RESEARCH ARTICLE

COHESION AND COHERENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ESL TEACHERS

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Abstract:
The paper explored the cohesion-coherence debate in second language learning. It first distinguished the two but also establishing that cohesion can and should help achieve coherence. However, it has also emerged that over-emphasising cohesion has, many times, led to negligence of coherence which, ironically, is more important. It also briefly touched on some suggested methodologies to tackle the two together. Finally, it has been established that whilst coherence should be the chief concern for the second language teacher competence in both is the ideal scenario since the two are meant to be complementary.

Key words: Speech act theory, contrajunction, anaphoric reference, discourse markers, felicity conditions.

Introduction
It has been observed that whilst cohesion can enhance coherence in a text, it is not uncommon to have a very cohesive text which is not in fact coherent. Second language teachers have to be aware of the danger of over-emphasising the former neglecting the latter, yet there is no doubt that coherence is by far more important. Some linguistics theories, inter alia, the speech act theory, discourse analysis and the cooperative principle can help explain the cohesion-coherence controversy. But first, a practical distinction between cohesion and coherence suffices.

Distinction between cohesion and coherence
Basically, Halliday and Hasan (in Levison, 1983) rightly homologate that cohesion refers to the relationship of linguistic elements within a text. Likewise Edmondson (1981:5) defines coherence as “a well-formed text or discourse.” Widdowson (1979:87) goes on to shed more light by taking cohesion to be “the overt structural link between sentences as formal items.” On the other hand, coherence is viewed by Widdowson (1979:312) as “the link between the communicative acts that sentences are used to perform.” Therefore, we can deduce that cohesion is the literal linking up of sentences in a text whereas coherence refers to the general flow of ideas in a text to make logical sense.

Here text 1 is cohesive because B uses an elliptical form of the sentence, ‘Yes I can go to Edinburgh tomorrow’ whereas text 2 has no cohesion at all between its two sentences yet it remains coherent because we understand that B is explaining that he cannot go, for the strike rules out what he considers the only obvious means of transport to get there. So it is justifiable, from the onset, that text 2 is coherent as discourse, without being cohesive as text.

Interestingly, Thornbury on-line gives the following distinction:
Put simply, then: cohesion is a formal feature of texts (it gives them their texture), while coherence is "in the eye of the beholder" - that is to say, it is the extent to which the reader (or listener) is able to infer the
writer's (or speaker's) communicative intentions. Thus, cohesion is objectively verifiable, while coherence is more subjective. A text may be coherent to you, but incoherent to me.

Be that as it may, the purpose of all utterances is to communicate, hence the all-import of coherence.

Theory and Application

Basically, the speech act theory can help us demonstrate how coherence can be achieved without cohesion. In brief, the theory, according to Pratt (1977:80), proposes that a person performs a speech act thereby doing three things namely performing a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act. We are particularly interested in the illocutionary act for our purpose. It mainly depends on appropriate conditions known as felicity conditions (Halliday, 1985). Without necessarily being cohesive, we can both produce utterances and decode utterances of others through various felicity conditions. For instance, in the utterance, “You must have another touch” made by a pastor in the church, we know that this is not a command but an invitation. In the utterance “Could you complete the homework before you sleep?” uttered by a parent, in spite of its interrogative form, we understand this to be a polite request and not a question about the child’s physical or mental capabilities. There is no any kind of cohesion here but both utterances are coherent. So as teachers, it is wise for us to familiarise pupils with situations in given texts which they should be able to interpret due to our knowledge of felicity conditions even where there are no lexical ties, collocations, conjunctions, anaphora and cataphora.

A cohesive text can be totally incoherent. For instance, a pupil who was over-taught cohesion will tend to believe that as long as he uses discourse markers, then he is in the right direction no matter how tautological he in actual fact could be. We can illustrate this unfortunate phenomenon using a typical class text below:

> Basically, God is good. Furthermore, the shops are closed now. In addition to that, I will be going to town after work. However, the university has bought new books for the library. Consequently, I will harass my wife tonight!

The above “text” is indeed an apotheosis of cohesion since sentences are neatly tied together. The introductory discourse marker “basically” is correctly positioned, as is the additive discourse marker “furthermore.” The contrastive discourse marker “however” assumes a counter argument which, unfortunately, does not come. Finally, the conclusive discourse marker “consequently” comes towards the end of the “text” although there seems to be nothing being concluded. The goodness of God has nothing to do with the closed shops, neither is the latter related to going to town after work. The new books purchased by the library have nothing to do with the harassment of the author’s wife. There is no doubt here this text has both flux and fluidity, but alas, it is totally incoherent. Such a text lacks what Coulthard (1985) calls topical coherence, that is, no link with the topic (not discussing any subject). Therefore, strictly speaking, this piece is not even a text at all. To this effect, Bloor and Bloor (1995:229) recommend that teachers teach pupils “the features of a particular text – in the sense that it performs the function for which it is intended and that it is acceptable by the community within which it is produced.” Only then can a pupil be able to distinguish between a coherent and an incoherent text thereby equipping himself to write coherent ones as well.

In addition to these observations, besides teaching cohesion, we need to teach discourse. Thus, we will be using sentences to perform acts of communicating which cohere into larger communicative units, ultimately establishing a rhetorical pattern which characterises the piece of language as a whole. So instead of merely teaching cohesive ties, we consider how far we can select and grade teaching material in terms of communicative acts rather than simply in terms of linguistic structures. Widdowson (1979:99), thus, observes, “we can teach our students to use the [second] language to define, classify, generalise, promise, predict, describe, report, and so on; to make them aware of how the language is used for the particular kind of communication they are concerned with.”

This leads us to the theory of the cooperative principle which can help pupils understand passages which are not necessarily cohesive but coherent. Pratt (1977:129) asserts that conversation normally exhibits some degree of coherence and continuity. So our conversational behaviour is governed by the need to “make […] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” In Grice’s maxim of relation, for example, having understood the situation, the child can easily comprehend the relevance of B’s response in the following text:

A: Dad, supper is ready.
B: I am bathing.

In this case, it will be easy for pupils to notice that although there is no cohesion at all, B is not off-point. Well, from a vacuum, there is no link whatsoever between the ready supper and bathing. However, the context with our knowledge of the world we can easily see the relevance of B’s response as an excuse that he cannot presently come since he is taking a bath. So the text is coherent without necessarily being cohesive.
Furthermore, the maxim of manner where the child is taught to avoid ambiguity and obscurity of expression, being brief and orderly, will help the student avoid writing verbose but vague or even incoherent texts. The student will learn to focus on the topic constantly and stick to it, especially when attempting a factual composition. He could even be encouraged to plan his work to avoid being carried away by verbiage by way of constipating his work with lexical cohesion, a dozen discourse markers and tens of conjunctions; tallying hardly related facts.

On a general note, Pit Corder (1973:159) observes that coherence can still be achieved where there is totally no cohesion. His argument is that since real life utterances show a number of “slips of the tongue, hesitations, searching for words, repetitions, changes of plan [and] structural blends, coherence can be achieved.” After all, they also show continuity features such as “I mean to say,” “you know,” “oh,” “ah” and expressions of emotions such as “gosh!” “hell!” “damn it!” and “bastard!” Therefore, in textual analysis such as practical criticism, unlike cohesive ties, these features can actually help us determine the mood, emotional state and tone of the characters, as long as these texts are coherent.

Regrettably, overconsciousness of cohesion at the expense of coherence might lead to life time problems with the latter. As the researcher was going through university course outlines designed by multiple degree lecturers, a disturbing trend was noticed. Let us have a look at a preamble of one such course outline from this researcher’s own university:

This course is designed for all university undergraduate students. The course is meant to groom effective communicators in their work places. It is also expected to equip students with survival and communication skills. It is also expected to equip students with survival and communication skills as they enter university social and academic life.

In the preamble above, the first statement is blanket enough, suitable for a topic sentence or a thesis statement. However, the second statement comes as an anti-climax, already talking about students’ work place (after university already!). From there, we find a semblance of chronology when the third statement refers to students’ general survival in society (probably after university). However, the logical flow is heavily disrupted by the last statement that claims that the course equips students to survive and communicate as they enter university life. Naturally, the last statement should have followed the thesis statement, before we refer to effective communication at work place and in society at large. Now, this lack of coherence occurring at this level is a cause for concern. The million dollar question is that if communication skills lecturers themselves are yet to master coherence, then who is spared?

Some teaching tips

To teach cohesion, R.I.T. on-line recommends the conscious teaching of reference. The website identifies anaphoric, cataphoric, exophoric and homophoric reference. While these facilitate the oneness or compactness of texts and the logical flow of ideas, they also help to do way with unnecessary repetition and redundancy. In the case of anaphoric and cataphoric references, the replacement of actual names with pronouns achieves this effect. For instance, in the following statement, he is an anaphoric (backward) reference to John, yet John is a cataphoric (foward) reference to he.

John likes beer. He carouses till first cock crow.

In the case of exophoric and homophoric reference, the pupil gets to know how to create a coherent text. For instance, exophoric words refer to something outside the text. For instance, two ladies meet and one exclaims, “Wow, that must be expensive!” without explicitly stating what is purposed to be expensive. It is likely to be outfit, a watch, a pair of shoes and so on. Such a text is not cohesive but coherent. Similarly, homophoric reference depends on cultural knowledge or other general knowledge, rather than the specific features. In a statement “He died for it, so don’t die from it,” the knowledge of homophoric reference will tell the reader that the it refers to sin. In this case, the ESL teacher can teach coherence without necessarily emphasising on cohesion.

Thornbury on-line also presents interesting methodology on the teaching of coherence and cohesion. For instance, cutting texts up and asking learners to order them is a good way of drawing attention to the way that they are linked.

Furthermore, identifying lexical chains in texts such as repetitions, the use of synonyms and hyponyms, and words from the same lexical field – is also a useful way of alerting learners to the key role that lexis has in binding a text together. The following text serves as prototypical of a text whose cohesion and coherence lie in the use of synonymy:

Daniel Chingoma made a flying machine. The chopper was the man’s first invention. When he started, no one thought the helicopter could ever fly. The President thanked the scientist for raising the Zimbabwean flag with the concord. Many people from far and wide came to feast their eyes on the technocrat’s jet.
The bold words are synonyms which help create cohesion and coherence, at the same time avoiding redundancy. If teachers could teach ESL pupils this way, then fewer problems with cohesion and coherence would be experienced. In addition to that, de Beaugrande on-line proposes the teaching of coherence and cohesion to second language learners through what he calls junction. This is a notion that subsumes the dependences of two or more elements. It has sub-elements of conjunction, disjunction, contrajunction and subordination. Instead of teaching second language learners how to use joining words in general, it helps to teach these cohesive elements separately. For instance, disjunction is the use of two elements whose relationship in regard to their environment is alternatively the same or similar, such as or, or else, either...or and so forth. In other words, it might be necessary to concentrate on a single type of joining words in a particular lesson to ensure that the mastery of cohesion is systematic and gradual.

Probably to run away from jargon such as contrajunction and disjunction, a high school second language teacher can teach discourse markers as a way of enhancing flux and fluidity in academic writing. This could be achieved by way of a table such as the one presented below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introductory</th>
<th>Additive</th>
<th>Contrastive</th>
<th>Conclusive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Originally</td>
<td>Again</td>
<td>Nevertheless</td>
<td>Finally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basically</td>
<td>Moreover</td>
<td>Nonetheless</td>
<td>Penultimately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally</td>
<td>To add on</td>
<td>However</td>
<td>Ultimately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstly</td>
<td>In addition to that</td>
<td>Contrary to</td>
<td>At last</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To begin with</td>
<td>Moreover</td>
<td>In contrast with</td>
<td>In conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initially</td>
<td>More so</td>
<td>Conversely</td>
<td>Therefore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At its genesis</td>
<td>Furthermore</td>
<td>Unlike</td>
<td>Consequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just like</td>
<td>Ironically</td>
<td>As a result</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, the students would practise using these cementing or gluing words to achieve cohesion during essay writing. However, it has to be emphasised during these lessons that cohesion should not be an end on its own but a means to an end, i.e., coherence.

Conclusion

So in this discussion, having realised the complementary nature of coherence and cohesion, we have established that over-emphasis on cohesion neglecting coherence can lead to superfluous, verbose texts which are hardly coherent. At the same time, it is possible to write and even understand hardly cohesive texts which are coherent. We have seen through discourse and textual analysis, speech act theory and the cooperative principle, that it is possible to have coherent but hardly cohesive texts. Therefore, there is a need to be conscious of these theories when teaching pupils to identify the purpose of a text or topic, to avoid ambiguity by being precise and concise. By doing so, they can still achieve automaticity in writing and comprehension of texts without using cohesion.

However, it could be concluded that we are not totally condemning cohesion. Outrightly jettisoning any of the two is linguistically injurious to second language learners. As much as possible, the second language teacher is encouraged to tackle the two together but starting with coherence. There is no doubt that a text which is both cohesive and coherent is by all means better than a hardly cohesive but coherent text. So it is only after the student can write coherently that (s) he can be taught cohesion and not the other way round since the latter practice would result in the production of a well-connected and smooth-flowing mumbo-jumbo which benefits neither the pupil nor the teacher.

References


**On-line Sources**

