Analysis of the problems on coherence in college English writing

Li Fengjie[*], **Yuan Xiuying, Zhang Chuanze**

Foreign Languages Department, School of Humanities, Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, Tianjin, China

Email address:

yyfx0901@163.com (Li Fengjie)

Abstract: With a view to finding out the current situation of college English writing, the authors conducted a survey in their university. It is found that students have some problems in sentence effectiveness, mainly on coherence. As a result this essay will mainly focus on the analysis of the syntactical problem on coherence in college English writing, then explore the main reasons for the problem in students' writing to help them improve their English writing.

Keywords: College English Writing Coherence Reasons

English writing, along with other basic skills (listening, reading and speaking), has always been an issue of great concern to EFL teachers and researchers. Despite the strong desire to write well in English, quite a number of Chinese university students still remain incompetent in English writing. Both students and teachers increasingly feel frustrated and complain about the quality of the learning outcome. Therefore, a survey is conducted with a view to finding out the existing problems with college English writing, to figure out the possible reasons which result in the errors and mistakes and to search for ways of bettering students' writing skill.

Coherence means clear and reasonable connection between parts and all the parts in a sentence are connected in smooth and logical order. Since the conceptual meaning of English sentences mainly depends on word order, so the arrangement of the parts of a sentence is especially important to accurate expression of ideas. A coherent sentence is easy to understand and does not contain any ambiguity with its conformity to grammar rules and usage. The incoherent sentences, however, would always misguide readers and present rather ambiguous meanings and can be interpreted in different ways. (Ding & Wu, 1998: 62).

The corpus for this essay was collected from the 18 students of one Experimental Class in Tianjin University of Finance and Economics in China. In the first term in the school year 2013 to 2014, each of the 18 students wrote 8 compositions based on seven different ways of developing a paragraph. The topics for the compositions were: 1) How to Prepare for a Picnic at the Weekend (development by process); 2) I Have Had a Happy School Life (development by time); 3) My Campus(development by space); 4) My Friends (development by classification); 5) Noise Pollution in the City Where I Live (development by example); 6) Over Development of Big Cities(development by cause and effect); 7) Popularity of Tours to Forests and Mountains (development by cause and effect); 8) Television and Cinema (development by comparison and contrast). For the convenience of error analysis, the authors number the 18 students from X1 to X18 and the 8 compositions from P1 to P8 in accordance to the sequence above.

From the analysis of the college English writing corpus, the authors find that most students can express their ideas correctively in English without serious grammar mistakes. However, when it comes to the effectiveness of sentences, it is quite a different thing. The next part of this essay mainly focuses on the analysis of the common syntactical problems based on students' college English writing from the perspective of coherence.

From the essays, the authors find that students are susceptible to coherent issues in writing. Now let's take a closer look at what problems the students have through the analysis of some typical sentences from their essays according to the rules (Ding & Wu, 1998: 62) listed above respectively.

1. Do not Separate Words that are Closely Related unless It is Necessary

Eg 1 (X2p6) *With over development of big cities, much influence come to our life including bad and good.*

In this sentence, it would be better to place *including bad and good* right after the *influence* since it was supposed to modify the influences brought about by the development of big cities. By putting *including bad and good* at the end makes the sentence and the meaning it tries to convey weird. A revised version would be as follows.

With over development of big cities, much influence, both good and bad, comes to our life.

2. Do not Use a Pronoun with Ambiguous Reference

Here is a sentence given by one of the students:

Eg 2 (X16p8) *There are various reasons for going to the cinema. First, because films are focus on the effect, they prefer the atmosphere and the great impact.*

The student who wrote this sentence actually meant that people watching movies in the cinema can enjoy the amazing atmosphere and vivid effect provided by the high-tech. Therefore, those who prefer cinema to television are more inclined to watch films in theaters. While in this sentence, the pronoun *they* may cause some misunderstanding. Readers may have some doubts about what exactly it refers to--the films or people who like cinemas. And to make that clear, we can write it in this way.

There are various reasons why people prefer going to the cinema. First, because films focus on effect, people enjoy the atmosphere and the great impact provided in cinemas.

3. Do not Use a Dangling Modifier or Put a Modifier Far from the Word It Modifies

Eg 3 (X13p2) *Look back, there are 12 years that have been spent on school.*

First, it should be "looking back" according to the grammatical rules; besides, a participial phrase expresses an action done by the person or the thing detonated by the noun it modifies. In this sentence, *looking back* should be the action of the subject (12 years), but apparently "12 years" cannot look back on its own, so the participial phrase is a dangling modifier. A gerund also expresses an action of the person or thing denoted by the word to which it is related. In fact, *Looking back* here is an act of the writer himself. One way of revising the sentence is:

Looking back, I have spent 12 years at school.

A modifier should be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies. If they are far from each other, misunderstanding may arise.

Eg 4 (X12p1) *In addition, you should bring with you several disposable pieces of plastic tablecloth, which can serve as the table when spread out on the ground.*

Eg 5 (X12p1) *You should also bring some slender pointed pieces of bamboo or iron so that small pieces of meat can be strung together for easy cooking.*

The problems of those two sentences are almost the same. In the first sentence, the *disposable* seems to be the modifier of *pieces;* while in fact it modifies the *tablecloth*. Thus the correct order should be *several pieces of disposable/plastic tablecloth*. The same goes for the second sentence. In the second sentence, the *pointed* should have been placed just before *bamboo* to describe the shape of the bamboo. One version to the above two examples should be as follows.

In addition, you should bring with you several pieces of disposable (or plastic) tablecloth, which can serve as the table when spreading out on the ground.

You should also bring some slender pieces of pointed bamboo or iron so that small pieces of meat can be strung together for easy cooking.

4. Do not Make Unnecessary or Confusing Shifts in Person or Number

Eg 6 (X14p2) *For us, school is a place where we are educated to be a civilized man and learned man out of a innocent child.*

To make a coherent sentence, number should also be coherent in a sentence. It can be clearly seen that the number in this sentence is a little bit chaotic. Honestly speaking, the sentence structure is good, while the details are not. And it would be better if changed in this way.

For us, school is a place where we are educated to be civilized and learned men out of innocent children.

Just make some small alterations to the number so as to make the whole sentence coherent and smooth.

5. Do not Make Unnecessary Changes in the Voice, Tense or Mood of Verbs

Eg 7 (X12p5) *Of course, noise pollution is made by not only some companies' building, much of noise is from habition noise also.*

The change of voice makes the sentence unnatural to read. In the first part of the sentence, the student used the passive voice to describe the source of noise. From the sense of coherence, the latter part of the sentence should use the same voice. On the contrary, the student chose a different one. Small alterations can be made to produce a better-formed sentence.

Of course, noise pollution is made by not only some companies' building, but also by people from the residential area.

Apart from the change in voice, the unnecessary change in tenses would have the same effect on a sentence. Take the following sentence for example:

Eg 8 (X16p6) *Some people who succeeded in their field become richer and richer, others who failed will be poor and*

depressed.

There are three different tenses in the same sentence, and they are not used in a coherent way. Such a disorder in tenses disputes the beauty and unity of the sentence. Putting the parallel verbs in the same tense would be better.

Some people who have succeeded in their field become richer and richer, while others who have failed turn poorer and depressed.

6. Do not Use Different Forms to Express Parallel Ideas

Eg 9 (X12p2) *I started to play on computer games and join many activities and ignoring the study.*

Although the sentence appears to be correct, the change in form makes it jerky. Whenever possible, parallel ideas should be expressed in parallel constructions which give the reader the feeling that the ideas are equally important and the sentence structures are coherent. It looks better if the *ignoring* here was in the same form with *play* and *join*.

I started to play computer games, join many activities and ignore the study.

Now look at another example.

Eg 10 (X11p6) *We can see many high buildings are springing up; the roads are wider and more supermarkets and hotels are established.*

At first sight, the sentence looks quite parallel owing to the three *are* used in it, while in fact, it's not,because the three identical *are* are not necessarily identical. The first *are* actually should be deleted while the second and the third *are* are totally different. One way of revising the sentence is as follows.

We can see many high buildings springing up, roads getting wider and supermarkets and hotels being established.

Generally speaking, writing in English is a complex, comprehensive and problem-solving process which greatly demonstrates one's English ability. In the composing process, the writers need to pay attention to a number of variables simultaneously, including the control of content, sentence structure, vocabulary, spelling and letter formation at the sentence level. Beyond the sentence, the writer must be able to structure and integrate information into cohesive and coherent paragraphs and texts. All these bring the writers a great many difficulties. The main reasons for the students to make mistakes in college English writing can be stated as follows.

Firstly, lack of self-identity in English Writing. In China, English learning plays a significant role in students' education. Like it or not, students have to strive their best to learn English well as a result of institutional imposition of English education. Therefore the exam-based teaching and learning of English gives rise to the lack of self-identity in writing which would greatly affect students' writing ability. 'Self' here refers to the individuality and the spirit, bestowed by its writer and influenced by the social contexts in which a person is embedded, which actually expresses the needs, interests and thoughts of its creator.

Secondly, limitation of English Vocabulary. Through the analysis of the compositions, the monotonous use of words is the main cause for the lack of variety in writing and deficient vocabulary is the main reason for their frustration in expressing ideas. Appropriate use of vocabulary and expressions is a mark for one's maturity in language use.

Thirdly, poverty in English Grammar. With respect to the problems in ESL learning, grammar is always considered the most annoying one. Usually, Chinese students are not good at grammar, which is the most serious and obvious thing that's been troubling ESL learners. They make a lot of grammatical errors in tenses, singular/plural forms and so on, which is also the main reason for the lack of unity and coherence in their writing.

Fourthly, lack of awareness for revising and summarizing. Though there are a great many errors in students' writing, they are not inevitable. However, most students seemed not so passionate about the idea of checking and revising from the answers they gave to the questions asked in the questionnaire. Another important thing is that students were not accustomed to summarizing, be it the mistakes they've made in writing or the guidance professors gave to their essays. Through summarizing, the authors believe, students will benefit a lot in a way that they cannot through other ways. Summary gives the students a chance to see what level their English is, what problems they have, what they should do to change that, and the impetus to work harder.

The findings in this study provide some insight into the current situation of college English writing.

Firstly, although students can convey their ideas in English, they are not proficient enough to make effective sentences. The main cause for this is probably the lack of knowledge and awareness of effectiveness. So teachers can spend some time introducing those factors which influence the effectiveness of a sentence.

Secondly, despite the fact that students have learned English for such a long time, they are still rather unfamiliar with and have a relatively insufficient knowledge of English grammar. Therefore, grammatical issue is still a great difficulty for college students and a great concern for professors.

Thirdly, from the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire, students' interest in English learning still needs special attention. As is widely acknowledged, interest is the best guide in learning. So is it in English writing. To achieve the goal of improving the writing skills, then their general English level, interest cultivation is the first priority for college students.

Furthermore, the development of critical thinking and students' subjective initiative in English writing deserves better deliberation.

Although this study can shed some light on the learning and improving of English writing, there are some limitations. The subjects in the present study come from the same college, and the data is not big enough to draw a generalized conclusion. Therefore, further studies should be carried out to

complement the results of the present study in order to confirm the effectiveness of college English writing.

Acknowledgements

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