



The Application of Cohesion and Coherence Theory in College English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The significance of cohesion and coherence in language learning goes without saying, especially for high level language learners. As advanced English learners, college students should have a deep understanding of cohesion and coherence in discourse. In writing, the theoretical knowledge can guide students to organically connect different ideas, viewpoints, and sentences, making their essays or speeches more fluent, coherent, and easy to understand. In spoken language, the use of cohesion and coherence can help students better express their opinions, logically organize their thoughts, and make it easier for listeners to comprehend and follow along. In listening and reading instruction, students can easily understand the original text by recognizing cohesive devices and other information. However, in everyday teaching, it is not difficult to find that students have insufficient understanding of cohesion and coherence theories, which leads to various obstacles in language learning. This article takes a discourse analysis perspective on cohesion and coherence, using the analysis of written discourse as an example to illustrate how to integrate the theory of cohesion and coherence into practical application, guiding students to gain a deeper understanding and apply it in practice.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

Cohesion, Coherence, College English, Reading Instruction

1. Introduction

M.A.K. Halliday, a linguist known for his initiative in systemic functional lin-

guistics, made significant contributions to the study of cohesion and coherence in discourse. Halliday & Hasan, in the book *Cohesion in English*, has classified cohesion into two categories: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion [1], with the former including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, etc. and the latter including repetition, synonym, hyponym, collocation, etc. Generally, researchers tend to regard cohesion as the functioning superficial structural relationship of discourse, while coherence is seen as the intrinsic semantic connection of content within the discourse, serving as the deep bond between different parts of the discourse. And it is evident that discourse is not a random combination of sentences, but rather has external means of cohesion and internal mechanisms of coherence in terms of its form and semantic meaning [1].

The theory of discourse cohesion and coherence has not attracted the attention of English teachers in college English teaching in China [2]. It is reasonable to infer that in the acquisition of English during students' learning process in non-English speaking countries such as China, students tend to rarely have a clear and sound understanding of cohesion and coherence, which is also fairly obvious to find in the daily teaching practice. Students can not solve the challenges in language learning by the guidance of the theories, which all have blocked students language acquisition and the overall understanding of the text or discourse no matter in reading, listening, writing or oral speaking.

In the course of Comprehensive English, which is mainly for the sophomores of non-English majors, the authors have intentionally introduce the theory of cohesion and coherence to the students and guide them to apply it in speaking, listening, writing, translation, and also reading, which is the best to introduce the theory and easier for students to understand, for the reason that cohesive and coherent devices identified in the discourses can enable students to grasp how to create a coherent and meaningful text. The theory background of cohesion and coherence will be introduced and exemplified before text analysis. And by understanding the central theme throughout the text, as well as the logical arrangement and sequencing of ideas and information, students can reflect and apply what they've learned into oral English, translation, writing, and listening.

2. Cohesion and Coherence

In the context of language learning and teaching, understanding and applying cohesion and coherence theory is crucial for both reading and writing skills. In reading instruction, students learn to identify cohesive devices and understand how they contribute to the overall coherence of a text. This helps them comprehend the text more effectively and extract the intended meaning since the cohesive devices and mechanism can be used to predict the coherence of the text [3].

2.1. Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the use of appropriate words, phrases, and sentence structures in language expression to organically connect different information, viewpoints,

and sentences, making an article or speech more fluent, coherent, and easy to understand. The purpose of cohesion is to help readers or listeners better understand the author or speaker's intentions and ideas, and smoothly follow the logical development of the article or speech.

In the theory of cohesion, some important concept and principles are listed as follows:

1) Reference: It refers to the use of pronouns, demonstratives, and other linguistic devices to refer back to previously mentioned entities or ideas in a text. By using reference, writers and speakers can avoid repetition and maintain coherence by linking different parts of the text together.

2) Substitution: It involves replacing a word or phrase with another word or phrase of a different category. This can help to avoid repetition and maintain coherence by providing variety and vividness in the language used.

3) Ellipsis: Ellipsis involves omitting words or phrases that are redundant or unnecessary for understanding. This can help to create cohesion by allowing the reader or listener to fill in the missing information based on context by themselves.

4) Conjunction: Conjunction refers to the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions to link different clauses and sentences together. This helps to create coherence by indicating the logical relationships between ideas and showing how they are connected.

5) Lexical cohesion: Lexical cohesion involves the use of words and phrases that are related in meaning to create coherence. This can be achieved through the use of synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and other semantic relationships.

6) Collocation: Collocation refers to the tendency of certain words to occur together frequently. By using collocations, writers and speakers can create cohesion and enhance the naturalness and fluency of their language.

The theory of cohesion emphasizes the importance of these linguistic devices and strategies in creating coherence and cohesion in discourse. It provides a framework for understanding how different elements of language work together to convey meaning and maintain the flow of information. By understanding and applying the principles of cohesion, writers and speakers can enhance the clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of their communication.

2.2. Coherence

The research on coherence has begun long before the birth of linguistics, and in rhetoric, coherence is considered to be the presupposition for the unity of a text [4]. Coherence refers to the logical and semantic correlation between sentences and paragraphs in language expression, forming a whole that enables readers or listeners to smoothly understand and follow the ideas and content of an article or speech [5]. The purpose of coherence is to make language expression clearer, easier to understand, and more persuasive.

In the theory of coherence, some important concept and principles are listed

as follows:

1) Unity: The central theme or main idea that is consistently developed and maintained throughout. This approach establishes a clear focus and direction for the reader or listener, contributing to overall coherence.

2) Organization: Ideas and information should be logically arranged and structured in a text. This can be achieved through the use of clear topic sentences, headings, and subheadings, as well as the use of transitional words and phrases to indicate relationships between ideas.

3) Coherence markers: Coherence markers, such as conjunctions, transitional words, and discourse markers, are used to signal relationships between different parts of a text. They help to indicate connections, such as cause and effect, contrast, comparison, and addition, and facilitate the reader or listener's understanding of the flow of information.

4) Pronoun reference: Pronoun reference is utilized to avoid repetition and ensure coherence by connecting different parts of a text together. Pronouns refer back to previously mentioned entities or ideas.

5) Lexical cohesion: It is established by using words and phrases that are semantically related, such as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and other similar connections. This technique enhances coherence.

6) Contextual information: Contextual information, such as background information, explanations, and examples, is provided to help the reader or listener understand and make connections between different parts of a text. It provides the necessary information and context for comprehension.

The theory of coherence underscores the significance of these principles and strategies in constructing a text or discourse that is coherent and comprehensible. By implementing these principles, writers and speakers can guarantee the seamless and logical flow of their ideas, effectively conveying their intended message to the reader or listener.

3. Application of Cohesion and Coherence Theory in Reading Instruction

In the course of *Comprehensive English*, which is mainly for the cultivation of students' reading skills, the enhancement of reading fluency, the expanding of vocabulary, critical thinking, understanding of culture difference, etc. It is easy to find that students are still confused about the reading skills, which means that they still can not grasp the skills and meet the challenge in reading successfully. The above mentioned phenomenon can also be found in writing, according to some of the feedback from the authors' students. In the informal face-to-face talks with the author's students, some of them say that their composition is "quite loose", and not interconnected which is quite different from the essay they learned in the textbooks. This can also be explained by the lack of understanding of the theory of cohesion and coherence. Therefore, in the course, the author has guided students to find the cohesive and coherent devices adopted in

the texts. Textual cohesion and coherence are to be analyzed at various levels, and a multilevel model should be developed to account for this relation [6].

3.1. Teaching Materials

The following excerpt composed of two paragraphs for exemplification is taken from text A of unit 8 in *New Target College English Integrated Course* (the 2nd edition of Volume IV, from Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press). The passage, entitled *Keep the Earth Going* is mainly about the impact of plastics on environment of America, and calls on the joint effort from government, manufacturers, retailers, the facilities, forward-thinking inventors as well as the public.

“But things may be changing. Recently, more and more states, cities, and concerned individuals have begun demanding that the producers of consumer goods take greater responsibility... Proponents of the strategy known as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) press governments to shift the costs of collecting and recycling products and packaging onto those who generated them in the first place. Under an EPR framework, manufacturers and brand owners finance the collection and recycling or disposal of packaging materials, hazardous landfill items... (p 1)

Won't these fees be folded directly into consumer price tags? They might. But that's actually the beauty of the EPR system: ... When EPR works as it's supposed to, consumers end up with less packaging—or, at the very least, with packaging that's easier to reuse, recycle, or compost.” (p 2)

3.2. Teaching Design

For the first 2 units, the author has introduced the theory of cohesion and coherence to the students both theoretically and practically.

For each lecture, students are grouped with 4 to 6 members in each group. The teacher will assign the paragraphs to each group and invite them to present their analysis which is focused on the devices they found in the paragraphs used for cohesion and coherence. The groups will have a discussion first in class or off class. And submit a word file of discussion record.

During the class, the teacher will randomly invite groups to present their analysis and others students are encouraged to make open-ended comments and teacher-students or students-students interaction. Students are encouraged to reflect about their analysis by comparison, which is aimed for making students fully understand about how to arrange topic sentences, and arguments in essay writing. Reading and writing are interrelated, and balance each other.

Students are also guided to analyze the passage from the different perspectives like the italicized two paragraphs mentioned above in 3.1. “But things may be changing”, the topic sentence has indicated the change, and the following part is expected to be about the change. The underlined words, including cost, finance, and fees, are synonyms which are for coherence. And students are invited to make comments and comparisons.

3.3. Text Analysis

In order to encourage the students' motivation and classroom involvement, and the text analysis is carried out by open-ended questions, which aim for stimulating students' critical thinking and collaboration skills, and promoting personalized learning and the generation of diverse answers. It helps improve their learning outcomes and the development of overall abilities.

The following two questions are given to students in advance:

- 1) What are the devices used for cohesion?
- 2) How does it realize coherence as a whole?

It intends to guide students to do the micro-and macro-analysis respectively for the above two questions. Students are guided to present their outcome in front of the classroom. The above mentioned excerpt in 3.1 is used as an example. In paragraph 1, the underlined transitional sentence "But things may be changing" signifies the change of ideas, since in the previous paragraph, the author has pointed out the obstacles in the disposal of plastics. And all the measures are in the dead-end, since the responsibility is not taken by the manufacturers but by the taxpayers.

The synonyms in paragraph 1, "cost", "finance" and "fees" in paragraph 2 has make the content or idea more coherent because of they are consistent with the theme within and between the paragraphs. At the same time, they are also the synonyms, which is helpful for cohesion.

In a nutshell, the analysis and explanation of the passage should not be narrowed down, but open-ended. Students should be motivated to share their understanding both objectively and subjectively, which can facilitate their understanding of the theory of cohesion and coherence thoroughly.

4. Conclusion

In college English teaching, teachers should focus on cultivating students' ability to use coherence and cohesion. And to achieve this goal, reading can be quite effective since it is the input of language acquisition. This can be achieved by explaining relevant grammar knowledge, providing plenty of examples and exercises, and conducting writing and speaking training. Additionally, teachers can offer practical writing and speaking tasks to give students opportunities to apply coherence and cohesion skills in real-life situations, further enhancing their language proficiency.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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