

Seeing is Understanding: Improving Coherence in Students' Writing

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Low English proficiency students have difficulty making their writing coherent. They tend to be more concerned with language matters rather than making meaning. This may be because they do not have a mental representation of their writing. Tree diagrams help students to see the hierarchy of their ideas and how their ideas are related to one another. Thus, tree diagrams can be used as a planning and diagnostic tool to help students improve the coherence of their writing.

Introduction

The number of years of education that a student has gone through is no indication of his ability to write. Many university students write incomprehensibly. These "novice" writers adopt different writing strategies as opposed to expert writers. Research provides a profile of the novice writers to help us understand how they approach the writing task and how we could help them overcome the problem.

Novice writers do not have the propensity to plan paragraphs or essays as a whole formally or informally (Stallard, 1974). Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) said that they use the trial-and-error approach to trigger more writing (if they get stuck in their writing, they will just start all over again using another word in the topic that they can relate to and tell about). They also spend little time planning and start off writing although they are still confused about the task (Richards, 1990). This may be because they lack a mental representation of what they are writing.

Furthermore, students tend to think that their lack of composing competence is due to their limited language resources. Hence, they are very concerned with language matters. Sommers in Humes (1983) said that they have a "thesaurus philosophy of writing" (p. 211) where they make many formal changes at surface level, especially in vocabulary choice and sentence formation but do not clarify meaning (Richards, 1990). Their main aim is to detect and fix errors rather than rethink their composition. This proves detrimental as concerns about language in the initial stages of writing would truncate the flow of writing (Perl, 1979).

The Sample

I was teaching an English Proficiency class in a university in Singapore. The students in this class failed their English test, taken before their university studies began. They consisted of foreign students from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and a few Singaporean students. Hence, they had to pass this 11 week course in order to graduate. The course mainly exposed them to writing the paragraph, compare and contrast essay and cause and effect essay.

The Challenge

The challenge in teaching them was that they came from different educational backgrounds and have been through many years of education. Although they were good in their science subjects, their English proficiency was weak. So how could they be helped to understand why their writing was not comprehensible? How could they be made to see that writing was more than just grammar?

Aim

The author decided to concentrate on helping them "see" what they are writing using a tree diagram. It was felt that using a tree diagram would be more helpful than an outline as the tree diagram could show the hierarchical relationship between ideas in a paragraph or essay. This would provide both the teacher and students with a common and visible mental representation to discuss. The thrust of the writing class was to help them develop the following elements in their writing:

- a thesis statement = topic + (controlling idea 1 + controlling idea 2 + controlling idea 3)
- a topic sentence = topic + controlling idea
- coordinate = explains the controlling idea
- subordinate = examples of controlling idea
- only one idea per paragraph

This decision was also supported by the students'; first assignment where these faults were very evident. A sample of it is shown below (all samples shown are with the permission of the students).

Assignment: Develop a Topic Sentence about Polluting the Environment.

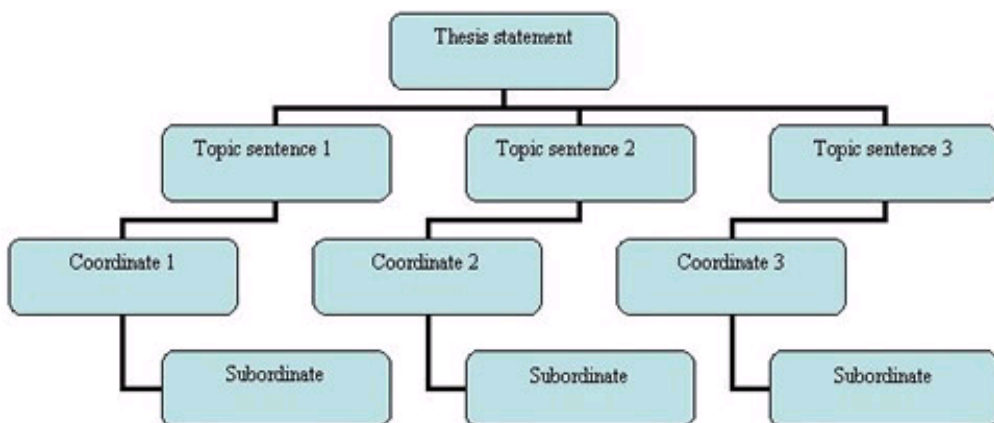
Support it with specific examples in a paragraph.

Nowadays, following with the development of industry at every corner of the world, pollution caused by the factory effects even breaks up the food-chain in natural environment on the land. For building up a factory, it has to cut down the woods of a certain area. Some animals lose their living place. Plants previously in the area disappear, that means the food sources of plant-eating animals decrease and it will caused their death. After the number of plant-eating animals decreases, meat-eating animals will decrease in number too. Trees act as important role in air-filtering and temperature controlling. After being cutted down, dust in the air will increase, gas of carbon dioxide increases and the temperature around the area will increase too. Some animals and plants cannot adapt themselves to the changed environment. They will eventually disappear from there. That means, there is a lose of food-sources of some other animals and a lose of food consumers at there.

The topic sentence for this paragraph was that pollution was caused by factory emission. Rather than explaining what elements in the emission caused pollution, his elaboration was on how the food chain would be broken and on global warming. The elaboration for the paragraph did not follow the topic sentence and there was more than one idea in the paragraph.

Procedure

The teacher taught them how to write a paragraph by explaining topic sentences, coordinates and subordinates using the tree diagram (Figure 1), after which they did exercises from the textbook ("Refining Composition Skills" by Smalley, Ruetten and Kozyrev, 2001). After that, the students progressed on to writing essays. Thereafter, the tree diagram was used both as a planning and diagnostic device by the teacher and students.



Common Writing Problems

1) The paragraph had no topic sentence.

- Example: Today people are still polluting the environment by some little actions.

There is no controlling idea in his topic sentence and this is reflected in his elaboration which is not focused. Thus, in the feedback conference, the teacher asked the student to use the tree diagram to help him draw an outline of his paragraph. As the problem was with the controlling idea, the student was asked to start from the subordinate then go up to the coordinate and then to state a possible controlling idea for his paragraph. Often, students will see that the subordinate and coordinate ideas do not relate to one another and therefore, their writing was unfocused (more than one idea per paragraph) and they had no controlling idea.

2) Developing the topic sentence was also difficult because sometimes the controlling ideas was too specific that it was difficult to elaborate the paragraph.

- Example: Littering of food packages is polluting the environment.

Thus, the teacher had to help the student see that the controlling idea in the topic sentence would actually serve better as a coordinate idea and "littering" could be a better controlling idea as it would provide better scope for elaboration.

3) Students may also find it difficult to write the thesis statement. This may be because they are still thinking at paragraph level. In addition, some students would rather "flow" with their thoughts rather than plan ahead to get the controlling ideas for their paragraphs before writing.

- Example: Obesity is now one of the major health challenges especially for Asian youth. Generally they think of the bad effects of obesity in physical appearance. Furthermore, we have to get the relevant information in order to ensure among us the effects of obesity based on health studies. Some studies have found that weight change has a profound influence on breast cancer rates in youth Asian.

This example showed that there was only one controlling idea for the thesis statement i.e. physical appearance and the coordinate was weight change. Therefore, the teacher had to show the student that there was no thesis statement and that this controlling idea did not correspond with his topic sentences for his following paragraphs. In this instance, he did not have controlling ideas for his topic sentences either.

4) Students also have problems sticking to their thesis statements, especially when they are writing on a topic very familiar to them. They tend to deviate from the controlling idea.

- Example: Cameron and Genting still differ in their location, climate and building.

In the paragraph on location, he started off with how to reach Genting, where is it located and then deviated off to talking about the climate and lifestyle. Thus, the teacher had to ask the student to draw his tree diagram based on what he had written and then ask him to point out which ideas in the diagram do not relate to the topic sentence and where they should be mentioned instead in the tree diagram.

Conclusion

The teacher used the tree diagram consistently in her teaching and also during the feedback conference. Students saw that using the tree diagram could actually help them to diagnose their own writing and more importantly improve their grades. This in part motivated the students to use the tree diagram to plan their writing too. They also found that planning their ideas using

the tree diagram helped them to be more efficient as it was easy to write when all the ideas were already laid out in the diagram. Furthermore, the ideas could be easily toggled around and edited if in the process of writing, they discovered more interesting ideas to write about.

Besides the tree diagram, concept maps can also be used to show the hierarchy of ideas in a paragraph or an essay. In addition, these graphic organizers lend to flexible extension in their use as they can easily branch out to include cause and effect relationships or even to compare and contrast ideas. Hence, the potential for their use is up to the creativity of the teacher and students. The primary criteria is that the graphic organizer has to meet the students' needs and be consistently applied for students to really understand how it will help them in their writing.

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