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TOPICAL STRUCTURE ANALYSIS AS BASIS FOR EVALUATING
COHERENCE IN STUDENT WRITING AND FOR DEVELOPING
SELF-LEARNING MATERIALS TO TEACH COHERENCE IN
WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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Oscar C. Veluz

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ABSTRACT

TOPICAL STRUCTURE ANALYSIS AS BASIS FOR EVALUATING COHERENCE IN STUDENT WRITING AND FOR DEVELOPING SELF-LEARNING MATERIALS TO TEACH COHERENCE IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE

Statement of the Problem

The dissertation is a study of discourse coherence in student compositions of Filipino freshmen college students in the school of education of Southern Luzon Polytechnic College in Quezon Province. It investigated whether the knowledge of topical structure would improve coherence in the written discourse of students at SLPC. Specifically, the study aimed

1.1 to use topical structure analysis as basis for developing coherence profiles of 40 undergraduate students of the school of education of Southern Luzon Polytechnic College;

1.2 to use self-learning materials focusing on topical structure to teach coherence in written discourse; and

1.3 to use global evaluation of student writing as basis for determining whether topical structure analysis is a valid way of evaluating discourse coherence.

Objectives of the Study

This description-and-treatment study aimed:



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2.1 to prepare coherence profiles of 40 students of Southern Luzon Polytechnic College, using topical structure analysis of students' pre-test essays;

2.2 to prepare and use a set of self-learning materials which focus on topical structure;

2.3 to prepare coherence profiles of 40 students of BLPC after the use of self-learning materials; and

2.4 to compare the pre- and post-test coherence profiles of the students.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the topical structure features of freshmen college students' paragraphs before and after use of self-learning materials in terms of:

- (a) number of T-units
- (b) sentence types
- (c) topical depth
- (d) topical progression
- (e) lexical items as topical subjects

2. Self-learning materials focusing on topical structure are not effective in teaching coherence in written discourse.

3. The global evaluation and the topical structure analysis of students' paragraphs are not congruent.



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Methodology

This description-and-treatment study used a one-group pre-test post-test design with the self-learning materials as treatment. Its main objective was to investigate the use of topical structure analysis as basis for evaluating coherence in writing and for developing self-learning materials to teach coherence in the written discourse of students.

The study involved writing paragraphs by one Freshman English class composed of 40 first-year education students. To carry out its main objective, it presented two sets of coherence profiles: the first as basis for evaluating coherence in student writing and for developing self-learning lessons to enable students to improve their own writing; and the second as basis for evaluating improvement after use of these self-learning materials.

The self-learning materials covered 12 lessons, each lesson equivalent to a half-hour session. Use of the materials was controlled to an extent by the researcher's presence in class when the students studied them.

The development of coherence profiles was based on topical structure analysis of the paragraphs. The first set was derived from the analysis of the paragraphs written during the first writing session (for evaluating student writing) and the second set during the second



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writing session (for evaluating improvement in student writing after use of the self-learning materials).

Procedure for analysis of the paragraphs involved the steps in doing topical structure analysis. The entire text of each paragraph was read for the purpose of identifying the discourse topic. Then the text was read a second time, sentence by sentence, to identify the independent clauses and classify them as T-units. The topic of each T-unit was identified, essentially, on the basis of what the sentence is about, not what the sentence says. Whenever possible, the discourse topic was called the sentence topic. Sentence types were then identified and tallied. Finally, the number of the dominant types of topical progression was counted and tallied. Topical depth was determined by the number of different topics in the longest sequential progression in the whole paragraph. Lexical items used as topical subjects were identified and tallied.

In addition, an English instructor (not the students' Freshman English instructor) was asked to evaluate the paragraphs using a holistic rating system to find out whether the holistic or global evaluation and the topical structure analysis are congruent. If congruence could be shown, then topical structure analysis could be considered valid as basis for evaluating coherence in writing. /



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Results

The test of mean difference between the pre - and post-test scores for T-units showed no significance, indicating that the students' performance was not substantially affected by the use of self-learning materials. Although the students had to deal with two different questions ("Should Filipino be used as the medium of instruction in non-English subjects in college?" and "Should news reporting over the radio and on TV be done in Filipino?"), they were on familiar grounds because both questions touched on the use of Filipino. Also, they had to engage in the same type of discourse and in the use of the same language, English. With these factors, aside from the same composition length requirement and composing time limit, the post-test result cannot be directly attributed to the use of self-learning materials.

As for sentence types, the pre-test performance of students, on the one hand, showed sentence type 5 as dominant, followed closely by sentence type 2. On the other hand, the students' post-test performance showed Type 2 as dominant, followed by Type 1. This dominance of Types 1 and 2 in the post-test paragraphs seems to agree with Witte's finding that writers of the high-score essays use Type 1 sentences somewhat more often than their low-



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score counterparts and have a tendency to rely more heavily on Type 2 sentences.

Also, self-learning materials containing lessons on referring to the same topic, identifying the topic of a sentence, topical development, and parallel progression led to the construction of more Type 1 sentences in the post-test session than in the pre-test session. Hence, the students learned to equate focusing on the topic with placing the topical subjects at the beginning of sentences, resulting in sentences in which initial sentence element, grammatical subject and topical subject coincide.

For topical depth, the test of mean difference showed significance. This means that the students' performance varied significantly in the post-test session. The pre- and post-test mean scores indicate that the number of different topics introduced and elaborated on increased by one topic per paragraph. The post-test paragraphs, where the number of different topics increased, were rated better by the teacher-rater who used a holistic rating system, indicating that the increase was needed by the students in developing their paragraphs.

For topical progression, the test of mean difference showed no significance. This means that the students' performance did not differ significantly after use of self-learning materials. In spite of this insignificant



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difference, the dominance of parallel and extended parallel types of progression in both sets of paragraphs may be indicative of the students' realization that these types (because of Lessons 7, 9 and 11) help to create coherence. Hence, the students continued to use them predominantly after using the materials.

For lexical cohesion, the test of mean difference showed significance for pronouns and repeated words. This means that the students used them as explained in the materials, that is, to refer to the same topic. However, despite their use of pronouns and repeated words to an extent good enough for coherence, they were unable to use other lexical items (like synonyms, super-ordinates, and general words) because of their limited skill in using words to establish a meaningful relationship between words and ideas.

Conclusions

In the light of the findings of this study, the following conclusions were arrived at:

1. The students involved in the study showed a tendency to elaborate on a given topic by referring to it through the use of pronouns and repeated words.

2. They learned to equate focusing on the topic with placing the topical subjects at the beginning of sen-



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tences, resulting in the construction of sentences in which initial sentence element, grammatical subject and topical subject coincide. Such sentences prove advantageous because they facilitate the reader's comprehension of the text. As shown in Faigley and Witte's (1983) study, "consistent assignment of a particular topic to the grammatical subject position does influence what readers perceive as the topic of a passage."

3. They used parallel and extended parallel progressions predominantly in their paragraphs. Such progressions prove advantageous because they show sentences in a paragraph in which the sentence topics are the same, resulting in a strong topic focus.

4. They increased the number of different topics in composing a paragraph. Increasing the number of different topics proves disadvantageous because the writer tends to lose his topical focus when he has too many topics to elaborate on.

5. They were unable to use words other than pronouns and repeated words in referring to the same topic.

6. Topical structure analysis and global evaluation are congruent because both registered more or less the same results in the sense that the paragraphs found "low" in coherence by the teacher-rater who used a holistic rating system were also considered "low" through topical



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in coherence by the teacher-rater who used a holistic rating system were also considered "low" through topical structure analysis. This congruence indicates that topical structure analysis is a valid way of evaluating discourse coherence.

7. Self-learning materials can develop topical structure awareness, as shown in the students' attempts to create coherence by writing Types 1 and 2 sentences and using parallel and extended parallel progressions predominantly.

8. As revealed in the coherence profiles of the students, topical structure analysis proved useful in pointing out causes of incoherence in student writing and can thus be used to provide students with insights on how to achieve coherence.

Recommendations

1. As a result of Conclusion No 1, that students tended to use pronouns and repeated words in referring to and elaborating on a given topic, they should be given enough lessons and exercises on the use of synonymous terms and expressions other than pronouns and repeated words.

2. As a result of Conclusion No 2, that students learned to equate focusing on the topic with placing the topical subjects at the beginning of sentences, they should be given lessons on Lautamatti's sentence types.



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These lessons, although dealing with sentences, should be given at the discourse level so that the students can see how the sentences relate to each other even if they do not belong to the same type. Particularly, they should be made aware that consistent assignment of a given topic to the grammatical subject position does influence what readers perceive as the topic of a passage. (Faigley and Witte, 1983).

3. As a result of Conclusion No. 3, that students used parallel and extended parallel progressions in their paragraphs, they should be motivated to continue using these types. They should be shown passages which clearly point out how these types help in creating coherence.

4. As a result of Conclusion No. 4, that students increased the number of different topics in composing a paragraph, they should be given lessons on how limiting the number of topics in a paragraph can help them achieve coherence. They should be made to see, through examples of compositions, how using too many topics to elaborate on can lead to an incoherent composition.

5. As a result of Conclusion No. 5, that students were unable to use words other than pronouns and repeated words, they should be exposed to posters and bulletin boards which promote semantic literacy. In vocabulary-building lessons, words should always be used in sentences within paragraphs.



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6. As a result of Conclusion No. 6, that topical structure analysis and global evaluation are equally effective in evaluating student writing, classroom demonstration on the use of topical structure analysis as basis for evaluating coherence in writing should be conducted to encourage English teachers to use it in lessons on coherence.

7. As a result of Conclusion No. 7, that self-learning materials can develop topical structure awareness, these materials should be used primarily as a means of developing topical structure awareness in students. Lessons in such materials should be reinforced with actual classroom teaching. Students who are handicapped by inadequate vocabulary and incorrect grammar should be required to enroll in preparatory courses with intensive writing in English, vocabulary development and grammar.

8. As a result of Conclusion No. 8, that topical structure analysis proved useful in pointing out causes of incoherence in writing, topical structure analysis should be applied as part of the English teacher's repertoire of classroom activities, especially in teaching writing. A short course in topical structure analysis should be designed for English teachers. Finally, further studies dealing with the use of topical structure analysis as



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basis for evaluating coherence in student writing and for developing self-learning materials to teach coherence in written discourse are worth undertaking because the present study was limited in many respects, particularly in its scope.

