercises, in which students can practice combining sentences, correcting errors or writing an essay from a topic given. Furthermore, a computer network is a source of information to which students can have access to seek related information for their assignments. Therefore, in computerized writing classrooms, students tend to write and revise more, and become more involved in writing and communication activities. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) encourage teachers to utilize technology because it offers great potential to enhance many aspects of the writing process. Pennington (1996) views hypermedia as a resource for creating an environment that supports communicative second language composition. Akyel and Kamisli (1997) report that student attitudes toward writing and planning for writing improved as a result of their use of computers.

All in all, lack of coherence in writing is still a problem of many Thai students. Incoherent writing may arise from many factors such as a lack of a proper rhetorical pattern or a flow of logical ideas without any digression or shifting of elements in the writing. A lot of practice on writing and rewriting as well as reading different text types and using technological advances can enhance coherence in writing.

References

Akyel, A. & Kamisli, S. (1997). Composing in first and second languages: Possible effects of EFL writing instruction. In K. Poger (ed.), **Writing: text and interaction Odense Working Papers in Language and Communication,** 14: 69-105.

Coskun, E. (2009). Text coherence in the narrative texts of Turkish students and Bilingual Uzbek students in Turkey. **Sciencetific Research and Essay,** 4: 678-684.

De Beaugrande, R. & Dressler, W. (1981). **Introduction to Text Linguistic.** London: Longman.

Ferris, D. & Hedgcock, J. (2005). **Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice** (2nd edtion). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah.

Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. (1976). **Cohesion in English.** London: Longman.

Johnson, P. (1992). Cohesion and coherence in compositions in Malay and English. **RELC Journal**, 2: 1-17.

Jones, J. (2007). Losing and finding coherence in academic writing. **University of Sydney Papers** in **TESOL**, 2(2): 125-148.

Kaplan, B. & Grabe, W. (1996). **Theory and Practice of Writing.** New York: Addison - Wesley.

Kies, D. (1995). **Coherence in Writing.** Retrieved October 15, 2009, from http://papyr.com/ hypertextbooks/comp1/ coherent.htm.

Liu, M. & Braine, G. (2005). Cohesive Features in Argumentative Writing produced by Chinese Undergraduates. **System,** 33: 623-636.

Pennington, MC. (1996). **The computer and the nonnative writer: A natural partnership.** NH: Hampton Press, Cresskill.

Raimes, A. (1998). Teaching writing. **Applied Linguistics,** 18: 142-162.

Reid, J. (2000). Comments on "Local coherence and its limits : A second look at second sentences" - another look. **Journal of Second Language Writing,** 9: 77-88.

Rivers, Wilga M. and Temperley, Mary s. (1978). **A practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language.** New York: Oxford University Press.

Sattayatham, A. & Ratanapinyowong, P. Analysis of errors in paragraph writing in English by first year medical students from the four medical schools at Mahidol University. **Silpakorn University International Journal,** 8: 17-38.

Swales, J. (1990). **Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.** New York: Cambridge University Press.

Todd, Watson R., Thienpermpool, P. & Keyuravong, S. (2004). Measuring the coherence of writing using topic-based analysis. **Assessing Writing,** 9: 85-104.

Walters, S. (1999). **Coherence and Unity.** Retrieved November 13, 2009, from http://lrs.edu. uiuc.edu/students/fwalters/cohere.html.

Word Works. (1999). **Achieving Coherence in Writing.** Retrieved November 13, 2009, from http://www.boisestate.edu/wcenter/ww97.htm.