

Analyzing Errors in Academic Essays Written by English Department Students

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Abstract

English Department students are expected to be able to write an academic essay as they learn the theories of writing an academic essay in Writing courses. Yet, their academic essays still contain structure errors. This study aims to analyze the structure errors in the fields of unity and coherence. The methods of this study are first identifying the structure errors on the data and second classifying the errors on whether the error is about the unity or coherence. The finding shows a significant number of errors on unity and coherence in most paragraphs of the essays.

Keywords: *essay structure errors, unity, coherence, academic essay*

Introduction

Being able to write an academic essay is one competence that must be mastered by English Department students since they learn the theories of writing an academic essay in Writing courses as requested by the curriculum. In Writing courses, students learn how to write academic essays appropriately. They also have an experience of writing some academic essays. Unfortunately, some of the students' academic essays still contain errors on the structure.

Seeing that there are several kinds of errors on the academic essay structure, this study does not analyze all the errors but errors in two fields only. The reason of choosing these two fields of errors is because they are important elements of effective academic writing. They are the errors on unity and coherence of each paragraph in an academic essay.

Theoretical Framework

Theories on the structure of essay used to analyze the data of this study are proposed by some experts found in such books on academic writing as *Effective Academic Essay 2: The Short Essay* by Savage and Mayer (2005), *Writing Academic English* by Oshima and Hogue (1999), *College Writing Skills* by Langan (2008), and *Discoveries in Academic Writing* by Leonhard (2002). These books mention that among the standards of effective academic writing are unity and coherence. Therefore, this study is limited to analyze the data from the two standards only; namely unity and coherence.

It is essential that an appropriate writing must have unity. Unity in a paragraph means that all sentences support one main idea (Savage & Mayer, 2005). This is in line with a statement that every effective paragraph has unity,

which means that there is only one single idea is discussed (Oshima & Hogue, 1999). Furthermore, another important point of unity is that every supporting sentence must directly describe or provide evidence of the main idea that is stated in the topic sentence (Oshima & Hogue, 1999). Accomplishing unity means that all the details in a academic writing related to the thesis and to the supporting topic sentences (Langan, 2008). It is then clear that a paragraph having more than one idea or the supporting sentences support more than one single idea does not have unity and neither does a paragraph having a supporting sentence that does not directly explain the main idea of the paragraph. Thus, these kinds of paragraph are considered inappropriate.

Another standard of effective writing that is used as limitation in this study is coherence. To build coherence in a paragraph, the ideas must have a rational movement; meaning that the connection between the sentences is clear and one idea links to the next (Savage & Mayer, 2005). In other words, the flow from one sentence to the next must be logical and smooth in order to have coherence in writing (Oshima & Hogue, 1999). Being coherent, or “stick together”, means that all the supporting ideas and sentences in a paper must be organized (Langan, 2008). When the sentences follow each other smoothly and logically, the English writing is coherent (Leonhard, 2002). So, if there is jump among the sentences of a paragraph or the sentences do not flow smoothly, the paragraph is not coherent and regarded as inappropriate paragraph.

Research Method

This study employs descriptive qualitative design. Qualitative research is designed to provide description of a specific program, practice, or setting (Mertens, 2010). The study provides explanations of errors on unity and coherence of paragraphs in academic essays. The data being studied here is academic essays which are obtained from natural setting without any manipulations or controls. The source of data was ten academic essays written by English Department students of third semester in Airlangga University. Random sampling was used to choose the essays.

After collecting the ten academic essays, analysis was made. There are two steps in analyzing the data. First, the structure errors on the data are identified. Second, they are classified into the limitations of the errors. Since unity and coherence are standards of effective academic writing, they then are chosen as the limitations of the errors in academic essay structure. As a result, the identified structure errors are classified on whether the error is about the unity or coherence.

Data Analysis

The data analysis is presented in two parts: Errors on Unity and Errors on Coherence to provide further description and deeper understanding on the findings of errors on students' essay structure. The descriptions are in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers, and cannot be achieved by reducing pages of narration to numbers (McMillan, 2008).

Errors on Unity

The data analysis shows a great number of errors on unity. The causes of errors are various. One is because the paragraph contains a supporting sentence that Oshima and Hogue (1999, p. 31) call “off the topic.” Another is because the paragraph has more than one idea.

To know more clearly about the errors, the following paragraph is one of paragraph that is error on unity. It is the introductory paragraph of an essay titled *Role of Television*.

- (1) For decades, we have seen **many parts of our world rapidly change because of technology** (1). Today’s society has been transformed by means of communication and the available information through mass media (2). Many people rely on television for news, sports, and entertainment (3). Television is just one of the many examples of how technology has changed our life (4). Since the invention of television in the early 1900’s, it has played a very important role in our life (5). **Having television set in home has become very essential in today’s society** (6). We depend on it to entertain and to inform us about current world issues (7).

In excerpt (1), it can be easily known that the clause which is bold in sentence 1 (S1) is the idea of the paragraph. The following sentences should support and prove this idea. But S6 is irrelevant sentence because it is “off the topic” and does not support the idea of the paragraph. Because of this irrelevant sentence, the paragraph is considered error on unity.

Another example of paragraph that has error on unity is the second supporting paragraph out of two supporting paragraphs from an essay titled *Traffic Jam*.

- (2) **If most of people like using public transportation, traffic jam problem will be decreasing** (13). However, public transportation is unusual for our people because of the condition of the transportation itself (14). **The government must repair and maintain the public transportation so people will not afraid to go by bus or the government has to convince the people that using public transportation is better than using private transportation** (15). And also, there are many advantages that we can take from public transportation (16). That’s why, to solve traffic jam problem, the government and the society must have a good cooperation (17).

The paragraph in passage (2) has more than one idea: first, public transportation can solve traffic jam problem and second, the government must repair and maintain the public transportation. As stated by Oshima and Hogue (1999, p. 30), a good paragraph has unity when only one idea discussed. Thus, it is clear that this paragraph is error on unity because there are two main ideas discussed.

Errors on Coherence

The data analysis shows a wide range of errors on coherence. The most common cause is because the movement from one sentence to the next sentence in a paragraph is illogical and not smooth. There are sometimes jumps on the supporting sentences of a paragraph.

To see more clearly an error on coherence, here is the same paragraph like the one presented to show the error on unity. It is the introductory paragraph of an essay titled *Role of Television*.

- (3) For decades, we have seen many parts of our world rapidly change because of **technology** (1). Today's society has been transformed by means of communication and the available information through **mass media** (2). **Many people rely on television** for news, sports, and entertainment (3). **Television is just one of the many examples of how technology has changed our life** (4). Since the invention of television in the early 1900's, it has played a very important role in our life (5). Having television set in home has become very essential in today's society (6). We depend on it to entertain and to inform us about current world issues (7).

The words that are printed on boldface form in text (3) above indicate that the movement from one sentence to the next is not smoothly. The first term used is technology in S1, followed by mass media in S2 that does not directly relate to technology, and then the next term is television in S3 and S4 that is closely related with technology. After these three terms, a sentence mentioning that television is part of technology has just been stated. So, this paragraph contains some jumping sentences. That is why the paragraph is regarded error on coherence.

This finding is in line with Mali's (2014) study stating that one of coherence problems that he found in analyzing 18 essays was irrelevant supporting evidence. He found jumping ideas among the supporting sentences written to support a topic sentence in a paragraph.

Conclusion

Important elements of good academic writing are unity and coherence. Unity is that all sentences of the paragraph support one single idea. Coherence is about the smooth and logical movement from a sentence to the next sentences in a paragraph. These two standards, unity and coherence, are the limitations of this study in analyzing the data which are academic essays.

Based on the data analysis, it is clear that the data show a significant number of errors on unity and coherence in most paragraphs of the essays. So, it is a fact that students' academic essays still contain errors on the structure though they have learned the theories of writing an academic essay in the Writing courses.

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