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Coherence in Writing: Research and Pedagogical Perspectives

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Since the mid-1970s and early treatments of cohesion such as Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal work *Cohesion in English,* there has been an increasing interest in coherence: in understanding, defining, explaining, and teaching it. The book *Coherence in Writing: Research and Pedagogical Perspectives* edited by Ulla Connor and Ann M. Johns makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature on the complex subject of discourse coherence.

Connor and Johns, widely published and well-respected researchers in reading, writing, and coherence, have organized the 12 articles in the volume into four sections: "Theoretical Overview," "Coherence Models," "Studies of Student Writing," and "Pedagogical Approaches." Several of the articles were first presented at a 1986 TESOL colloquium titled "Coherence: Theory and Practice," but unfortunately the editors do not identify which these are. At least two others appear to have been written specifically for the volume (Enkvist and Johns) while one article (Lautamatti) was published previously. The volume has an international flavor because of the content of the articles and the mix of authors, many well-known in the fields of language research and teaching. This seems most appropriate for a TESOL publication.

The editors have written a brief introduction that gives some general comments about the study of coherence and a brief description of each article. At the end of each chapter, there are four or five discussion questions and four or five extension activities. The single list of references at the end of the book is an excellent resource, and a biographical sketch of each of the contributors is a plus for the volume.

The first section contains theoretical articles by Enkvist and Lautamatti. Both articles stress the interaction of reader and text—a theme throughout the volume. Enkvist's article—"Seven Problems

in the Study of Coherence and Interpretability"— discusses problems that "bedevil the study of discourse" and textual coherence (p.1). He argues "that coherence is a concept with a crucial hermeneutic ingredient" (p. 26). It cannot adequately be explained by intra- and intersentential links, syntax, or semantics. He goes on to argue that a process model that is sensitive to context and situation must be developed if textual coherence is to be modelled. In "Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse" Lautamatti draws the distinction between propositional coherence and interactional coherence, discussing how these two relate to different types of discourse, discourse topic, and cognitive frames. The theoretical concepts and questions raised by Enkvist and Lautamatti provide a gestalt of coherence studies for the remaining articles, all of which deal with particular aspects of coherence from various perspectives.

The second section, "Coherence Models," contains four articles. In "Pragmatic Word Order in English Composition," Bardovi-Harlig presents a model concerned with the sequencing of given-new information within sentences (Firbas, 1979, 1982) and the pragmatic value of various types of syntactic structures (for example, preposed adverbials, *there)* insertion, passive *WH*-clefts, and topicalization). Harris in "The Use of 'Organizing Sentences' in the Structure of Paragraphs in Science Textbooks" presents a model of coherence concerned with the function of opening sentences in paragraphs. In the third chapter, "Inductive, Deductive, Quasi-Inductive: Expository Writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai," Hinds models a regionally preferred (Asian) rhetorical pattern for expository prose. This is an organizational pattern that Hinds argues English-speaking readers classify as neither inductive nor deductive. Thus, the readers view the essay as incoherent. This article is the only one dealing with contrastive rhetoric. I wish more such articles had been included. In "Toward Understanding Coherence: A Response Proposition Taxonomy", the final chapter in this section, McCagg presents a semantic model of coherence that extends the propositional analysis technique often used in prose comprehension studies (see, for example, Connor, 1984; Meyer, 1975) so that "coherence-building inferences may be investigated more satisfactorily" (p. 113).

Of these four articles, McCagg's is the least accessible to readers unfamiliar with discourse studies and techniques. Whereas he presents his argument clearly and makes a strong case, I fear one could not use his taxonomy to analyze a summary without more reading and some guidance. To his credit, however, he does refer readers to more detailed discussions of the technique.

The third section—"Studies of Student Writing"—contains three articles, two of which analyze the writing of Swedish EFL students. Wikborg in "Types of Coherence Breaks in Swedish Student Writing: Misleading Paragraph Division" reports the results of a study which

focuses on the second most common type of coherence break found in the data: misleading paragraph division (confusing physical paragraphs). Evensen, in "Pointers to Superstructure in Student Writing," draws a distinction between local and global coherence, develops a taxonomy for rhetorical pointers to superstructure, and applies that taxonomy to narratives of 11th grade EFL students in Sweden. The final article in this section, Jacobs' "Building Hierarchy: Learning the Language of the Science Domain, Ages 10-13," reports on a study of how children use language to construct a discourse hierarchy appropriate for academic work.

Jacobs' article is especially interesting as it is the only one in the volume to deal with development of cognitive skills and acquisition of academic language. A question not addressed by Jacobs is what role one's language use at home and one's home environment have on acquisition of classroom language (see, for example, Heath, 1983). Surely, a child's first language (personal language) use influences the process of learning the language of school.

The final section—"Pedagogical Approaches"—consists of three articles that focus on practical application of coherence models. Swales, in "Nonnative Speaker Graduate Engineering Students and Their Introductions: Global Coherence and Local Management," presents a process model for teaching research paper introductions. In "Coherence as a Cultural Phenomenon: Employing Ethnographic Principles in the Academic Milieu" Johns suggests "that coherence requires pragmatic competence in a target discourse community" (p. 225). She describes an instructional method, the academic journalog (the learning log), in which students become participant-observers in order to increase their pragmatic competence and understanding of this unfamiliar academic culture and how they fit into it. The last chapter in this section and the volume—"Improving Coherence by Using Computer-Assisted Instruction" by Cerniglia, Medsker, and Connor—describes the development and use of the computer-assisted instructional program STAR (Studying Topical Analysis to Revise) to help students improve coherence. All three articles offer sound advice for classroom practices and stand complete in themselves; that is, readers would not have to do further reading to understand the theoretical bases or concepts presented.

The purpose of the book, as implied in the title and stated in the Introduction by Connor and Johns is not simply to present theory and research findings, but rather "to present important coherence models and to suggest how insights from coherence theory and research can be introduced to the classroom" (p. 2). Closely related to its purpose is the intended audience of the book: "students, teachers, and researchers in the fields of ESL reading and writing" (p. 5). The book is true to its purpose and has much to offer. The reader, however, must have a basic knowledge of linguistics to profit from the

articles, and certain aspects of the book are designed for upper division or graduate students interested in becoming second language teachers.

Only two articles can be classified as purely theoretical (Enkvist's and Lautamatti's), yet all have a theoretical basis. By the same token, most of the articles have implications for teaching and research, some explained in detail and others only implied. For example, the focus of the article by Cerniglia, Medsker, and Connor is discussion of a computer program designed to help students improve coherence in their writing; however, the instructional program is based on topical structure analysis (Lautamatti, 1987) which is based on the theory of functional sentence perspective (Danes, 1974; Firbas, 1982). The authors provide a clear presentation of the theoretical base. On the other hand, the article by Bardovi-Harlig focuses on a model of coherence also based on the theory of functional sentence perspective—the pragmatic value of word order in sentences. Despite this focus, Bardovi-Harlig offers some of the best and most detailed examples of classroom exercises to teach discourse coherence found in this volume. Hinds in his discussion of a common rhetorical pattern found in Asian languages, what he terms "quasi-inductive," does not suggest any ESL classroom applications, yet some come to mind. For example, prediction exercises with ESL students given an introductory paragraph and then predicting what follows could be used in teaching ESL reading writing. Harris suggests a similar activity to improve the reading comprehension skills of students in the sciences.

Several articles suggest taxonomies or typologies for use in research. Here I list only a few: McCagg's taxonomy for studying prose comprehension and summary writing abilities of students; Harris' typology for "organizing sentences" in science textbooks; and Evensen's taxonomy for rhetorical pointers to superstructures. Yet, other chapters are suggestive of research studies. I find especially intriguing Swales' contention that if ESL students can manage global coherence with some skill, even if they overuse global coherence signposts, then their difficulties on the local level may not overly distract or confuse the reader and may perhaps be overlooked. Is this true for other types of writing besides research papers in engineering? Is there a minimum proficiency level with which one must manage local coherence for this to be true?

The inclusion of discussion questions and extension exercises suggests that the editors envision the volume being used as a textbook. This seems appropriate. Typically, the extension exercises differ from the discusison questions in that they ask readers (probably students) to do something related to a concept presented in the chapter. For example, one activity after the chapter by Enkvist is "...Review what Enkvist says about metamessages of writing and analyze the last piece of mail you received for metamessages in it" (p. 28). An extension

exercise may also ask the reader to develop an ESL lesson to teach a particular point or concept presented in the article. In addition, the editors use both the discussion questions and the extension exercises to refer to important literature in the fields of first and second language reading and writing and to draw connections between articles in the volume. For example, after the chapter by Evensen one question is "Compare Evensen's superstructure pointer taxonomy to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesion..." After the chapter by Lautamatti, readers are asked to compare her "cognitive frame" with "schemata (see Tannen's work [1979]) in first language research framework and Carrell's (1985) work in the second language context" (p. 40).

The questions and exercises at the end of the chapters also make explicit the complementary nature of the articles in the volume. I give one example: "Compare the Wikborg discussion with the chapter by Harris on organizing sentences." If this volume were used as a textbook, instructors would need to present background information and in some cases students would need to read some of the literature cited in the articles or in the questions and tasks at the end of the chapters before reading and discussing the article and applying the concepts presented. The number and diversity of questions and exercises allow instructors to choose the most appropriate ones for their students and are suggestive of the type of activities and discussions possible. Even seasoned teachers and resarchers will find the questions and exercises thought-provoking, certainly not distracting. The references to related first and second language research are especially useful to readers not well-versed in studies of coherence.

In the introductions and in all the chapters, the complexity and difficulty of defining and pinning down what constitutes coherence is evident. Its complexity necessitates viewing, studying, and teaching coherence from diverse perspectives. Connor and Johns were wise in their choices of purpose, title, and articles. This volume helps demystify the concept of coherence and should spark interest in studying and teaching it. It is, however, unfortunate that these proceedings from a 1986 colloquium did not appear earlier than spring, 1990. TESOL is to be applauded for publishing this volume but admonished for not doing so in a more timely fashion. ■

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REVIEW

Roles of Teachers and Learners

Tony Wright. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987. Pp. xi + 164.

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Roles of Teachers and Learners is a volume in *Language Teaching:* A Scheme for Teacher Education, a series edited by C. N. Candlin and H. G. Widdowson. Like the other volumes in this series, it is divided into three sections. Section one, "Teaching and Learning as Social Activities," grounds the text in the theoretical issues relevant to the topic of teacher and learner roles and thus focuses on explanation. Section two, "Teacher and Learner Roles in the Classroom," demonstrates how the theoretical principles relate to classroom activities, and section three, "Investigating Teacher and Learner Roles," encourages the reader to combine actual teaching practice and action research in the classroom, based on the tasks of section two. Again, like all the other volumes in the series, the book combines text and task, with the goal of engaging "...the reader in a principled enquiry into ideas and practices" (p. xi).

Section one begins by asking "What is a role?" and then proceeds to explain what people do, how they talk, and what is expected of them, using the role of pilot to illustrate the various points. Readers are then asked to engage in a task in which they begin to develop for themselves the nature of teacher and learner roles, based on the previous discussion of a pilot's role. Thus, readers are asked to "Make a list of all the people with whom a teacher and a learner may have contact in the establishment where you work. Make a second list of the people outside the school itself who influence the behavior of teachers and learners" (p. 7). From these lists, readers draw networks of interaction and their hierarchies, thus discovering for themselves the most direct influences on the behavior of teachers and learners. This focus on doing and discovering permeates the book. Even the explication of theory in section one is reinforced by activities that guide readers to understanding. At no time are readers passive; they are active participants in a learning discovery process. This makes the use of the term *reader* somewhat of a misnomer when talking about the audience of this textbook. Clearly, a passive reader will

not learn from this book. The reader must become an actively engaged doer. However, for convenience and lack of a more descriptive term, I will continue to refer to the actively engaged doer as reader.

The remainder of section one deals with the factors that influence teacher and learner roles. Wright, taking the position that teacher and learner roles are socially constructed, examines important issues such as power, duties and obligations, values, attitudes, personality, motivation, and group processes. This section covers a wide range of theory from a wide range of disciplines, including second language acquisition and social psychology. The author examines, for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968), integrative versus instrumental motivation, small group communication patterns, and ways teachers manage knowledge. At times the relationship between the concept and the disciplinary history from which it comes is overlooked or at least treated superficially. For example, in the discussion of integrative versus instrumental motivation the author states rather baldly, "Major studies have found that people are either integratively or instrumentally motivated towards learning a foreign language" (p. 30). The only reference given for the reader to be able to explore further is Giles and Byrne (1982), "...who cast doubt on the instrumental/integrative distinction but still acknowledge the importance of positive attitudes towards the L2 community as well as the instrumental aspect of motivation" (p. 31). While this lack of constant reference to other sources makes for a very readable text, most students in a teacher education program will need a teacher to work with them through some of the concepts and research findings.

Section two, "Teacher and Learner Roles in the Classroom" demonstrates how both roles are played out in the classroom and how they are portrayed in ESL materials. The section is divided between teacher roles (titled "Teaching Tasks and Teaching Strategies") and learner roles (titled "Language Learning Tasks and Activities"). Teacher roles includes "Teaching Style" (3.1), "Instructional Tasks and Learning Activities" (3.2), and "Instructional Materials and Resources" (3.3). "Teaching Style" takes up many of the issues raised in section one, such as motivation, organization of groups, and attitudes and beliefs. Many of the tasks present a quotation from a published text in ESL teacher education and then ask the reader to evaluate the excerpt by responding to statements such as "The teacher's most important task is to impart knowledge. The author assumes that teachers have full authority and power in the classroom" (Task 27, p. 52). One valuable task in this section (Task 35) asks readers to examine two lesson plans taken from teacher education textbooks, determine which teacher has a tendency towards transmission and which has a tendency towards interpretation. Readers must support their decision with evidence from the lesson plans.

The second way in which teacher roles are played out in the classroom is through instructional tasks and strategies, the choice of which is, of course, somewhat determined by teaching styles; however, it is also affected by materials, subject matter, and outside influences such as prescriptions of school administraators (p. 69). After presenting a number of instructional modes (lecture, elicitation, evaluation, and lockstep), the author invites readers to examine the appropriacy of these modes for teaching particular language skills, such as grammar and pronunciation (Task 37, p. 71). Although Wright does not make value judgments concerning these instructional modes as he presents them, in the following section, he shows his own preferred instructional mode. In "An Alternative: Inquiry-Centred Learning," Wright states that the modes previously outlined

> ...are favoured by the transmission teacher. An alternative is inquiry-centred learning...The teacher is primarily a facilitator, setting up tasks and providing the instructional materials...In inquiry-centred learning the process of learning is seen to be as important as the content of learning. (p. 72)

This view also perceives learners as contributors, not blank slates, who bring with them a wealth of cultural and linguistic resources, a range of cognitive abilities, and varied ideas and beliefs. It is just such inquiry-centred learning that Wright himself is implementing in the organization of this textbook. This alternative view of instruction is one being advocated in a number of different areas of ESL pedagogy: the emphasis on the process of composition, as opposed to the finished product (see, for example, Raimes, 1987); the learner-centred curriculum (see, for example, Nunan, 1988); and the Whole Language Approach (see, for example, Goodman, 1986).

The book next undertakes an evaluation of materials and resources, an extremely valuable enterprise for both prospective teachers and practicing teachers. The text, through its tasks, invites the reader to reassess the place of materials in language learning. The tasks and explanations include excerpts from many well-known ESL textbooks. One section focuses on the type of knowledge the textbook excerpt equates with language study. Wright includes a complete range of types, from the view that language study is the study of structures, to the view that language is problem solving. Although only textbooks are dealt with in detail, one task (44) asks readers what alternative media such as the language laboratory, video, and so forth, contribute to the language learning process.

Section two then moves the focus to the learner ("Language Learning Tasks and Activities"). By focusing equally on learners, readers are asked to reexamine any preconceived notions they might have about the passive nature of learning in contrast to the active nature of teaching. For Wright, classroom language learning is a cooperative

endeavor, one in which the learner can also have control. Thus, in Task 47, readers are asked to examine two activities in terms of the following questions:

> Can the learner decide what the topic or subject matter is?
> Can the learner do the activity at his/her own pace?
> Can the learner stop the activity at any time?
> Is the activity open-ended in terms of its outcomes? (p. 105)

This section also investigates classroom climate and communication patterns. The next section on the topic of learner classroom roles examines the individual learner: his/her personality, stages of personal and cognitive development, and learning styles and strategies. As in other parts of section two, actual ESL materials are used as illustration and source materials for tasks. Each section concludes with a valuable summary of the section.

Section three, "Investigating Teacher and Learner Roles," invites readers to examine actual classrooms and experiment with different materials, tasks, and strategies to create different roles. Many of the tasks, unfortunately, work best if the reader is an already practicing teacher. While some do include observation, they focus on colleagues' observing each other's classes, working through the task, and then determining a course of action to alter any patterns that might be changed. Others ask the reader to evaluate his/her own experimentation with different strategies or materials. Task 59, for example, asks the reader "To set up new modes of classroom organization and to evaluate their effects on learner roles" (p. 59). These activities provide wonderful opportunities for teachers, both new and experienced, to examine their teaching practices in the light of what they have learned about teacher and learner roles. However, in teacher education programs, we may have to alter our traditional teaching practice if we are to gain the full benefit of the ideas in this book. Indeed, I think it is time we reexamined our own practice of assigning student teachers to classes for observation and teaching practice. Richards and Crookes in a 1988 *TESOL Quarterly* article surveyed institutions offering MAs in TESL and found that not all even include a teaching practicum in their program. They called for the inclusion of a practicum, in all programs, and one that included *supervised* teaching practice. Wright, in this text, goes still further, implicitly calling for inquiry-centred teacher education programs, ones in which prospective teachers can explore, investigate, experiment, and thereby learn about the roles of teaching and learning.

I have successfully used this text in an ESL teaching practicum. However, I have had to adapt many of the tasks in section three to fit the more traditional model of observation and teaching practice, where students work with a practicing ESL teacher, but must take guidance and instruction from that teacher since we are imposing

on that teacher and relying on his/her goodwill. I believe it is time our practice teaching was less ad hoc. I would suggest that we teacher educators need to collaborate more with colleagues teaching ESL so that they might work through tasks such as in Wright's book with our students as partners. I also suggest that teacher educators should work through many of these tasks in their own classrooms, and thereby open to inspection the roles of teachers and learners in graduate programs. In these ways, we shall all learn and become more effective teachers and learners. ■

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