A STUDY ON STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF COHERENCE AND ITS USE IN ESSAYS WRITTEN BY STUDENTS AT QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. This study examines the topic of coherence. The participants were university students majoring in English at Quang Binh University. Data were collected from the questionnaires to the students and from their written essays. The students surveyed were aware of the importance of coherence in writing but their writings show that they had difficulties in using techniques to achieve coherence in their essays. Based on the study’s findings, suggestions were given to both students and students of English regarding teaching and learning how to write coherent essays.

1. Introduction

Writing is an important productive skill in language learning. It can objectively reflect students' competence of thinking, organizing and expressing. In English teaching, writing is considered as a difficult knot for both teachers and students. A number of English majors in Vietnam in general and at Quang Binh University in particular, at present, cannot write coherent essays even if they have acquired a large number of vocabularies, studied a lot about English grammar and essay format.

If in sentence writing, grammar and vocabulary are the most noticeable problem, a lack of clear thesis statement, inadequate supports or evidences to support and control the thesis statement, a lack of unity in essay ideas and organization, a lack of coherence among essay components and so on are major problems confronted in essay writing. It is thus important to examine how students at university perceive and use coherence in essay writing. This article reports a study carried out at Quang Binh University with the objectives to investigate students' perceptions of coherence in essays and the ways they employed coherence in their essays. More specifically, the research aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of coherence in essays?
2. How do they employ coherence in their essays?

2. Coherence in Essays

“Co” is a Latin prefix that means “together” or “with”. The verb “cohere” means “hold together”. In order to achieve coherence in writing, the movement from one
sentence to the next (and in essay, from one paragraph to the next) must be no sudden jumps. Each sentence should flow smoothly into the next one. Coherence contributes to the unity of a piece of discourse such that the individual sentences or utterances hand together and relate to each other. That means, for any text or discourse to be coherent, it must make sense and also have unity and so be well-informed.

In language teaching, coherence is a component of the writing skill which plays a crucial part in writing quality. Hatch (1992, p. 32) said, “Without coherence, a text is not properly a text”. Although coherence has been accorded the increasing interest by the teachers and researchers around the world such as Van Dijk (1997), Enkvist (1990), Witt and Faigley (1981), it is still an illusive concept. Therefore, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the concept of coherence.

According to Palmer (1999, p. 54), coherence refers to the rhetorical devices, the ways of writing and speaking that bring about order and unity and emphasis”. In fact, the notion of discourse is closely related to the notions of logicality and relevance, hence any texts lacking of logicality and relevance will be incoherent, thus, it will be difficult or even impossible for the readers to understand.

Together with cohesion, coherence is seen as a component of the writing skill which plays a crucial part in writing quality. If cohesion denotes the ways sentences and parts of sentences combine in order to build a complete text, coherence, according to Palmer (1999, p.61), “refers to the rhetorical devices, to ways of writing and speaking that bring about order and unity and emphasis.” Due to the necessity of coherence in discourse, a number of linguists and researchers spent time and efforts conducting studies this issue. Yule (1996, p.106) denotes that the key to concept of coherence is not something which exists in people. It is the people who make “sense” of what they read and hear.

**Ways to achieve coherence**

There are several ways to achieve coherence in writing. Repetition of key nouns is an important technique for gaining coherence. Another way is using consistent pronouns. Oshima and Hogue (2006, p. 42) remark that when we use pronouns instead of key nouns, we should be sure to use the same person and number throughout the paragraph… Also, it is important to repeat a key noun instead of using a pronoun when the meaning is not clear. The third way is using transition signals. In Oshima and Hogue's theory (2006, p.43-47), transition signals are words such as first, second, next, finally, therefore, and however, or phrases such as in conclusion, on the other hand, and as a result. Transition signals are traffic signs that tell your reader when to go forward, turn, slow down, and stop. Transition signals tell the reader when a writer is giving a similar idea (similarly, moreover, furthermore, in addition), an opposite idea (on the other hand, however, in contrast), an example (for example), a result (as a result), or a
conclusion (in conclusion. Logical Order can be achieved by chronological order, for example, story telling in narrative essays; Spatial Order with details are arranged as they appear across space, such as top to bottom, front to back, left to right, or near to far; and Progressive Order with details arranged from the least to the most, or from the most to the least important, interesting, compelling, surprising, etc.

In Vietnam, a number of linguists and researchers have made great contributions to the study of discourse analysis. Nguyen Thien Giap (2000) mentions a set of different aspects as context and semantics, information structures, especially discourse and discourse analysis. He particularly emphasizes the necessity of coherence and cohesion in creating a clear and comprehensible discourse/text. Do Huu Chau (2001) points out some of the communicative factors deciding the successful communication, they are situational context, language and its varieties, and discourse. He also defines discourse as a continuous stretch of talk, normally larger than an utterance to make the conversation a coherent unit. Together with these theoretical studies relating to discourse and discourse analysis, some practical ones on this topic have been conducted so far, such as the doctoral dissertation “Phương tiện liên kết phát ngôn - Đối chiếu ngữ liệu Anh - Việt” by Phan Van Hoa (1998) and the master thesis “An Analysis of Coherence and Cohesion and a Contrastive Analysis of Lexical Cohesive Devices in English and Vietnamese” by Phuong To Tam (2003).

Although several studies which analyze cohesion and coherence have been carried out, there is no evidence that any researchers have conducted a study relating to coherence in essay writings made by English major students of a Vietnamese University as this study aims to explore. Therefore, in this dissertation, the matter of coherence in essay writing is taken into consideration with the aim at helping English majors create their own writing products coherently; as a result, improve their academic essay writing.

3. Research Methodology

100 third-year English major students studying at Quang Binh University participated in the study. The reasons for choosing them were based on their psychological age, the length of their English learning, their competence in English as a foreign language, and the subject they were learning. Their age ranged from 29 to 22, because they shared nearly the same ways of thinking, it is easier for us to generate ideas during the process of collecting data. The students all had two years taking part in the tertiary course for students majoring in English at the university. The students’ competence in English was approximately upper-intermediate. They were currently studying writing subject at essay level - the highest level of academic writing they have to study in their tertiary course.

An instrument for the study was the essay examination. This form was used to examine 40 essays written by English majors during the course. In addition,
questionnaires and interviews were used as instruments for this study. Only data from the questionnaire and students’ writing are reported in this paper.

The questionnaires with the total of 14 closed and open-ended questions written in English with careful and clear instructions as well as guidance to make sure that the respondents could easily understand and give appropriate answers to the questions were carefully prepared and delivered to 100 third year English majors randomly because the total students of this course is 126.

For coherence analysis of essays, 40 essays written by English majors at Quang Binh University were holistically and analytically evaluated. The holistic form of evaluation is based on the researcher’s general evaluation of the students’ writing while the analytical form of evaluation is grounded on a set of criteria, that is, Grice’s (1975) maxims of relation, quantity, and manner as a quantifiable, objective measure of text coherence. According to this co-operative principle, language is interpreted on the assumption that its senders is obeying four maxims to achieve successful communication, then they should be true (the maxim of quality), brief (the maxim of quantity), relevant (the maxim of relevance), and clear (the maxim of manner).

4. Results

4.1. Data from the questionnaires

Students’ perceptions of coherence in essays

The following figure shows students’ perception of coherence in essay writing. The data were collected from the questionnaire to students.

![Fig. 1.1. Students’ perceptions of the importance of coherence in essay writing](image)

Fig. 1.1 shows that most of English majors at Quang Binh University are aware of the importance of coherence in essay writing (93%). Among 93% of the students agreed that coherence is of importance in essay writing, 70% of them thought that it is very important and the rest 23% also considered this discoursal element important, but
not so important that they had to take most of the time to concentrate on. The remaining (7.0%) admitted the fact that coherence is important; however, their attitude towards it is not as high as the former group.

Apparently, students’ perception of coherence revealed that this discoursal device played an important part in essay writing. However, their explanation to their choices was quite different from each other, as showed in Fig. 1.2.

![Fig. 1.2. Students’ explanation to the importance of coherence in essay writing](image)

It is clear that a text without coherence is just like a group of isolated sentences with no relationship to one another. If cohesion denotes the way sentences and parts of sentences combine with one another to ensure some propositional development in a written or spoken discourse (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), coherence refers to ways of writing and speaking that bring about order and unity and emphasis (Palmer, 1999). When asked why coherence is an important factor in essay writing, most of the respondents had more than one choices of answer, even some of them chose four of five out of six items given, which makes the rate exceed 100%. As can be seen in the Fig. 1.2, 58 out of 100 respondents showed their awareness of the importance of this “rhetorical device” (Palmer, 1999, p. 54) by giving their own ideas that coherence helps the essays make sense to every reader, 48 and 43 respondents, shared their opinions that coherence helps connect ideas in an essay and makes the ideas relevant to the thesis statement respectively. In addition, 32 turns of the respondents said that if they followed the ways to achieve coherence, the ideas in their essays would be presented in a logical order. Since coherence refers mainly to the ways of combining or joining ideas to make a piece of writing clear, logical and smooth rather than the rules of using grammatical structures vocabulary, it seemed to the researcher that the English major students at Quang Binh University could distinguish these two separated categories. It was illustrated by the choice of only 7 out of 100 respondents to the third item given, that is, coherence helps show the correctness of word choice and grammatical structures.
Students’ ways to achieve coherence was also investigated. Data from the questionnaire are presented in the following table.

**Table 1.1. Students’ ways to achieve coherence in essay writing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Students’ choice (N = 100)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Proper order</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Transition words/phrases</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Repetition of a key term</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Consistent pronouns</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Parallel structures</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The issues presented in the table were examined closely based on the essays written by students.

**4.2. Data from students’ writings**

In terms of evaluating coherence used by students in their essays, the researcher took a top-down approach to writing by paying more attention to the content, the organization, and the structure of the written text rather than the linguistic forms. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p. 122), “The top-down processing of a text recruits the reader’s background knowledge of both content and text genre, and his/her expectations and experience, and applies them to the interpretation of the text, as the reader moves along from one section to the next, within the text.” Where possible, incidences in which students used the techniques to achieve coherence whether appropriately or inappropriately were synthesized and presented in figures (see Table 1.2).

**4.3. Proper order**

An essay is usually a short piece of nonfiction writing that is often written from the author's personal point of view. It is an organized collection of ideas that are written in a proper essay format. All essays have beginnings, middles, and endings and are built around a central idea, usually referred to as a thesis. Most essays consist of at least three paragraphs, long enough to discuss, argue or prove the main idea of the essay. The controlling ideas must be arranged logically so as to support the thesis statement. Whenever the ideas in the essay flow smoothly from one to another, coherence is established. Since all the parts of the essay are not necessarily of equal importance in explaining or clarifying the thesis statement, it is necessary to know how to arrange them as suitably as they should be. Depending on different types of essay, different types of order are applied so that the supporting paragraphs are arranged in proper way, such as chronological order, spatial order and progressive. Followed are data from students’ writing.
(1) Cell phone has a lot of advantages that attract the use of people worldwide. **First**, it helps us in daily communication even in long or far distance. **Next**, it make searching Internet, sending or receiving email become quicker and easier. And **finally**, it can be a means of entertainment with a lot of interesting game.

(Student’s writing)

In order to make this introduction flow smoothly in the chronological order, some common time order words were used, such as “first”, “next”, and “finally”. With these words, the readers are easy to catch up with the main points that will be presented in detail.

(2) In today’s modern world, people can have access to highly advanced technological devices. The invention of cell phones has met the increasingly high demands of people in communication and other services. Cell phones have changed our lives, and since its appearance, cell phones have brought to man both advantages and disadvantage.

(Student’s writing)

This sample paragraph looks good since it reveals the proper spatial order. The overall introduction of highly advanced technology was initially focused, and then, cell phone, the key term of the essay, was described. Therefore, the readers can imagine how the essay should go.

(3) **The first and the most important reason** is that cell phone can be used almost everywhere without cables or electricity. …. **A further reason** of using cell phone is that you can keep in touch with other people easily and quickly….. **The final reason** that most people use cell phone is due to its convenience in entertainment…………

(Student’s writing)

The example above is an illustration for arranging ideas in the order of importance. Thanks to the transitional expressions like “the first and the most important reason”, “a further reason”, “the final reason”, it is completely easy for the readers to understand what the most and the least important reason of using the cell phone is.

4.4. Transition words/phrases

This is an example of a good paragraph in one essay written by an English major at Quang Binh University which contains the elements of transitions to make it coherent.

(4) The first and the most important reason of using cell phones is (that)
they can be used almost everywhere else. **By using a cell phone**, you can communicate with anyone whenever you want and wherever you are. **Besides**, if there is an emergency situation, cell phones can also be useful. **Furthermore**, you can get access to the Internet to get every information you need with only a small device as a cell phone. **In addition to this**, nowadays, the world’s most common means of communication is SMS. Cell phones, certainly, include this system. **Therefore, in this way**, you can communicate with others more cheaply than by normal callings. It is the reason why most of the students always consider this feature before making a final decision to buy a cell phone.

( *Student's writing* )

From this paragraph, its topic sentence focuses mainly on one out of two most important advantages mentioned in the whole essay, not any other ideas. For its coherence, its supporting sentences are in logical order since the writer in turn listed out the usefulness of using a cell phone in daily communication, in emergency situations and in SMS. Besides, its ideas are connected by the use of appropriate transition words and phrases, i.e. by using a cell phone, besides, furthermore, in addition to this, therefore, and in this way. Therefore, this paragraph is easy to read and to understand.

Below is an example of a paragraph without any elements of coherence:

(5) The first and the most important reason of using cell phones is (that) they can be used almost everywhere else. You can communicate with anyone whenever you want and wherever you are. If there is an emergency situation, cell phones can also be useful. You can get access to the Internet to get every information you need with only a small device as a cell phone. Nowadays, the world’s most common means of communication is SMS. Cell phones, certainly, include this system. You can communicate with others more cheaply than by normal callings. It is the reason why most of the students always consider this feature before making a final decision to buy a cell phone.

( *Student's writing* )

The paragraph above is, somewhat, incoherent due to the lack of proper transitions. Although the topic sentence is clear-cut since it focuses only on one advantage out of the two mentioned in the essay, the supporting ideas do not contain any signs of connecting. Therefore, the sentences are disconnected from each other, making it difficult for the readers to follow the writer’s train of thought.

Since achieving coherence through transitional words and phrases such as *in addition, however, moreover, although, and first/ second/ third*... seem to be easy to construct and link sentences as well as paragraphs, students tend to take advantage of
using this device as a way to make their essay coherent. However, unlike the native students, the use of transitions was problematic for non-native students due to their misuse or overuse of this device. Example (6) is an illustration for the student’ misuse or overuse of transition words and phrases to connect sentences in paragraphs and paragraphs in the essay.

(6) Cell phone is one of the most positively viewed inventions in the technological era. It, however, brings us both advantages and disadvantages.

Firstly, cell phone helps us communicate everyone more easily. For instance, we can talk with everyone who stays everywhere we like. Or we may make a call in order to solve some work, such as arranging a meeting, canceling a meeting, informing news, etc. Secondly, cell phone is really convenient in traveling and in emergency situations. Young people can not imagine their life without cell phone. They can carry a mobile phone with them, so they will not miss any important calls. It keeps them in constant contact with other important people. Or if we are in accident, we can call a policeman or an ambulance and if the phone has a camera, we can takes pictures of the accident. If we get lost, we can call for directions. Next, we can use cell phone to search any information from the internet we like. Therefore, we can hold the world in our hand.

The last advantage is that we can enjoy ourselves with the cell phone by listening to favorite music, watching film, reading newspaper, taking photos or playing games.

Besides these above advantages, using cell phone also brings us some disadvantages. When using a cell phone, people spend less time with their family and friends because they only communicate to everyone on phone, not face to face. They even send a message to congratulate or condole someone. Thus, they become lazy in meeting others. The second disadvantage is that using cell phone regularly affects people’s health. If we spend a lot of time for our mobile, we will be stressful, sore eyes and get other dangerous symptoms.

No doubt, cell phones make our life more convenient. But, we should use them suitably so that we can avoid their disadvantages.

(Student’s writing)

The introductory paragraph looked good when it comprised the general statement, then a short but adequate thesis statement which presented two main subtopics, i.e. the advantages and the disadvantages of using cell phone. In this essay, the student’s overuse of transitional device makes some of the ideas presented rather
illogically and incoherently. With the thesis statement in this essay above, the body paragraphs should comprise two main supporting ideas, one is the advantages and another is the disadvantages, and the topic sentence of each paragraph should be introduced at the beginning, the supporting sentences are followed with the transition words and phrases such as firstly, secondly, next, and the last advantage/disadvantage to support the main topic discussed. In this essay, despite using transition words and phrases, the first paragraph talking about the advantage of using cell phone which did not look good since some supporting sentences did not come along with the subtopic presented in the thesis statement, and the paragraph itself lacked of the topic sentence, for example:

(7) *Secondly*, cell phone is really convenient in traveling and in emergency situations. Young people can not imagine their life without cell phone.

*(Student’s writing)*

With the transition word *secondly*, the writer aimed at introducing one more advantage of the cell phone, that is the convenience of cell phone in traveling and emergency situation, however, the detailed illustration followed, *young people can not imagine their life without cell phone* did not have any relation with the preceding idea. Furthermore, the transition phrase “besides + noun/noun phrase” is often used to repeat what has just been discussed in the first paragraph before continuing to discuss another idea in the same category, example:

(8) *Besides improving communication*, personal computer has made it possible to do business from home.

*(Oshima and Hogue, 1997: 124)*

Here, the author used this transition phrase as an addition at the beginning of the second paragraph to show another positive idea about personal computer with the aim at repeating the first topic (Communication) to link the two paragraphs even further, not for the purpose of giving a contrast or opposite idea, as shown in the student’s essay.

(9) *Besides these above advantages*, using cell phone also brings us some disadvantages.

*(Student’s writing)*

It can be seen from examples (8) and (9) that unlike the native writers of English, Vietnamese students tended to link ideas between paragraphs in Vietnamese. Instead of using the transition word *besides* to give an additional idea which means “ngoài ra”, Vietnamese students use it as “bên cạnh” to show the contrast or opposition of the ideas. Similarly, the misuse of the connector “*but*” in the concluding sentence also illustrated the fact that some English major students in Vietnam in general and in Quang Binh
University often write Vietnamese-like English essays.

(10) **No doubt**, cell phones make our life more convenient. **But**, we should use them suitably so that we can avoid their disadvantages.

(Student’s writing)

In short, using transitional words and phrases is one of the most common ways to link parts of a whole to make a complete piece of writing, i.e. an essay. With the words such as “in addition”, “however”, “moreover”, “although” and “first/second/third”..., the related thoughts will be connected more tightly together and their relationship will be shown more clearly, as a result, the coherence of the essay will be achieved more easily.

4.5. **Other techniques to achieve coherence**: repetition of key terms, consistent pronouns, and parallel structures.

As mentioned earlier in this part, incidences in which the students participating in this study used techniques to achieve coherence in their essays were recorded by the researcher. The three techniques which emerged with countable figures are: repetition of key terms, consistent pronouns, and parallel structures. The findings are presented in the following table:

**Table 1.2. Techniques to achieve coherence used by students in essays**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Appropriate use</th>
<th>Inappropriate use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incidence</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition of key terms</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent pronouns</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel structures</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Together with proper order and transition words/phrases, repetition of key terms is one of the most common ways to achieve coherence in essay writing. And it is commonly used by English majors. This is because repeating words is of importance to the sense of each paragraph’s message and the whole essay’s as well.

As shown in Table 1.2, students’ using the repetition of key terms occured with 459 instances of appropriate use (98.3%) and only 8 inappropriate uses (1.7%). The data suggest the common use of this technique to make the essay as coherent as it needs to be.

The following example taken from students’ writing is a typical illustration.

(11) Nowadays, many people hold the opinion that **cell phones** have made life easier and more convenient, but some others say that **cell**
phones have made life more complex and stressful. In my own opinion, cell phones have brought us both advantages and disadvantages.

(Student’s writing)

The word cell phone was repeated three times in the above sample excerpt since it was the key term in the text.

It is obvious that in writing, repeating key terms can help tie together the flow of the writer’s thoughts. However, when repetition is used inappropriately, the text will certainly become boring, monotonous and less academic, since it is the fact that when everything is emphasized, no emphasis is achieved, as in example 12 which was taken from the students’ essay below:

(12) Cell phones have made communication easier and more convenient. In fact, cell phones are now the most efficient way of communication. Most of us use cell phones for daily conversations. Moreover, with the help of cell phones, booking a ticket, arranging a trip or calling an ambulance, etc… can be done in a few seconds. Cell phones, therefore, save us so much time and energy.

(Student’s writing)

It can be seen from the above excerpt that the words cell phones appeared in almost every sentence. The repetition of this word so many times made the excerpt sound clumsy. It will be better if this example can be rewritten with the use of the equivalent pronoun or noun phrase as follows:

(13) Cell phones have made communication easier and more convenient. In fact, they are now the most efficient way of communication. Most of us use this device for daily conversations. Moreover, with the help of cell phones, booking a ticket, arranging a trip or calling an ambulance, etc… can be done in a few seconds. Cell phones, therefore, save us so much time and energy.

(Student’s writing)

In short, repetition of key terms is one of the lexical devices which have a great contribution to the creation of cohesive and coherent text with precision, unambiguity and tightness. Thus, the repeated words should not be too much or too little, that means appropriate use of repetition is of necessity in essay writing if the writers want their text coherent and unified. Repetition adds nothing on the sense of the paragraphs rather than pulling thoughts together more effectively.

The students’ essays also displayed their successful use of pronouns. Surprisingly, 95.7% of the incidences were successfully used and only a small
percentage was not (4.3%). In addition, all the incidences with the use of parallel structures were appropriate (100%) (see Table 1.2).

Followed is an example illustrating the appropriate use of personal pronouns and possessive ones.

(14) Thanks to the development of science and technology, the rhythm of life is increasingly rapid. Cell phones are an example. They are now designed as a pocket computer with a lot of functions such as camera, chatting, searching webs, video calls and so on. Thus, they give people more convenient access as well as useful information and services.

(Student’s writing)

By using the pronoun they, the writer maintained the relationship between the sentences in the paragraph without having to repeat the key terms again. However, there were examples in which the students were not successful in using pronouns to achieve coherence. When the use of personal or possessive pronouns are not clear, it might result in the possibility of misunderstanding by the readers. The following example taken from student’s writing is an illustration of the stated problem.

(15) The last advantage that cell phones can offer people is that they provide them with lots of extra useful functions. Most cell phones have a calculator, a phone book, a music player, an alarm clock, etc...They are necessary for them to both work and entertain.

(Student’s writing)

As shown in Table 1.2, in the essays collected for the current study, the students used parallelism successfully to achieve coherence. The following extract taken from one of the students’ essays is a typical example of using parallelism appropriately:

(16) Cell phones have a number of different functions including, helping people in daily communication, entertaining them with games, camera, music and radio, providing them with Internet services, alarming them every morning, and making notes of important dates or work for them to remember.

(Student’s writing)

5. Conclusion and implications

Coherence, together with cohesion, is seen as the most important term in discourse analysis and text linguistics, since it is a rhetorical device that brings about order and unity and emphasis (Palmer, 1999). Data from the questionnaires show that students perceive the importance of coherence in essay writing but find it difficult to use cohesive devices to make their written products coherent.
The finding obtained from student’s written products reveal that although students liked to use transitional words/phrase in connecting ideas in each paragraph and the whole essays, their use of these linking words was sometimes not appropriate, i.e. misuse or overuse. The excessive use of repetition of key terms as a technique to achieve coherence in the process of writing essay was the second problem found in some of the students’ essays. This is due to the fact that they did not realize the close relationship between ideas in a piece of writing and/or they were influenced by the interference of their mother tongue. This transfer of the mother tongue language in writing was resulted from the limited command of coherence, and the failure in using such devices mentioned, certainly, made the students’ essays long, clumsy, unnatural and incoherent.

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are made to English majors and teachers of English.

**For English majors**

Normally, English majors little consider the readers’ needs because they are not “readers” themselves, hence, they do not often take a global view of their work, i.e. revising their whole essays before submitting their essays to the teacher as finished products. This often leads to the incoherent text unexpectedly. Therefore, first and foremost, students should have a deep theoretical insight in a good piece of writing in which coherence should be ranged great emphasis. It is necessary that students know how to organize ideas in such logical way that can be acceptable by the English readers. Furthermore, it is the students who must be master as many techniques as possible and use them properly and flexibly in their writing to achieve coherence. Simultaneously, high awareness of the relevant use, meaning and form of cohesive devices should be paid attention to so as not avoid misusing or overusing.

Among the causes leading to the failure of students in gaining a coherent text, the influence of the mother tongue is a major one. Thus, in order to minimize this kind of phenomenon, the students should be put in the English learning environment where they have a habit of thinking and writing everything, even a simple sentence, in English.

Together with their concentration on the theoretical knowledge concerning discourse, particularly in essays, students should build the habit of reading books, magazines and newspapers frequently in order to accumulate knowledge for the subject of writing and other as well. This work, in fact, helps the students enrich the vocabulary and grammatical knowledge as well as learn the style and the use of language of different types of writing for the improvement of their own writing skill.

**For Teachers of English:**

Teachers should use a variety of exercises to help students realize the importance
of coherence and build a habit of considering coherence as a matter to be taken notice of whenever they write a paragraph or an essay. For instance, teachers can give students a list of sentences that are statements of a paragraph and ask them to arrange these sentences in the most logical way; then ask them to add more additional ideas for each of the main ones given before putting creating a logical paragraph. This activity will require coherence considerations, so that with the difference of passages collected from the students, the question of coherence will be concentrated on.

Future study should investigate either coherent devices in Vietnamese are transferred into essays in English.

References


