



Coherence in ESL Students' Persuasive Texts

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Abstract: *Principled form of text organisation is one of the features that contribute to coherence. The present study examines the quantitative changes occur in the organisation of persuasive texts written by the cross-sectional groups of students learning English as a second language in the environment of their mother tongue. A reader-based approach is used to identify the various characteristics of the principled form of organisation. The analysis reflects that qualitative changes occur in the writing of students as they progress to higher grades.*

I. Introduction

In last few decades researchers in psychology, linguistics, and applied linguistics have focused on the role of the reader in constructing the coherence of texts. Modern reading theories propose that text processing is an interaction between the reader and the text and that readers employ their knowledge of the world (content schemata) and knowledge of text structures (formal schemata) to make sense of a text (Carrell, 1988). Research in the area of artificial intelligence has demonstrated that we use conventional knowledge structures known as scripts, frames or schemas in organizing experience and knowledge (Dehn & Schank, 1982). These knowledge structures help readers anticipate upcoming textual information, thereby enabling them to reduce and organize the text into an understandable and coherent whole (Bamberg, 1983). Brown and Yule (1983) have also underlined the role of the reader in establishing coherence: "...what the textual record means is determined by our interpretation of what the producer intended it to mean." Researchers in pragmatics and conversational analysis also maintain that coherence is at least partly based on the readers' ability to make inferences from the texts, irrespective of the text structure itself (Garnham, 1985; Oakhill & Garnham, 1988). The readers' attempts at inferences in the process of constructing textual coherence may be triggered by formal elements in the text (Britton & Gulgoz, 1991; Singer, 1990).

Cognitive theory of discourse supports that coherence is a matter of interaction between the text and the reader's knowledge base, another source of the non-linguistic nature of coherence is derived from an interactional theory of discourse. Therefore, coherence is based on the readers' understanding of the writer's intentions, the context of writing, and the relationship between the writer and the readers. Coherence is an essential element in written discourse; writing that lacks coherence will almost certainly fail to communicate its intended message to a reader. Many linguistic elements such as thematic unity; consistency or continuity of referents, temporality, locality and structure; the use of cataphora; and the use of a principled basis of organisation have been identified as being helpful to readers in achieving coherence (Bamberg, 1983; Gernsbacher, 1997; Givon, 1995; Lawe Davies, 1998; Van Dijk; 1977). If writers employ these features appropriately, it increases the possibility that readers will perceive the resulting text as coherent.

Theoretical background of the study is present in the literature over last forty years. Initial works simply provide a description of the overall organisation of L₂ (Second language learner) writers' (Kaplan, 1966). Others have given more precise descriptions of discourse patterns (Kubota, 1998); use of assertions (Allison, 1995); markers of doubt and uncertainty (Hyland and Milton, 1997); qualitative description of repetition in the texts of L2 English writers (Bartelt, 1992; Reynolds, 1995). Shaw and Liu's (1998) examined a group of features considered to reflect register, including some syntactic features. Ann Galloway (2002) examined the development of features of language used that contribute to coherence in students' persuasive texts. Others focused on local coherence relations and their signalling (Sanders et al., 1992; Sanders, 1997; Knott & Sanders, 1998; Prasad et al., 2008); hierarchical structure and its complexity (Mann & Thompson, 1988, Stede, 2004; Wolf & Gibson, 2005; Webber, 2009).

The literature in second language acquisition suggests that the empirical base of a majority of studies consists either of westerners studying a foreign language or foreigners studying in western countries, where the second language is the language of instruction and of the country concerned. In most cases, the latter situation applies to non-native speakers studying English in English-speaking countries, particularly in North America and Great Britain. The present study has, thus, placed the broad examination of textual organisation at the centre stage to look into the possible features that distinguish the representative samples of the data obtained from the cross-sectional groups of students learning English as a second language in the environment of their mother tongue.

This paper presents the results from the investigation of the developmental patterns in using one of the features that has been found to contribute to coherence- the use of a principled form of text organisation.

II. Methodology

The structured persuasive texts on the topic “The desirability of monitoring the use of computer for school going students/college going students” written by 400 school and college students were used for the analysis of features of text organisation.

The study is motivated primarily to explore the idea of creativity as a marker of linguistic competence and to examine textual organisation in English as a second language. Therefore, the study aims to investigate the features of language used, contributing to the organisation of the text as a coherent material. The study has largely examined various characteristics of textual organisation such as logical, inferential, topical, sequential, etc. with regard to the developmental samples of the data in English texts written by the students of different developmental groups in the study. Such an inquiry also draws its rationale from the continued focus on language through literature. Subsequently, all the texts in the sample (n = 400) are analysed by using a reader-based approach to identify the development patterns in the use of each of the features. Each text was read by two people and they rated these texts coherent and non coherent. The texts that are rated coherent are examined to identify a variety of these characteristics of organisation patterns (logical, inferential, topical, sequential, etc. that needed to be present if the texts are to be perceived as coherent.

III. Analysis

The texts (letters) used for analysis have both external and internal forms. The external form of a letter consists of salutation, body and closure sections, while the internal form refers to the form of the body section of the letter, which is made up of three main sections: introduction that introduces the topic and generally gives the writer’s opinion on the topic under discussion; development that put forward the writer’s reasons for his or her position on the topic; and conclusion that is the opinion or the judgement of the writer on the topic. The organisation of the development section of the body of the letter is analysed to find out the form of organisation and to observe the developmental patterns in successive higher classes.

Seven different organisational patterns logical, inferential, comments, problem-solution, topical, narrative and sequential are evident in the texts in this study, across the whole sample (n = 400). Logical, inferential, comment and problem-solution forms of organisation are the most commonly used and topical, narrative and sequential forms occur relatively very low in number in these data. The characteristics of the organisational patterns are discussed below with the help of some illustrations taken from the texts of sample:

A. Logical

Logical form is most common form of organisation occurred. In this form a logic marker is used to introduce reasons for the position being taken, for example:

A software like cyberoam is very important for students at college as well as at school level *because* it stops students from not visiting or watching wrong sites which will distract the minds of students *and* will not enhance their knowledge in anyway.

Most common logic marker used is the causal adverb *because*, and one or more additive connectives like *and*, as in above example, although other forms such as resultative and conditional adverbials, for example, *so (that)* and *if (then)* are also frequently used.

B. Inferential

Inferential is the next frequently occurring form of organisation characterised by the absence of overt marking of the semantic relationships between different sections of text, for example:

Today students are exploring the world on computer through Internet. They access website and get information on the topic they want. But students some times distract from the actual target and start misusing computer and internet. Internet contains some non-useful content like prone material along with useful study material. [so] there must be a monitoring through software or anything else on the students’ use of computer. [So that] administration or parents can monitor the internet usage and webpage visited by students. Further, it can be used to block prone sites and web pages.

When students involved in such activities they get distracted and loose motivation towards studies. [So] it’s the responsibility of administration to stop students. In the end I support monitoring systems like cyber roam to be used as internet manager so that we can direct our emerging energy in form of students to achieve development by 2020.

C. Topical

In topical form of organisation, key noun phrases or clauses, which occur first in the text introduction, are used at the front of successive units of the text to develop a new section of the argument, as in the following example: I strongly favour the supervision of students’ computer work. There are many reasons after this position. Firstly, the crimes happening through internet.... Secondly, supervision stops the student.... Thirdly, this helps in the positive use of computer....

The main solution and proper control is supervision. Without it the students may spoil their life.

In these data, a topical form of organisation is frequently introduced with a short cataphoric statement such as *for several reasons, for many reasons* as in the example above.

D. Sequential

In sequential form of organisation enumeration is most commonly used in these texts but sequential organisation can be achieved linguistically in several forms.

Dear Editor,

I agree that there should be monitoring of students’ computer. Following are the reasons:

1. In this age students are unable to judge what is good or bad. So, to focus towards the goal
2. Many examples are there in when students have been implicated.
3. A lot of vulgar and porn website are spoiling the career of students.

Other sequential forms that appear in these data included the use of sequential or additive connectives, usually preceded by a cataphoric statement such as *here are some reasons*, or as in the above example, *following are the reasons*.

E. Problem-solution

The problem-solution pattern is marked by the use of word that has connotations of a difficulty or problem and how it could be overcome, for example:

Students use computers to communicate and to get study material and other necessary information. ^{Problem} No doubt computer has become essential part of our life today but also cannot deny the fact that crime through internet is increasing and easy accessibility to porn-material is causing threat to the social values. ^{Solution} The parents at home and teachers at school should monitor students’ use of computer. Moreover, access to undesirable sites should be restricted for students to use such sites. This problem should be handled in a way that it solves the problem without hurting feelings of students.

In the above example, the problem section of the text is introduced by, *but also cannot deny the fact that crime through internet is increasing and easy accessibility to porn-material is causing threat to the social values* and then a solution proposed, the means of overcoming the difficulty presented *the parents at home and teachers at school should monitor students’ use of computer. Moreover, access to undesirable sites should be restricted for students to use such sites*. In some other texts, as in the above example, the outcomes or benefits the reader would have from the solution are also highlighted.

F. Narrative

In Narrative form of organization the encoder selectively deals with factual and/or conceptual phenomena in time. A narrative is the text type related to the cognitive process of perception in time. The text base of a narrative text can be reduced to the length and structural constituents of the simple (non-continuous) action-recording sentence, for example:

Today most of the students misuse internet. Students play on internet or remain busy on social networking sites continuously three or four hours and many a times more than that. They make friendships on internet which is only for time pass

The *text idiom* of narrative texts is constituted by action-recording sentences (and their variants) in sequence.

G. The Comment

The encoder passes judgement by relating concepts of events, objects and ideas to his private systems of thought, values and beliefs in comment form of organisation, for example:

I [strongly believe] that monitoring should be enforced on school students’ computer use and college students may be exempted from any such monitoring.

I [feel] that such ‘restrictions’ will create in adults a sense of irresponsibility and misunderstanding. As far as school going students are concerned they may fall prey to vicious attractions due to negligence and inquisitiveness and in order to save them monitoring is required.

Therefore, I [strongly recommend] monitoring mechanism in school but it is not required for college students.

In the comment the neutral style of the argumentative text idiom is normally modified by the encoder’s choice of styles such as informal style, ironical style, appreciatory style, depreciatory style, and persuasive style.

In these data logical, inferential and problem-solution patterns of organisation occur frequently and topical, sequential and narrative occur very low in number. Increasing diversification in the use of patterns of organisation, as students grew older or progress to higher classes is observed. Within each of these forms of organisation, changes in their use with increasing age are identified. Although forms of organisation other than logical were not so common until secondary school, yet all forms of organisation were present even in texts written by the youngest students. In table 1 the distribution of various forms of organisation is presented.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Form of Organisation

Form	Text	%age
Problem Solution	33	8.25
Inferential	94	23.5
Comment	90	22.5
Logical	124	31.0
Topical	20	5.0

Narrative	8	2.0
Sequential	17	4.25
Not Evident	14	3.5
Total	400	100

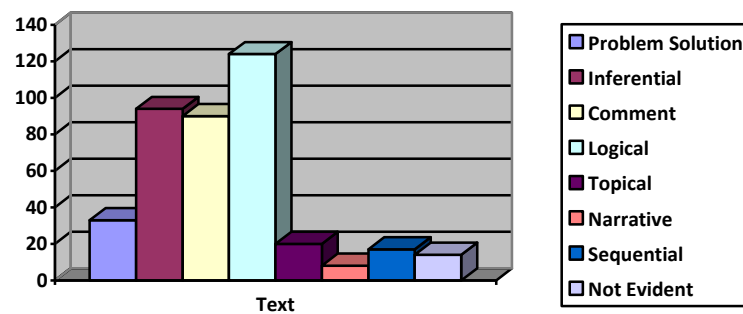


Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Form of Organisation

Table 1 and figure 1 reflects that of all the forms of organisation identified in these data, logical form is the most common, with 31% of all the texts in the sample using some form of logic marker as their organizing principle; 23.5% texts use inferential form, 22.5% texts use comment form, 8.25% texts use problem-solution form, 5% texts use topical form, 4.25% texts used sequential form, 2% texts use narrative form and in 3.5 % texts forms of organisation are not evident. In the next section the developmental patterns in forms of organisation as well as developmental patterns within different forms of organisation across all the classes are discussed.

Table 2: Class-wise Frequency Distribution of Form of Organisation

Form	VIII	X	XII	UG-I	UG-II	UG-III	Total
Problem Solution	1	2	9	4	14	3	33
Inferential	9	22	25	7	25	6	94
Comment	6	16	16	22	20	10	90
Logical	22	29	21	20	20	12	124
Topical	0	1	1	3	10	5	20
Narrative	0	1	3	0	2	2	8
Sequential	1	1	0	2	3	10	17
Not Evident	4	6	4	0	0	0	14
Total Texts (n)	43	78	79	58	94	48	400

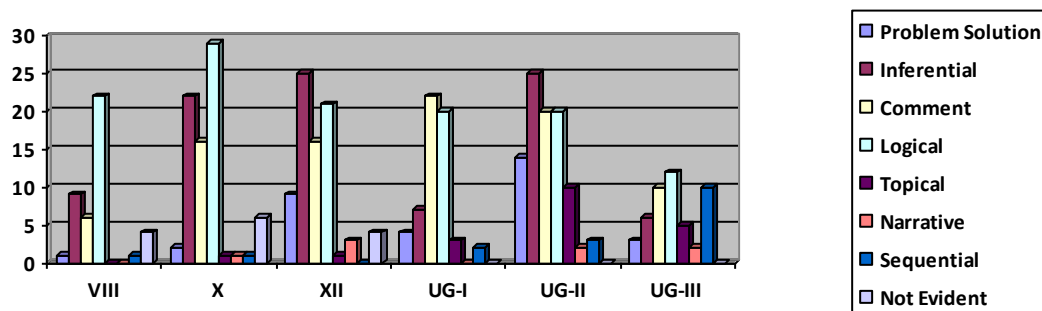


Figure 2: Class-wise Frequency Distribution of Form of Organisation

Table 2 and figure 2 reflects that of all the forms of organisation identified in these data, logical, comment and inferential forms are the most common occurring in the texts across the classes. Problem-solution, topical and sequential forms occurred more in the texts of senior students more. Narrative form of organization occurs rarely in this data.

Table3: Developmental Patterns: Overview

Class	VIII	X	XII	UG-I	UG-II	UG-III
Logical %	51.16	37.18	26.58	34.48	21.26	25.00
Others %	39.54	55.13	68.36	65.52	78.74	75.00
Not Evident	9.30	7.69	5.06	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100

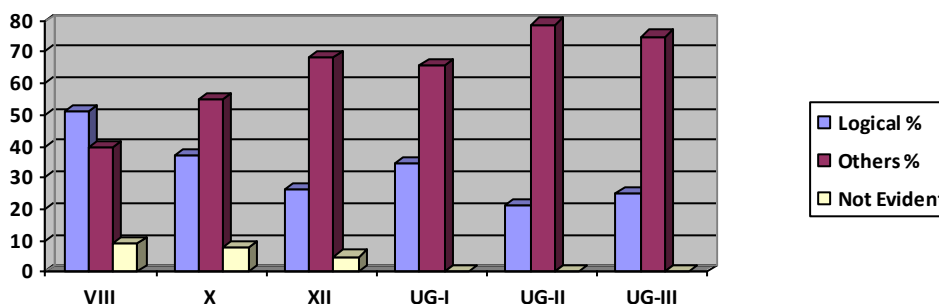


Figure 3: Developmental Patterns: Overview

From table 3 and figure 3 we observe that at middle school level, logical form is the most common form of organisation, whereas other forms being used increasingly as students grew older, especially once they moved into secondary school, probably reflecting the influence of formal teaching. Therefore, the general trend of development is an increasing diversification in the use of patterns of organisation, as students grew older. Within each of these forms of organisation, changes in their use with increasing age are identified. Although forms of organisation other than logical were not so common until secondary school, yet all forms of organisation were present even in texts written by the youngest students.

Table 3: Developmental Patterns: Detailed

Class	VIII	X	XII	UG-I	UG-II	UG-III
Problem Solution %	2.33	2.56	11.39	6.90	15.96	6.25
Inferential %	20.93	28.21	31.65	12.06	26.60	12.50
Comment %	13.96	20.51	20.25	37.93	21.26	20.83
Logical %	51.16	37.18	26.58	34.48	21.26	25.00
Topical %	0.00	1.28	1.27	5.17	10.63	10.41
Narrative %	0.00	1.28	3.80	0.00	2.13	4.16
Sequential %	2.33	1.28	0.00	3.44	3.19	20.83
Not Evident %	9.30	7.69	5.06	0.00	0.00	0.00

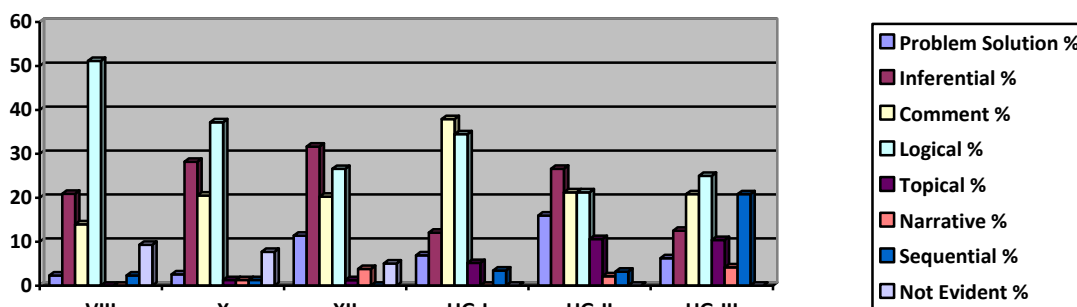


Figure 4 : Developmental Patterns: Detailed

Another general developmental trend, noticed from the texts of the writers is the change in the way logic markers are used. In the texts of more mature writers, usually more complex patterns of organisation are employed rather than logic markers being the dominant organising principle. However, within these other forms of organisation, logic markers are also employed as the basis of organisation of sections of the text. Other linguistic means such as reason/cause are also used to express relations.

The topical and narrative forms of organisation are used by very few students and that too of higher classes. In the texts, where organisational pattern is not evident the writers (students) simply fail to provide readers necessary information about the topic or to organize the details adequately. It can be argued that writers may have difficulties in focusing on topics and selecting a plan of organisation, or in creating a context for their readers, because they continue to struggle with the production of words and sentences. Fear of mistakes can halt flow of discourse and cripple a writer’s attempt to project and sustain plans. However, impromptu texts such as these should be regarded as first drafts, not as the best writing that students can produce. The better writers were able to take the reader’s perspective from the beginning and produced well-structured, coherent texts. This ability seems to be a consequence of both the writer’s skill and experience and the relative lack of difficulty in the writing task.

IV. Conclusion

This paper emphasized on the organisation of persuasive text of students learning English as a second language in the environment of their mother tongue. Quantitative changes are observed in the students' texts as the mature and progress to higher classes. However, mature students have used more complex forms of organisation in their texts; also few junior students have used these forms. It shows that students have different levels of awareness about the different ways of organising information and readers' needs. Findings of the study, though, lead us to conclude that the perception of global coherence in an expository text, that is, the extent to which the individual sentences of such a text help in developing its topic and local coherence, that is the relative frequency with which a sentence is an elaboration of the one that precedes it, improves with age, as students progress to higher classes (Kintsch and Van Dijk, 1978; Danner, 1976; Englert & Hiebert; 1984; Bamberg, 1984). The performance of the students on tasks that assess knowledge of global coherence in expository texts may begin to level off by approximately eighth grade (Garner et al., 1986), whereas the ability to produce globally coherent expository texts continues to improve beyond that point. The influence of formal teaching on patterns of organisation seems to be evident in the texts of older students in these data, as the texts generally used more complex patterns of organisation than did those of younger students, suggesting greater success in meeting audience expectations.

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