

Written Discourse

**ALAN R. MACEDO
MA PROGRAM – TESL/TEFL
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND
MODULE 5 – MARCH 31ST, 2001**

1.0 Aims

The aims of this report on **Written Discourse** include the following topics:

- a) *Analyzing* problems in processing text produced by a student.
- b) *Rewriting* that text into a more acceptable form.

After an introduction of relevant background literature on written discourse, an e-mail letter will be analyzed for problems and rewritten into a suggested form. This will be followed with a discussion on the pedagogical implications and accompanied by suggestions for various activities, on how to better instruct the student/learner in overcoming similar problems and/or difficulties when producing written discourse.

1.1 Analyzing Written Discourse

There are many approaches to analyzing written discourse. Cook (1989) explains at the **bottom-up** or *micro*-level, discourse is interpreted at the lowest level units first, then it proceeds to an interpretation of the rank above. At the **top-down** or *macro*-level, discourse is interpreted by hypothesizing the most general units first. Then, it moves downward through the ranks below. A top-down approach regards all levels of language working together as a whole. Conversely, the bottom-up approach divides communication into discrete levels, which can be dealt with separately. Because of the unusual nature of this particular text (an e-mail letter), various approaches from both top-down (macro/holistic) and bottom-up (micro/atomistic) will be investigated.

One important component in written discourse is **cohesion**. Cohesion is the formal link between sentences and clauses. Halliday and Hasan (1976) believe that most texts display some links between sentences in terms of grammatical features. These features include base forms of *conjunction* (which connects the parts of sentences, phrases and clauses) *pronominalization* (which refers to words in their pronoun-form) and finally, *ellipsis* (which is the omission of clauses, phrases and words that can be recovered from context or elsewhere in the discourse). Cohesion is a vital component in making written text more coherent for the reader. Without it, the reader may be left with an incoherent piece of non-sequential discourse to decipher. Winter (1994:94) states below, that clause relations can affect textual cohesion at the bottom-up or micro-level:

The moment you put any two sentences together for a purpose, your listener or reader looks for a sensible connection between the topics, and if they make sense to him/her, it will be because s/he can relate the two sentences in the same way as they relate to the constituents of the clause in expected ways. The important factor is the sequence.

Hoey (1983) and Winter (1976) also believe that knowledge is not linear, but discourse is. All writers are faced with the problem of how to organize and present his/her non-linear message in a comprehensible linear form. There are many text patterns to help facilitate this organization and presentation. They include claim-counterclaim, general-specific, hypothetical-real, problem-solution, cause-consequence and so on. If any of these patterns exist in this text, it shall be determined *which* patterns are present, and if they are *appropriate* to the nature and content of this letter. At the *macro*-level, additional problems in the shape and/or structure of the sample letter will be identified, along with any problems in sentences and/or clauses found at the *micro*-level of the text.

2.0 Analyzing a Specific Text

2.1 The Letter

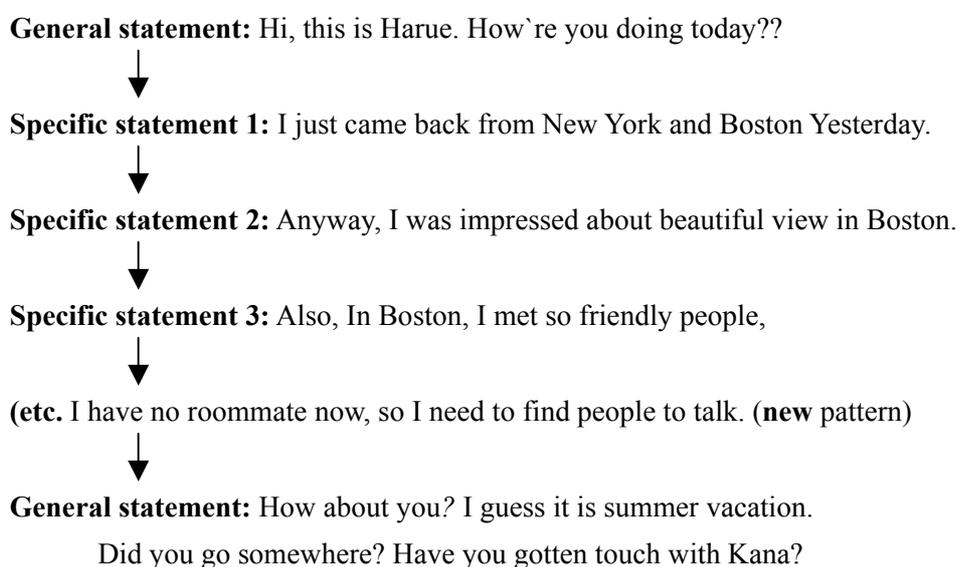
This particular piece of discourse is an *e-mail* letter, which was written by a former Japanese high school student. The student is attending university in the United States, where she is now in her second year of studying English. (Note: the e-mail letter was received in this *precise* format without paragraphs, etc. However, the lines of the text *have been numbered* for the purpose of easier identification in the analysis and rewrite.)

- 1) Hi, this is Harue. How`re you doing today?? I just came back from New York and
- 2) Boston Yesterday. It was really nice to take a trip for me.. Also, I went to Carifornia
- 3) before that. I have kind of busy time in this summer...Anyway, I was impressed
- 4) about beautiful view of Boston. Also New York reminds me of Tokyo. Utan is kind
- 5) of counrty place. So I enjoyed a lot there. You know what, I stayed at the station in
- 6) Manhattan one night. It was so scary. I should have stayed at hotel, I guess
- 7) everyone could tell that. But, I did with my friend. It was so dangerous, but I had a
- 8) good experiance. Also, in Boston, I met so friendly people, then, they let us in their
- 9) house as B & B. Because I couldn`t find any place to stay. I felt so kindness of
- 10) people at that time. I was supposed to visit Quebec and Tront, but we couldn`t
- 11) because we didn`t have enough time there. Next time we`ll travel around Canada.

- 12) Recently I haven't used English much...So I'm lacking English skills...I have no
 13) roommate now, so I need to find people to talk. How about you?? I guess it is
 14) summer vacation now. Did you go somewhere?? Have you gotten touch with
 15) Kana?? I haven't see her for long time. I heard she's also interested in overseas. So
 16) I'm wondering how she is...She might study abroad like me...Anyway, I have to
 17) go now. I'll write to you sometime. See you later, Harue

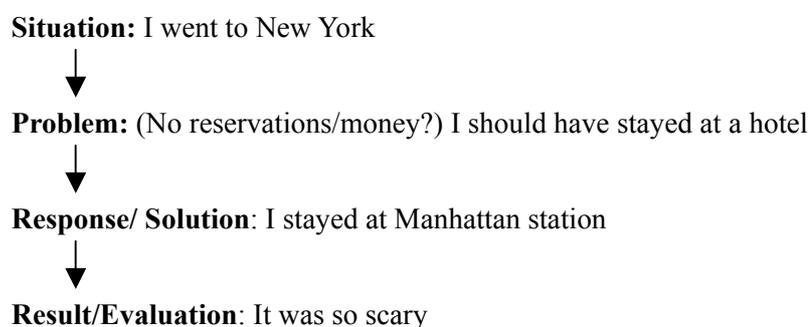
2.2 Problems in Text Patterns

Finding problems in the text is a matter of interpretation by the reader, making use of clues and signals provided by the author. It is not a question of finding *one* right answer, and it will often be possible to analyze a given text in more than one way. But certain patterns tend to occur frequently in particular settings. After reading the letter, an overall **General-Specific** (G-S) pattern seems to emerge. McCarthy (1991) identifies this pattern as having an initial *general* statement followed by a series of more specific statements, concluding finally with a further generalization. The nature of personal or informal letters might suggest that this pattern is an appropriate vehicle for this style of text. Below is the overall G-S pattern (with all of its original errors) found in the text:

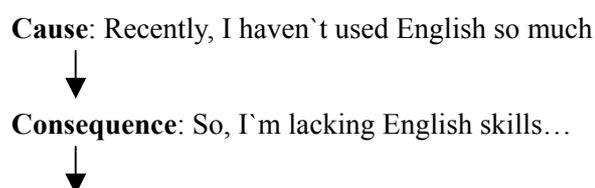


Although the text appears to follow McCarthy's (1991) G-S pattern, there is a slight deviation towards the end. Even though '*How about you?*' is a general question, it does not follow the previous link of *travel-related* statements in the pattern. To review the sequence of events: the letter starts off with a general introduction, and then three

specific statements about Boston. This is followed by two smaller patterns (to be analyzed later) appearing in the middle. At this point, the text seems to have an acceptable G-S sequence pattern. However, the letter loses direction at the end of text when the topic moves from summer vacation, to her struggle with English, back to summer vacation, and finally to a general inquiry about another student. Because of this pattern deviation and lack of clear sequencing, the letter is difficult to follow and interpret what exactly she is asking of the reader *e.g.* ‘*Did you go somewhere for vacation or do you have people to talk with?*’. This sequencing problem affects the cohesion, which in turn, affects the coherence of the discourse. It would be more appropriate to have the last general-statement of this G-S pattern be related directly back to the **topic** of travel *e.g.* line #3, ‘*I have kind of busy time in this summer*’. Then, the reader may be able to recognize that the end of the topic is near or the pattern will change soon. Other patterns seem to be embedded within the G-S pattern. The student describes a problem encountered during her visit to New York. This fits with Hoey’s (1983) **Problem-Solution** (P-S) pattern, containing a situation (within which there is a problem), a problem (within the situation, requiring a response), a response or solution (to the problem), and an evaluation or result (of the response/solution). The text reads:



In analyzing this pattern in the text, it appears to follow Hoey’s (1983) P-S pattern. As a result, it fails to reveal any significant problems in cohesion or sequencing of the text. A short **Cause-Consequence** (C-C) pattern can also be found. This is one of the simple patterns that exist under the *clause-relation* family. These clauses are very significant semantic units of sentence function because they make the text more cohesive and coherent. This pattern is followed by another P-S pattern, inside the larger G-S pattern:



Problem: I have no roommate now



Solution: so, I need to find people to talk

2.3 Problems with Cohesion

Even though the C-C pattern changes abruptly to a P-S pattern, it remains cohesive at the micro level, because the final solution is an elaboration of the initial cause of her difficulty with English skills. So, it may be argued that the writer successfully uses these two text patterns *within* the overall general-specific pattern. However, the **sequencing** of the text (in lines #13-14) creates a problem with cohesion because it is different from McCarthy's (1991) *typical* G-S pattern. As a result, it affects the coherence of the letter. This will be a primary objective in rewriting the original text. At the macro level, '*How about you?*' (in line #13) falls completely out of sequence, and should appear toward the beginning of the letter as an initial general statement/question. At the micro level, there appears to be some general confusion and a misuse of **pronominalization** or reference to words in their pronoun form. In the letter, the writer makes many references to what *she* does during summer vacation. This makes the reader assume that even though *they* traveled together, the experiences belong exclusively to *her*. As a result, the text appears incoherent with these inconsistent references between 'I', and 'us/we'. For example, in line #8 '...in Boston, **I** met so friendly people, then, they let **us** stay...' and in #10-11, '**I** was suppose to go to Tront, but **we** couldn't because **we** didn't have enough time'. McCarthy (ibid.:167) believes a reason for this problem is some languages tolerate more repetition of the noun head (as it seems to operate in Japanese) rather than correct pronominalization. As a result, students may unnecessarily repeat the same noun-head, disrupting the cohesion/coherence of the text. However, I argue that it may be irrelevant in this case, because the student doesn't repeat the same noun-head; she merely displays trouble in *matching* the correct pronoun to the original noun-head.

2.4 The Rewritten Letter

In the suggested rewrite, specific efforts are made to make the letter more **sequentially** cohesive to follow a *clearer* G-S pattern (see underlined text). By moving line #13 (*How about you?*) to the beginning, and line #3 (*I have kind of busy time in this summer*) to the end of the G-S pattern, it helps the letter become more sequential and coherent at the macro-level. It also makes the text easier to predict because there is a

clearer beginning and ending on the topic of summer vacation. This is done without sacrificing the original content of the letter. The new G-S pattern starts with (paragraph 1) a general introduction and question concerning summer vacation followed by specifics about her travels. Then, it moves to (paragraph 2) more specific statements about summer vacation. Finally, the G-S pattern finishes with a general statement about the same topic. In paragraph 3, the additional patterns address the other issues, but remain cohesive in the text by starting a new paragraph. The corrections concerning the problem of pronominalization (see *italicized* pronouns) and the lack of proper paragraphing (for structure) are also made in the letter. Finally, even though there were many spelling and punctuation errors, (which may be a problem directly related to *composing* e-mail on a word processor) they fail to disrupt the cohesion or make the text less coherent. However, these errors need to be recognized and corrected in order to make the letter suitable for the reader. Suggestions for this and the problems mentioned above will be addressed in following section on pedagogical implications.

Hi! This is Harue. How are you doing? Did you go anywhere for summer vacation? My friend and I just got back yesterday from a long trip! *We* traveled to California, Boston and New York. I was most impressed by the beautiful view in Boston, and New York reminded me of Tokyo. I enjoyed being there the most, because it was more exciting than rural Utah, where I live now.

Guess what? In New York, *we* did something a little dangerous. *We* stayed overnight in Manhattan station. It was so scary and I know *we* should have stayed in a hotel. I guess anyone should know that! Even though it was dangerous, *it* was a good experience. Then, in Boston, *we* got lucky. *We* met some nice people and they let *us* stay at their house as a B & B. I was very moved by how kind the people were to *us*. Finally, *we* were supposed to visit Quebec and Toronto, but *we* ran out of time. Next time, *we* hope to make it to Canada. Even though *our* trip was busy, *it* was very nice!

Recently, I have not been able to use my English very much because I do not have a roommate to converse with. As a result, I feel my English skills are declining. By the way, have you gotten in touch with Kana recently? Unfortunately, I have not seen her for a long time. I heard she was interested in studying overseas like me. I often wonder how she is, and if she will also study abroad like me someday. Well, I have to go now!

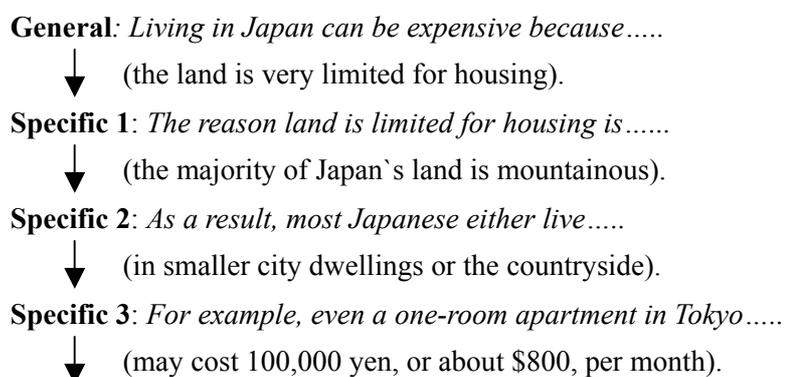
I'll write to you again sometime. See you! Harue

3.0 Pedagogical Implications

This section is a discussion of the pedagogical implications (i.e. how to remedy *in-class* the problems encountered in a text) of the analysis and the rewritten letter. With the need for general discourse in mind, it is best to examine many language-teaching strategies for the practice it provides in the elements of discourse, so that teachers/students may have a broad and effective range of activities to teach/learn from.

3.1 Teaching Text Patterns

It would be pragmatic to deal with classroom activities, which are directed toward similar problems in structure at the macro-level and cohesion at the micro-level. At the macro-level (or top-down approach) the following activities are also be referred to as **holistic** – or dealing with the parts working together. At the micro-level (or bottom-up approach) these suggested activities are also referred to as **atomistic** – or the division of language into parts. A good deal of language teaching has followed a bottom-up approach, because it has considered only the formal language system, often in isolated sentences, without demonstrating or developing the way that system operates in context. Even within the formal system, further divisions have been made, so that exercises, parts of lessons, and home assignments attempt to deal with pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar isolation. In this letter, the student displays a particular problem with successfully completing a general-specific pattern. One suggestion to deal with this problem at the atomistic level is an activity called **segment starters**. McCarthy (1991) believes that this classroom activity can take the strain off macro-level planning, but still produce a learner-generated text for scrutiny in the classroom. Each learner creates a textual segment relevant to a given topic, with segment-starters containing signal words of the targeted pattern. Here is an example of a G-S pattern in an *invented text*.



etc.



General: *Even though living in Japan is expensive.....*

(many people do live there).

The next stage of this activity is marshalling the individual segments into a coherent text. This activity is guided by the holistic constraints of a typical general-specific pattern as seen in the *revised* e-mail letter (section 2.4). These recurrent features of textual patterning may be exploited in vocabulary teaching/learning as a top-down phenomenon. Once conscious of a larger text pattern, the learner can be brought to an awareness of the rich vein of vocabulary that regularly realizes it. As a bottom-up/atomistic phenomenon, learners can bring together in their vocabulary records items that regularly occur in similar textual environments, e.g. the typical specified statements found in a general-specific pattern. Such lists can be added over a period of time to build up a rich, textually based lexicon. Regarding the general question about her friend Kana, which appears toward the end of the e-mail letter, Hinds (1983) presents evidence, which demonstrates cultural differences in textual structure. He believes there to be an acceptance in Japanese texts, of *abrupt insertions* of irrelevant matter. However, it may be argued that even though the general question about her friend is somewhat abrupt, it certainly is *not* irrelevant to the nature of this personal letter, and does not appear to deviate enough from the G-S pattern to affect the overall cohesion of the text. However, it should definitely be **marked**, to alert the reader that the subject of travel has been changed to a different topic. Here are two general (but common) bottom-up strategies to help students from getting trapped in the difficulties of micro-level discourse planning, at the expense of macro-level discourse management:

- 1) **Signposting** the sentence relationship between the two clauses. By adding an indicator, such as *by the way*, *anyway* or *well*, it will contrast new from old information, as suggested in paragraph 3 of the rewritten e-mail letter (see 2.4).
- 2) **Paragraphing** the text to show that the previous topic has ended and a new topic will begin. Because paragraphs were not present in the sample e-mail letter, it is still unclear if the problem originates at the students macro-level planning skills *or* it is just the nature of composing personal e-mail letters. Regardless of the problem, this simple suggestion to include paragraphing can be applied to either writing situation.

3.2 Teaching Cohesion

As mentioned in section 1.1, Halliday and Hasan (1976) believe that cohesion is the formal link between sentences and clauses. Because cohesion has been neglected (until its current revival in the 1970`s) it may be assumed that many student difficulties arise primarily from lack of vocabulary or the complexity of grammatical structure at the sentence level. In addition, the situation is made worse by the traditional approach, which determines a particular use to be right or wrong. Nuttall, (1982) suggests that cohesion may be taught easily by identifying problems *first* and then asking questions to which the meaning of the cohesive item is made explicit. She (ibid.:91) adds this:

The answers to these questions have to be found by searching the text and using your common sense and knowledge of the context (...) To develop this skill does not require complicated exercises. The difficulty is to make students realize the value of these activities and to prevent them from dismissing them as trivial. Preparing exercises for this purpose may be lost unless examples are located in an extended text.

In the e-mail letter, the student demonstrated many difficulties related to the cohesion of her text. To address this, Nuttall (see Cook 1989:132) suggests these three general activities and teaching methods for teachers to demonstrate cohesion to students:

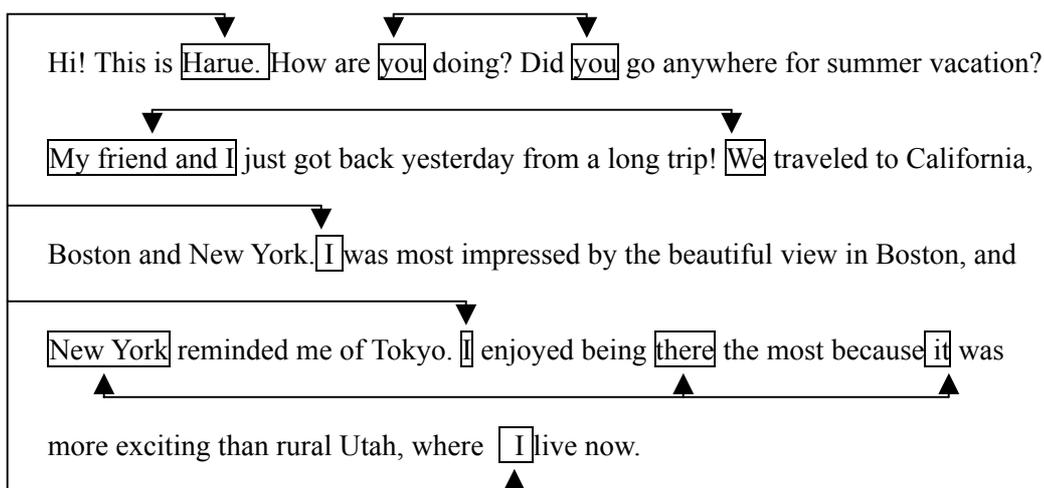
- A) More advanced students may enjoy **making their own questions**, searching the text for items they think may baffle their colleagues. This gives good practice in focusing attention on any potential problems, a skill they need for tackling texts independently. Here is an example of this activity, using Nuttall`s (1982) model:

Clause: The Greeks believed so.

Q1: **What did the Greeks believe?**

- B) A specific bottom-up approach to help teachers address the problem of teaching cohesion in the classroom would be to supply a suitable (invented, text-book or authentic) text by **putting boxes around relevant items**. Then, students can find all other items with the same reference as each boxed item. Students then circle each item and join them with lines to the appropriate boxed items, or use different colors so that all items with the same referent will be underlined or circled with the same color. The teacher puts a box around the noun-head and the students

identify all relevant pronouns. This suggested activity can specifically help students experiencing problems with pronominalization affecting text cohesion. It is best demonstrated by working through a selected text on an overhead projector. One advantage of using an OHP is that blank transparencies or copies can be overlaid on the text and the lines and circles can be drawn using colored, water-soluble pens. This allows for easier correction of mistakes. Below, is an example of this activity using the first paragraph from the *revised* e-mail letter:



- C) Another strategy to help learners better understand pronominalization for cohesion, would be to supply a text with **reference items** (or some of them) **omitted** and replaced by gaps. Then, provide the list of items in random order as a guide for a follow-up activity. Applied to an *invented* text, this activity would look like this:

(1)_____ enjoy riding bicycles because (2)_____ are very fun. Bicycles are very inexpensive and (3)_____ can ride them with (4)_____ friends or family. Riding a bicycle is also very good for (5)_____ health. If (6)_____ do not own a bike, (7)_____ suggest either renting (8)_____ or consider buying a used (9)_____ at first. If (10)_____ do ride bicycles, (11)_____ should always wear (12)_____ helmet!

Omissions: (4) = your, (12) = your, (8) = one, (2) = they, (10) = you, (6) = you, (1) = I, (9) = one, (3) = you, (5) = your, (7) = I, (11) = you.

It is to be noted that activities which focus on cohesion, should consider all *processing* and *production* of verb forms, reference, repetition, lexical chains, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. However, these activities should avoid confusing the *use* of cohesion with the knowledge *about* cohesion. There is no need to burden students with the

difficult terminology for analyzing cohesion in the field of linguistics. For this reason, a unit of discourse can be approached successfully by teachers using these two effective methods: (1) **Analysis** of cohesive devices and their stylistic effect, and (2) **Devising** activities (such as the three suggested above) which will better develop their use and understanding. Confusion between the above two stages should be avoided whenever possible, because the primary goal for learners is to be able to operate the interlocking systems of discourse, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in their entirety.

3.3 Teaching Sequencing

In the e-mail letter, the university student displayed some difficulty with sequencing in her text. To help students with this problem in the classroom, Cook (1989) suggests an exercise called **recombination**, or **scrambled sentences**. This fairly common activity is designed to sensitize students in sequencing, discourse structure, and clause relations. Asking learners to recreate a text from its constituent parts has the dual advantage of providing a problem-solving task, and avoiding much decontextualized explanation. First, a text (invented or authentic is acceptable) is divided into sentences or clauses. Then, the text is given to the student(s) in random order, or cut-up into strips of paper. Finally, the students decide on the correct order so that it forms a coherent text. The text can then be rewritten into a more acceptable form. The recombination activity is demonstrated here using an example from an *invented* text, and should be noted that the teacher must use discretion in determining the appropriate text-level for the student(s).

A > The King lived in a large castle on top of a hill, which overlooked his kingdom.
B > So, the King had his guards call the townspeople back.
C > Once upon a time, there lived a wise and generous King.
D > The King simply responded, “What is a kingdom without its people?”
E > After hearing of the incident, the King became angry because the voice of the townspeople in his kingdom was very important to him.

F > But the townspeople was turned away because he came unannounced.

G > One day, a townspeople came to the castle to inform the King of a problem.

H > When he was finally brought to the King, the townspeople was very grateful.

Now, the C>A>G>F>E>B>H>D strips can be rewritten into a complete text as below.

Once upon a time, there lived a wise and generous King. The King lived in a large castle on top of a hill, which overlooked his kingdom. One day, a townspeople came to the castle to inform the King of a problem. But the townspeople was turned away because he came unannounced. After hearing of the incident, the King became very angry because the voice of the townspeople in his kingdom was very important to him. So, the King had his guards call the townspeople back. When he was finally brought to the King, the townspeople was very grateful. The King simply responded, “What is a kingdom without its people?”

It may also be suggested that this strategy be implemented as a group activity because students can incorporate their problem-solving skills while exercising learner autonomy. Finally, it should be noted for activities such as these, that teachers can reduce the discourse intuitively by what they judge to be suitable for their own students. In fact, text samples need not necessarily be derived from an existing piece of discourse. They may simply be invented. As Widdowson (1978:163) states, ‘the act of invention may seem to depart from the current obsession with the use of authentic texts’, so it should be remembered that authenticity is a feature of how we *use* the text, not of the text *itself*.

3.4 Additional Activities

Even though there were many spelling and punctuation mistakes found in the e-mail letter (e.g. the misspellings of the *place names* California, Toronto and Utah) they failed to affect the overall cohesion of the text. However, possible solutions to help correct these problems are necessary. Hacker (1996) suggests these two simple activities for students to use when revising and editing discourse. Proofreading a text for misspellings, typographical mistakes and omitted words may be a dull methodical task. One strategy

to fight this tendency is to **proofread out loud** or articulate each word as it is actually written. This awareness-raising activity may alert the writer to careless mistakes, because students usually read what they intended to write. The other strategy to help students with writing is proofreading the drafted sentences (printed on paper) in **reverse order**. This bottom-up/atomistic activity helps take attention away from the intended meaning and forces the student to look closer at the micro-level of the text.

5.0 Conclusion

The e-mail letter proved that analyzing written discourse can be very difficult. With a multitude of problems present in almost all texts, the reader has a great responsibility for interpreting the meaning of what is written. However, by using a variety of approaches to identify the specific problems in the e-mail letter, a clear and cohesive text was easier to rewrite. In spite of weaknesses found in this letter, it was also demonstrated how to rewrite a text without losing meaningful content and authenticity.

At the *macro*-level, the student initially produces a *semi*-cohesive text, which loosely follows McCarthy's (1991) general-specific pattern. Along with a cause-consequence situation, she incorporates Hoey's (1983) problem-solution pattern for the general shape of her letter. In the analysis, only three lines (#3, 13, 14) in the text were identified as being out of sequence, thus creating the problem with cohesion in the discourse. However, by clearly marking these clauses at the *micro*-level, the letter became more coherent and easier to predict. As Winter (1994:49) states, 'the sensible connection between topics is made the moment two sentences are put together.' The text will then make sense because of expected relationships between the clauses. In the end, this reasonable connection made it a much easier piece of discourse to interpret and rewrite.

Concerning the pedagogical implications of the analysis/rewrite for teaching writing in the classroom, several top-down/bottom-up strategies were suggested to help learners with similar problems. To better develop written discourse skills teachers should consider utilizing a *balance* of holistic and atomistic activities when implementing various strategies in the classroom. The practical pressures of language teaching exist because teachers must carefully evaluate the descriptive insights before accepting these suggestions as final solutions. As Nuttall (1982) mentions earlier, developing these skills should utilize more common sense rather than complicated exercises. With this in mind, a wider path can open to coherent written discourse for effective communication.

References

- Cook, G. (1989). *Discourse*, Oxford University Press. Oxford. pp. 79-132.
- Coulthard, M. (1994). *Advances in Written Text Analysis*, Routledge: London & N.Y.
- Hacker, D. (1996). *A Canadian Writer's Reference*, 2nd Edition, Nelson Pub. pp.33-35.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & R. Hasan (1976). *Cohesion in English*, London: Longman.
- Hinds, J. (1983). Contrastive rhetoric: Japanese and English. *Text*, 3, 183-95.
- Hoey, M.P. (1983). *On the Surface of Discourse*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. CUP pp. 25-170.
- Nuttall, C. (1982). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. London: Heinemann.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1978). *Explorations in Applied Linguistics 1*. Oxford: OUP.
- Winter, E. O. (1976). 'Fundamentals of information structure: a pilot manual for further development according to student need' mimeo, Hatfield Polytechnic.
- Winter, E. O. (1994). 'Clause Relations as informal structure: two basic text structures in English' in R.M. Coulthard (ed.) *Advances in Written Text Analysis* Routledge: London pp. 46-47.

