

## The Use of Coherence and Cohesion in Composition Writing Among Botswana Primary School Pupils

Golebamang Galegane  
University of Botswana,  
Gaborone – Botswana.

### Abstract

The researcher analyzed selected pupils' compositions which they wrote as a class exercise. The study aimed at investigating the use of coherence and cohesion in composition writing among Botswana primary school pupils. The purpose of the study was to find out the extent to which the pupils could produce a coherent text. Twenty scripts were chosen through purposive sampling from standard seven pupils of two primary schools: school A and school B. Data were collected by visiting the schools and asking the class teachers to select 10 scripts from each class. The data were then analyzed using a taxonomy that reflected organization in a text in terms of tense and aspect.

The findings of the study reveal that some of the pupils do not produce or write a coherent text at all. The study further reveals that there is a problem of not using the right tenses and a failure to sequence events. It was noted that incoherent paragraphs contributed to the students' inability to produce good texts. The failure to write coherent paragraphs is a result of their inability to sequence events chronologically. It is therefore recommended that the use of tense be taught before writing a composition in class. Further, pupils should be exposed to sequencing events logically as this will help them in the use of aspect.

### 1. Introduction

The study seeks to investigate the use of coherence and cohesion in composition writing among Botswana primary school pupils. The study intends to identify problems relating to coherence and come up with some ways of solving the problem. The Revised National Policy on Education (1994: 8) emphasizes that educational achievement at primary level is declining. The Ministry of Education sees to it that the pupils do well in all areas of learning including English composition. This is in line with what other scholars have observed such as Holmes and Ramos (1993: 83) who indicate that, "many... departments are entrusted with the responsibility for not only setting up courses but also evaluating students' ability to work in English..." (Vision 2016, 1997: 5) also notes that "...Botswana's wealth of different languages...will be recognized, supported and strengthened within the education system."

One of the goals of teaching compositions in primary schools is to see to it that pupils in primary schools organize their texts and express themselves well. Further, pupils should perform well in their Primary School Leaving Examinations

(PSLE) composition writing so that they are able to write well. In this regard, one of the tasks that the primary schools are faced with is to write various English compositions. Kalu & Alimi (2003: 60) suggest that there is unanimity among English Language teaching practitioners that proficiency in the language of instruction is essential for students' academic success. The cohesion of a text is very important even at primary school. It is a skill that one has to acquire more especially at the earliest stages of learning. Braine (1989: 3) argues that "if academic writing is to be taught successfully, composition teachers must be aware of what students write...."

In this paper coherence is taken as the linkage of points within a text. According to Reid (2000:116) Coherence means "to stick together". Brusaw, Alred & Oliu (1997:221) say that in coherence "...the sentences and the paragraphs will flow smoothly from one to the next and the relationship of each sentence or paragraph to one before it will be clear."

Cohesive writing uses devices that link points (coherence) within a text. Halliday & Hasan cited in Horning (1991) say that, "the simplest definition of cohesion is that it "refers to relations of meaning that exist within a text and that define it as a text." The relations of meaning referred to by Horning are the cohesive devices, which can be in the form of words or phrases. These can be at three levels:

- i) within a sentence
- ii) between sentences in a paragraph and
- iii) between paragraphs

Producing a coherent text is an indication that pupils can express themselves well. Expression by pupils is important because it does not end in the classroom, but influences their passing of examinations and extends to the world of work where they are expected to produce several pieces of coherent texts as they communicate in the various sectors such as business, commerce and industry (Masendu: 2000,100; Mothudi: 2003,81). In the light of the above, the Ministry of Education wants to uplift the English language standard in Botswana. This is because it is a medium of instruction in schools, outside school and during the world of work. The same view is shared by Fanning (1993:159) who claims that, "...this movement is generating massive demand for foreign language training in preparation for closer international collaboration." Magogwe (2000: 159) also notes that "pupils performance in English will certainly have a bearing towards their success in later years". As the pupils write their compositions, there should be an attempt to perfect their writing skills, which could be done by taking note of coherence and cohesion.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Sample and sampling procedure**

Two government primary schools were used as sites of investigation. The primary schools were school A in Gaborone and school B in Tlokwen. The schools were chosen through convenience sampling. Twenty standard seven pupils from these

schools were used (ie. 10 from each school). All the pupils had been in the primary school system for six years, during which they had been taught composition writing. At standard seven, they prepare for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), and composition writing is one of the papers that the pupils write. The class teachers were asked to do the sampling.

## **2.2 Data collection**

From each of the schools, data were collected from students' written compositions. A single composition was purposively sampled from the compositions written during the class exercise. From both school A and B, the composition sampled was on the same topic, "the journey by bus". The pupils were given the topics to write by their teachers as a class exercise. All these compositions were narrative. According to (Trennepohl: 2003, 117) "during composition writing, the teacher would concentrate on one writing style at a time." An example of the writing style is narrative writing. Then the pupils would be given some guiding questions and then ask the pupils to use the guiding questions to develop the composition. The compositions were selected because they were written in a natural setting.

## **2.3 Data analysis**

All the twenty scripts were numbered from 1-10 for each school. The two sets of compositions were analyzed by looking at their organization, presentation, cohesion and logic within the text. To identify the above, the following taxonomy was used:

- i) Organization: finding out how the pupils had laid out their text in terms of
  - tense
  - aspect

Hughey et al (1983:120) point out that, "to achieve unity...in a piece of writing, then, writers will first examine the structure-arrangement-of larger parts, or units, of writing."

While reading through the scripts, the deficient aspects were noted and later analyzed. The analysis was done by categorizing the aspects observed, for example, introduction, body and conclusion.

## **3. Results and discussion**

The purpose of this study was to find out if pupils in the two primary schools produce a coherent text and, if not, what could be done to rectify the problem.

The pupils' compositions were analyzed for the following:

- unity
- logic

In each of the compositions, the researcher identified if the whole text was about the same main idea (unity). Further, the researcher identified if there was a flow of ideas between the paragraphs (logic).

### 3.1 Tense

Tense in this paper refers to how the pupils related the past event, of the journey by bus. The results are presented in three categories: Above Average, Average and Below Average.

The Above Average use of tense was marked by relating events well throughout the composition. The Average use of tense was marked by problems in relating events. Finally, the Below Average use of tense was marked by the pupils having serious problems in relating the events.

Table 1: Presentation of results on the use of tense

School	Above Average	%	Average	%	Below Average	%	Total	%
A	3	30	7	70	0	0	10	100
B	0	0	6	60	4	40	10	100

From these results, school A performed better than school B. This is indicated by the 30% of the pupils whose use of tense in their compositions was above average. On the other hand, school B does not have Above Average pupils. Instead the school has 60% of pupils being average and 40% below average.

The above results show that school A, which is an urban school, does better in the use of tense compared to school B which is a rural school. This might be due to the fact that pupils in the urban area have more exposure to the use of English as compared to the other school. For school B, the pupils might be disadvantaged by the socio-economic status. Examples of these might be the home environment not being conducive to learning, such as, poor lighting and lack of studying facilities. Another factor that explains the difference between the two schools could be lack of mass media in rural areas.

a) Below is an example of a composition that was Above Average which shows the use of Tense.

*Even though I had traveled to many places using different modes of transport, this was the most exciting that I had experienced.*

b) An example of a composition that was Average which shows the use of Tense.

*When the bus arrives at Maun my brother was picking us at the station and I felt sleepy by the moment we reached home.*

The pupil in the last example, does not use the tense well because the way the events are related, there is no flow. It does not reflect the real event in terms of how time is marked, for example, *bus arrives----- was picking us*

Further, the tense does not mark the distance well, for example, was picking us ----  
----- I felt sleepy-----

The tense is incorrectly used to indicate the distance between the bus station and home. As a result, this affected the coherence and cohesion of the text. There is also lack of grammatical accuracy in the above sentence that the student wrote.

c) Examples of compositions that were Below Average with regard to the use of Tense

#### Examples

a) I go with my brother to visit my uncle. I can go to by food with can eat in the bus. The are 500 killometer to go at Gaborone to Mochudi. I can take three hour to go at Mochudi when bus is ourkaey and it not problem.

b) The bus go to from Gaborone to Serowe. The bus leave in Gaborone at ten o'clock.

There is no communication at all in the two examples above in order to show the correct use of tense. The time is not marked well as the pupils are unable to show past events.

### 3.2 Aspect

In this paper, aspect refers to how pupils stated the verb action in their compositions. Because the composition was narrative, they had to use the progressive aspect. The progressive aspect shows the progression of the story line. The benchmark to determine this feature was to find out if each composition identified the beginning (introduction), development, and the end (conclusion).

The pupils' use of the progressive aspect in their compositions was as follows:

**Table 2: Table showing sequencing of events for school A**

School: A	Intro	Development							Concl
		flow	Starting time	Ending time	Starting place	Ending place	Date	Transport	
1	x	x	x	x	x	√	√	√	x
2	√	x	√	x	√	√	√	√	√
3	x	x	√	√	x	√	√	√	√
4	x	x	√	√	x	√	√	√	x
5	x	x	√	√	√	√	x	√	x
6	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
7	√	x	√	x	x	√	√	√	x
8	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
9	x	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
10	x	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
<b>Total: good points</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>

**Table 3: Table showing sequencing of events for school B**

School: B	Intro	Development							Concl
		flow	Starting time	Ending time	Starting place	Ending place	Date	Transport	
1	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	x	x	x	x	x	√	x	√	x
3	x	x	√	x	x	√	√	√	√
4	x	x	√	x	x	√	√	√	√
5	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√	x
6	x	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
7	√	x	√	√	x	√	x	√	√
8	x	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
9	x	x	√	√	x	√	√	√	x
10	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
<b>Total: good points</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>

Many of the pupils have problems with writing sequential events. Their main problem seems to be their failure to show explicitly the progression of events.

From the above examples, the way the pupils tell their story is a problem which is related to inter sentence coherence like in the first example below (from school A). The problems are also as a result of a lack of appropriate vocabulary like in the second example (from school B). Failure to use words well has a negative impact on the flow of the composition.

An example from school A:

*I went on a journey on the 14 of January on that day it was my brothers birthday. We went to Kasane we saw a lot of animals and we even slept in the forest. It was really scary and I had never slept on the bushes before so I was afraid. I went on that journey because I was going to be aloof, my mother went to a trip, my sister went to visit her friend. I went on that journey with my friends and teachers the teachers were there to take care of us. We took Seabelo's Express because it is a very comfortable bus and many pupils liked it.*

An example from school B:

*I go with my brother to visit my uncle. I can go to by food with can eat in the bus. The are 500 killometer to go at Gaborone to Mochudi. I can take three hour to go at Mochudi when bus is ourkaey and it not problem.*

Pupils need to be taught how to consider situations thoroughly such that there is a story line. Pupils need to be developed in the area of critical thinking so that at their early years they could reflect well on what they are writing. This is because, for the composition to have a good flow of ideas, the writer should think critically. A flow of ideas also requires that pupils should be creative. The pupils could probably perform better if they are taught cohesion before writing the composition. There are also some guiding questions that are normally given to pupils by the class teachers. These guiding questions should include aspects like; who, when, where, why for a narrative composition.

It is possible that pupils could be poor in sequencing events chronologically because they are not taught creativity and critical thinking. For a narrative composition, all these are the pupils' initiative and the teacher cannot guide them any further. From the findings, the school in the city performed slightly better than the school in the village. This could be because of the varied backgrounds that pupils come from. Those in the city are better placed as compared to those in the village.

On the basis of the above findings, it seems the pupils could not produce a coherent text because of the following three problems:

- a) Sociological/Psychological factors: These involve a situation where the pupils want to express themselves but have some form of fear. The fear is the uncertainty about what they want to say. Our learners need assurance that textual production is the expression of the self which is neither wrong nor right. This will help pupils to have confidence in using English as a form of communication.
- b) Cultural factors: One of the cultural problems is that English is not a mother tongue in Botswana. It is not the language of the pupils' cultural identity. Language is a mirror of culture which reflects the world around

and inside us (Ter- Minasova, 2003: 301). In most of Botswana government schools, the pupils only meet English when they start school, except when they go to a pre-school. Because of this cultural problem, even at primary, English is not fully used as a means of communication. Our learners need cultural change, where it could be normal to converse in English at earlier stages.

- c) Linguistic factors: As pupils move from home to school, they have not gained much exposure in expressing themselves in English. There should be linguistic exposure right from home. This could be in the form of pictures and cartoons in English. Further, there should be exposure to literary texts. Pupils should be encouraged to read newspapers, magazines and books, right from the beginning of their primary education.

The encouraging thing is that both pupils are not under pressure in order to write good coherent compositions. This is because all classes in primary schools have an English lesson slot of 30 or 60 minutes daily. Composition writing is for 60 minutes every week. The pressure that leads to pupils not writing coherent compositions relates to their poor command of basic English communication. Fanning (1988: 161) notes that the real reason for the special feeling of pressure is something more particular to the course than to the duration.

#### **4. Implications of the study**

The findings of this study are very important for ESL teaching in Botswana. Many studies have been undertaken by other scholars like (Connor & Johns, 1990; Kies, 1995; Horning, 1991; Witte & Faigley, 1981; Johns, 1980) on the subject of cohesion and coherence. These previous studies looked at coherence and cohesion in many different ways and they also addressed different contexts in colleges and universities. This study, therefore, addresses coherence and cohesion from the Botswana context. It looks at ESL learning in Botswana at the primary school level. The study brings some measures that can be taken to address an ESL situation like the one in Botswana. The study serves as an eye opener to the primary schools and the curriculum in Botswana. The teacher should not only mark the content of the pupils' compositions, but should also consider coherence and cohesion within the text. So, it should be the teacher's task to see to it that the First Language is used as a cultural capital for the learning of the Second Language.

#### **5. Recommendations**

With regard to coherence and cohesion of compositions discussed in this paper, there is need for teachers to address them in their teaching. It is recommended that:

- grammatical features like tense and aspect in composition writing should be well drilled by the teacher before the lesson.
- pupils be thoroughly taught how to sequence events in a composition.



- the Principal Education Officers (PEO's) should organize *coherent writing* workshops for the teachers. The skills acquired would be imparted to the pupils.
- resources like Television, Computer Software and Audio Tapes should be supplied to schools. These will expose the pupils to samples of coherent texts.
- the *Theusarus* should be supplied as early as the primary school. This will help pupils to develop knowledge of the lexically related words because it is an important aspect of coherence.
- pupils should be encouraged to always edit their work before submission.
- both the home and the school should provide pupils with the assurance that first language is cultural and linguistic capital for learning second language. This will help pupils improve their English compositions.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examined how coherence and cohesion are used by primary school pupils in their writing of English compositions. The findings of this study suggest that primary school pupils in the sample do not write coherent texts. This is because most of them do not use the correct tense to relate to the events that occurred in the past. Further the conclusion drawn from this study is that these primary school pupils have a problem of sequencing events in a chronological order so as to show the use of aspect in their compositions. Finally, the role of the first language is also important because it influences the way the pupils write their compositions.

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