

Application of Cohesion and Coherence in Teaching College Students' English Writing

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Abstract: The traditional English teaching focuses on the grammar and sentence structure but ignores the relationship between the sentences and paragraphs thus causing students' lack of awareness of using cohesive devices. This study aims to illustrate the cohesion and coherence problems in college students' writing. As one of the four basic language skills, English writing skill is the most indispensable but complicated one for English learners to master. According to College English Curriculum Requirement and under the theoretical framework of Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion Theory, this study finds out the misuse of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion in students' English writing. By illustrating the examples of the discourse errors in students' English compositions, this study tries to put forward some suggestions to ameliorate traditional English teaching and improve students' writing skill.

Keywords: cohesion, coherence, college English writing.

INTRODUCTION

English writing is both a text output process and an innovation and transformation process of college students. It is the representation of their English comprehensive ability. According to College English Curriculum Requirement 2007, the basic requirement is "students should be able to complete writing tasks for general purposes.

They should write no less than 120 words within 30 minutes on a general topic. The composition should be basically complete in content, clear in main idea, appropriate in diction and coherent in discourse". There are several levels for English writing, the best one must meet the following requirements: clear expression, coherent text, few language errors.

Practice proves that the writing level of most college students is relatively weak and they cannot write out a high-quality composition required by College English Curriculum Requirement. Many scholars have done researches in the aspects of vocabulary, grammar and the way of thinking which showed that the outstanding problems of the Chinese college students' English writing are the lack of capacity of building logic structure and layout in the form of discourse, mainly in the performance of cohesion and coherence [1]. The problems that students have in writing reflect the drawbacks of writing teaching. In the research on the current situation of college students' English teaching [2], most universities believe that "basic knowledge and basic skills of English language" plays an important role in teaching.

The overall teaching order of basic skills of English language in the investigated universities is reading, listening, speaking, writing and translating. Compared to reading and listening, writing is belittled. The examination-oriented college English teaching makes CET4 and CET6 as the single standard to measure students' English proficiency. Many of the universities set CET4 and CET6 as the core of English teaching. However, students' compositions in CET4 and CET6 have many mistakes, among them the most outstanding is that their writing is confined to sentences. When the sentences are developed to a whole paragraph, consistency, coherence and conciseness are often absent in the paragraph. The traditional college English writing teaching focuses on grammar and sentences, emphasizes syntactic structure, always picks out the mistakes of the students' spelling, and word usage, but ignores the application of discourse analysis and cohesive devices. This will lead to empty articles and generalities and college students cannot realize the importance of the application of cohesive devices [3].

Therefore, it is necessary to make college students aware of cohesion and coherence and learn to

use the skills of cohesion and coherence consciously. Such kind of enlightening training will definitely improve their writing proficiency. In the remaining of this paper, Cohesion Theory will be displayed and the errors in college students' writing will be analyzed. Then we will put forward several feasible suggestions to improve college students' writing skill by means of cohesion and coherence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The publication of *Cohesion in English* 1976 marks the foundation of Cohesion Theory. Cohesion and coherence began to be discussed as theoretical concept. Cohesion refers to relations of meaning that exist within a text. Halliday and Hasan's definition of cohesion emphasizes that it is a semantic concept. "Cohesion occurs when the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, on the sense that it can not be effectively decoded except by resource to it [4]. Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion Theory as well as taxonomy of cohesive devices in *Cohesion in English* has aroused close attention of an increasing number of linguists to effectiveness of Cohesion Theory in English writing. A coherent text is not only a series of grammatical sentences lined up one by one. Researchers have studied a lot and concluded that the use of cohesive devices plays a great role in a high quality of English writing. The domestic study began from the publication of *Cohesion and Coherence of Discourse* by Hu Zhuanglin [5].

The application of cohesion and coherence differs in students' compositions. The frequency distribution of the cohesive devices is higher in high-quality composition than that in a low one [6]. Students' ability to use cohesive devices varies, some can use properly, while others make discourse errors in their composition. Therefore, the frequency distribution of the cohesive devices is not a decisive factor of a high-quality composition. Studentd should avoid misuse of cohesive devices such as overuse, loss of cohesive devices [7].

Since Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy of types of cohesive relationships is by far the most popular theoretical framework. This article will also adopt Halliday and Hasan's classification of cohesive devices as the framework. The cohesive devices will be outlined as follows:

References

Reference is the relation between an element of the text and something else by reference to which it is interpreted in given instance. Reference can be divided into endophora (in the text) and exphora (outside the text). While Halliday summarizes tree types of reference: personal, demonstrative and comparative.

Substitution

Substitution is a replacement, which can replace the words appearing in the context. In order to avoid repetition, one element is used to substitute another one thus making cohesion in context. According to Halliday and Hasan's theory, substitution can be divided into three types: nominal substitution, verbal substitution and clausal substitution.

Ellipsis

Ellipsis refers to the omission of elements that are anaphorically recoverable from a preceding sentence. Substitution and ellipsis are very similar to each other and ellipsis is simply "substitution by zero". Ellipsis can also be classified into three types: nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis and clausal ellipsis.

Conjunction

Conjunction in discourse specifically refers to the conjunctive relation between sentences or sentence groups.

Lexical cohesion

Lexical cohesion is used by means of words, which does not deal with grammatical and semantic connections. Halliday and Hasan divide lexical cohesion into two categories: reiteration and collocation.

ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS

By interviewing the non-English majors, we find that over 70% have no clear general conception of cohesion and coherence. While writing, students may have no difficulties in vocabulary or grammar, but their consciousness of textual cohesion is very weak, thus the discourse errors are fairly common [9]. Error refers to the second language learners' unconscious deviation from the target language when using the language. The criteria for judging the errors is based on the standard of the target language. Discourse error includes general coherence error, such as incomplete structure, loss of topic and so on, and specific coherence error. Specific coherence error refers to the error related to the application of cohesive devices [10]. The following part will illustrate the problems found in the students' writing from the perspective of specific coherence error.

In an article talking about the earthquake, there are several sentences should be analyzed:

After these, the government organized the people to rebuild his houses.

The first underlined word "these" refers to "the earthquake". Here the plural form "these" fails to refer to the singular form "earthquake", so "these" should be changed into "that". The second underlined word is opposite to the former. The singular form is used to refer to the plural form. The word "his" should be

corrected into “their” referring the people. This is disorder of reference which means the reference words couldn’t have an agreement with their referents.

With the people's efforts, life returns to normal

This sentence is ambiguous because of the word “life”. What does this word exactly refer to? The officials’ or the animals’? It should be the people’s life. This is loss of reference which may cause ambiguity and vagueness. Here the definite reference “their” should be added before the word life to define it.

The disorder of reference and loss of reference are both the misuse of reference. This is negative transfer in students’ second language acquisition. Affected by first language, Chinese, students often write run-on sentences. A run-on sentence is a complex sentence which is composed of multiple grammatically complete segments consistently followed without any explicit word to connect them. In run-on sentences, several subjects often appear at once. Therefore, loose connection and ambiguity will be caused by the misuse of reference in students’ writing.

As for substitution, the following examples will be analyzed:

I need a new computer to replace my old computer.

The word “computer ” appears twice in this short sentence. we could infer from the adjective “new” and the verb “replace” that the latter part should be the old computer. The simple repetition of “computer” causes redundant sentence. Therefore, the second “computer” should be replaced by “one” to avoid redundancy.

The weather in Beijing is much warmer than the weather in my hometown.

The underlined “weather” is usually forgotten to be substituted by “that” causing the loss of substitution. This results in lack of logic and failure of tightly compact structure.

The listed two examples are both the loss of substitution. It refers to simple repetition of the words which should be substituted by prepositions. Using substitution is both to avoid duplication and to connect contexts. It is necessary to look for the substituted words in the context to understand the meaning of sentences containing alternative forms [8]. In students’ writing, there is another kind of error in substitution called vague substitution. This means that any part of the context cannot be referred to by the substituted words. Look at the following example:

At the same time, we should be honest. Even though your grade isn’t very good, you have done, you are successful.

In this sentence, we cannot find the specific verb or verb group substituted by “have done”. Vague substitution is influenced by the fixed Chinese way of thinking. English has complete syntactic structure and strict formal logic. It pays more attention to the integrity of sentence structure and the logical rationality, while Chinese focuses on meaning rather than the formal integrity. It takes the semantic as the core, relies on the coherent of thoughts. The semantic is naturally connected to express the meaning. According to the semantic connection, the word group “have done” in the example is equal to “have gotten a good grade”. The ignorance of the characteristics of English and difference in way of thinking between English and Chinese results in vague substitution.

Ellipsis has the same function as substitution. They are both the means to avoid repetition of syntax and the connection context. The misuse of ellipsis includes loss of ellipsis and overuse of ellipsis. Look at the following examples:

Your brother has a big variety of toys. Some toys are fancy motors and cars. Some toys are furry animals.

There is no grammatical mistakes or logical confusion in the sentence, but the repetition of the underlined word “toy” causes loose connection of the context. The topic in the second sentence is toy which can be extended in the whole sentence. The simple repetition of toy breaks the natural connection of the topic chain. Proper use of ellipsis will avoid redundant content and make the expression concise and live. The ellipsis can enhance the cohesion and coherence between the semantic groups, express the same meaning with few words, strengthen cohesion in the text and highlight the new information in the sentences.

All of us must work hard to make a great contribution to our motherland in the future. By doing so, we increase people's living standard and make our society more harmonious and prosperous.

The vacancy of the underlined word “we” is not rare in students’ writing. This is related to null argument. It is an important content of second language acquisition researches based on generative grammar, which refers to the argument of some verbs for some reason only has grammatical function and semantic content, but no phonetic manifestation. Null argument includes

null subject and null object. In Chinese, null subject and object is very common and will not cause ambiguity in meaning. However, English doesn't allow null subject and object. Without concrete subject or object, the sentence cannot be understood correctly.

In the process of writing, students often cannot accurately express the relationships between sentence and sentence or paragraphs, such as causality, transition, connecting, turning, listing and summarizing. Look at the following examples:

Luckily, there weren't many people died and people move to safer places although they loved their hometown.

Apparently, the relationship between the former part "Luckily, there weren't many people died" and the latter part is result and cause so the word "and" is misuse of conjunction and it should be corrected to "because".

Because the trees were even pulled out of the soil, so it made great damage.

In this case, students pay too much attention to cohesive means and use as much cohesive means as possible thus causing excessive accumulation and redundancy of the conjunctions. This is a mistake from high school to college. In addition to this, "although... but..." is also found in the students' writing.

In some places you may borrow as many books as you want, in other places where you are limited to a certain number.

Parataxis and hypotaxis are the two languages' different organizational characteristics and have their profound cultural tradition. The meaning of the above sentence could be understood but it does not conform to the English expression habit because of zero connection in the proper place. Therefore, the conjunction "while" should be put between "want" and "in other places".

Lexical cohesion is constrained by discourse and context, in the meantime it requires a higher cognition of the lexical relation of the readers. Here is an example:

Firstly, travelling is a kind of travelling. Travelling can make you stronger. When climbing the Mount Tai, you feel very tired and energy is burning. Secondly, travelling can widen your knowledge; you can get much information that you can't get in books. Thirdly, travelling makes

you feel happy. After many months of hard work, it is necessary for you to have a rest and travelling is the best way. In a word, travelling is good to our health and our life. Please enjoy travelling.

The paragraph listed above violates the unmarked information structure pattern. Language is the carrier of information, so the process of discourse generation is the process of information transmission. Discourse is a complete semantic unit composed of information units which is made up of given information and new information. Given information is information mentioned above and being talked about, while new information refers to the message not mentioned above or something unexpected. In general, this kind of known information → new information (Unmarked information structure) is in line with the cognitive process from the known to the unknown. It is one of the important means to form the coherence of discourse. In this paragraph, new information is put before given information. Started by new information, the sentences are incongruent. The repetition of words "travelling" leads to a lack of variation in language expression causing tediousness instead of making the text cohesive. We can use its synonym "trip" to take its place and in the latter part we can use referential pronoun "it". By doing this, this paragraph will be more concise.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, this article will offer some teaching proposals in students' English writing.

Follow the development rules of English writing ability

It can be concluded from the discourse error analysis that the mistakes students make at the lower levels of writing continue to the senior stage of college [11]. The teaching of English writing is not planned or phased causing a huge knowledge gap from middle school to college. Therefore, each different stage should have corresponding teaching goals. The primary stage of middle school should focus on the cultivation of language ability, while the college should put emphasis on the training of high-level writing skills such as layout, discourse coherence and expression of their thoughts.

Use the theory of discourse analysis to guide English writing teaching

According to College English Curriculum Requirement 2007, a high-level English writing should be complete in content and coherent in discourse. Most students have no textual awareness. They have little knowledge of cohesion and coherence so hardly can they use the cohesive devices. Teachers should have the relevant courses to make students recognize and learn to use proper cohesive devices in their own compositions.

Teachers can classify the discourse errors in students' compositions and illustrate how to use the cohesive devices by comparing the error and correct expression. Matching composition exercise assignments enable students to master these types of cohesive devices. After such conscious training, there will be fewer discourse errors in their compositions and their English writing level will be enhanced effectively.

Pay attention to the transformation of Chinese and English thinking mode

Chinese is different from English. Chinese puts more emphasis on the content, while English focuses on the form. Although students already have a certain base of native language writing, the Chinese expression pattern misleads their English expression [12]. Run-on sentences and null argument can be avoided after the students realize this difference. Teachers should guide students to compare the differences of Chinese and English thinking mode and understand the characteristics of Chinese and English text patterns through purposeful writing training and analysis. Teachers should also cultivate the students' cross-cultural consciousness and their sensitivity to alien culture to eliminate the interference of Chinese thinking and to organize sentences consciously according to English thinking mode.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results obtained in this study, we could get the following conclusions: There are many discourse errors in students' compositions. The frequency of the cohesive devices may not determine the quality of English writing because of misuse of them. Therefore, the proper application of the cohesion and coherence is an important element of a high-level composition. It is very necessary to cultivate the students' consciousness of using cohesion and coherence. The other main cause of students' discourse errors is their negative transformation of first language. In English writing classes, the difference between Chinese and English should not be ignored. Detailed illustration of the Chinese and English thinking mode could avoid run-on sentences and misuse of cohesive devices.

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