

An Expectancy Exercise in Cohesion

by Dean Brodkey

Some years ago, Jon Jonz, a creative teacher in the English Tutorial Program at the University of New Mexico, introduced a text-prediction exercise to his freshman ESL composition class. He used a mock incohesive, incoherent student essay and contrasted it with an excerpt from Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." The two passages were presented one sentence at a time on separate pages so that the students had to guess what would follow next before turning the page. The students quickly came to appreciate that the mock student essay was thoroughly jumpy and unpredictable while Carson's smooth prose was so carefully plotted with logical connectives and organizers that no one could be surprised by what followed what.

Picking up on this exercise a few years later, I found an even more compelling way to illustrate cohesion using actual students' papers as they came across my desk. For example, I might get the following:

"I'm belonging to E.S.S. (English Speaking Society) of my university in Tokyo. I'm interested in English, especially English conversation. I wish I could speak English fluently. In Japan, there are only a few opportunities to talk to a native speaker. I think it is the best way to study English in the countries such as America, England and Canada."

This sort of paragraph bothers me. Although a silent reading gives a passable impression that the student wants to write about "Difficulties and Opportunities in Learning English," I was bothered by the many indirect turns the text was taking. Where would the focus end up? Would I hear more about the student's English club? About problems speaking fluently? About the lack of opportunity to speak English in Japan? About the best cut-rate fares to America, England and Canada? My mind sank into the frequent dilemma that I have when trying to follow incohesive student writing, as I give the student the benefit of the doubt while doggedly searching for

the main claim or theme as I proceed dutifully down the page unhappily aware that I am paid to do it.

Then I tried the following exercise. I asked the student to read the paper *aloud* to the class, stopping after each sentence. After the first sentence, the other students would have to guess what came next, giving the exact words they would write and not just a general response such as, "well-I think it will talk about . . ." Naturally, what came next had to flow cohesively from what came before. The students' expectancy grammar for cohesive thinking had to be tapped, and the result was usually something like this:

Student: "I'm belonging to E.S.S. (English Speaking Society) Club of my university in Tokyo."

Class:

- 1) This club is very popular because. . .
- 2) The purpose of this club is. . .
- 3) The E.S.S. is a group students who. . .
- 4) I joined this club because. . .

At this point, the writer would begin to giggle because the lesson is such an obvious one. The class has no trouble coming up with appropriately cohesive followup sentences, and the giggle is that no teacher had ever suggested using such a style. In fact, some students will begin to object that their last English teacher told them "never repeat the same words!" Therefore, an exercise that seems to demand repetition of the same key terms must be "wrong". Yet a predictable reading almost demands verbatim repetition of terms in order to carry the main idea forward with clarity, and the effect, if not stylistically elegant, is conceptually very easy to follow.

Two objections from teachers crop up at this point. The first objection is that without prior instruction in how to be cohesive, with lessons in the use of logical connectives and other organizers, the students simply won't be able to do it. I an-

swer that my own intermediate-level students seem to do it quite well and seem to need no special pretraining. The exercise seems to tap the same sort of latent skills that sentence-combining taps. Someone in the class always comes up with a good answer, and the rest quickly catch on. The logic of cohesive continuations is easy to apprehend, even in multilingual settings, and when the linguistic emphasis falls on simple reiteration of key terms there is no confusing pressure to resort to the difficulties of our connective vocabulary except as students in the class find them natural and well acquired already. Many will blurt out "Second, . . ." or "For example, . . ." because these are such readily understood and acquired stylistic devices.

Teachers may also object that the resultant style is crude, childishly bare sounding, and undesirable. I reply that it need not be

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so. For example, the following passage from an exercise book intended to teach "finding the main idea", makes the reiterative point well.

Fat people have fewer colds than thin people; rich people have fewer colds than poor people; old people have fewer colds than young people; city dwellers have fewer colds than their country cousins. Families on the east and west coasts have fewer colds than those in the middle of the country, and small families have fewer colds than large families. Management workers have fewer colds than administrative employees, and office workers have fewer colds than production workers. Workers in offices where the air is filtered and

conditioned have the fewest colds of anyone. (Boning 1976)

Pardon me while—achoo!—I expel a thoroughly cohesive sneeze.

Finally, I include this excerpt from a weightier tome which illustrates exactly what I am talking about.

The study of discourse has become a major concern of scholars in many fields. With regard to children, education, and schooling alone, there is a great accumulation of *work*. Much of this *work* is readily available and summarized. What is most *lacking*, perhaps, is perspective on the relation between this *work* and the needs of educators. Such a *lack* is indicated in the bewildering variety of definitions and understandings of the term 'context'; the diversity of approaches to the relation between 'form' and 'function'; and the uncertainty as to the pedagogical relevance of various outlooks. (Hymes 1982)

The author goes on to repeat the word "discourse" four times in the short half page that follows, repeats the formulation, 'context', 'form', 'function' a second time, and uses such sentence continuers as "a few key ideas These ideas," "I shall argue I shall argue" and so forth.

The ensuing style reminds one of devices used when talking to foreigners who do not quite follow what is being said. Dubbed "foreigner talk" it emphasizes the repetition of key lexical items and the left-shifting of main ideas to the beginning of utterances. The effect is often seen by native speakers as sounding a bit simple-minded and overly emphatic. But I would contend that college writing needs a good deal more of this than we usually get from scholars, who work with difficult concepts, and from our freshman students, who have the same sort of trouble keeping their ideas in focus to themselves as well as to their patient English teachers.

Note: For the very advanced ESL class, see Donley 1976.

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