

**CONSTRUCTING COHERENT IDEAS AND USING COHERENCE DEVICES
IN WRITTEN DESCRIPTIVE ESSAYS: A Study at the Fourth Grade English
Department Students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi**

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Abstract

This paper derived from the research results conducted in 2011, looks into the skill of the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi in constructing coherent ideas and in using coherence devices in writing descriptive essays. The students' skill in constructing coherent ideas concerned the relevance and the order of ideas and in using coherence devices concerned the repetitions of the key words/nouns and the use of pronouns and transitional signals. The research results show that the students had weak skill in constructing coherent ideas and had low average skill in using the coherence devices. In relation to constructing coherent ideas, the relevance and the order of ideas of the students' descriptive essays were weak. Then, in relation to the use of coherence devices, the students' skill in repeating the key words/nouns was weak, and in using pronouns and transitional signals were high average. Therefore, the students could not achieve coherence in writing descriptive essays yet.

Key words/phrases: writing descriptive essays, coherent ideas, coherence devices

A. INTRODUCTION

Constructing coherent ideas and using coherence devices are two inter-related aspects that have to be taken into account in any kind of writing. In constructing coherent ideas, students need to know the relevance of ideas they have and to be able to arrange the ideas in effective, logical, and clear order (Kane, 2000). In other words, the students have to know which ideas come first and which ideas follow other ideas based on the relationship between them. Then, in using coherence devices, students have to keep in mind that the devices function as signaling the relationships between the ideas of different paragraphs, sentences, or between the ideas of parts of a sentence to achieve coherence. In line with this, Reid (1994) states that to make a paragraph smoother, a writer needs to use coherence devices. The devices are used to avoid the paragraph sound choppy (that is rough or interrupted). They consist of repetitions of the key nouns/ words, pronouns, and transitional signals (Reid,

1994; Oshima and Hogue, 1999; Briguglio, 2007).

In writing descriptive essays, constructing coherent ideas and using coherence devices should be seriously considered. They help achieve coherence as well as communicative purpose of the essay, that is to give objective or subjective descriptions about animate or inanimate objects such as human, animals, and things. According to Alomo College Writing Center (2010), a descriptive essay writer should make sure that he/she is "showing" rather than "telling". Therefore, he/ she should pay attention to the elements of a descriptive essay; topic, significance, details, language, reiteration, and questions to consider which, then, become his/ her consideration in elaborating his/ her ideas/ feelings through each part of the essay (introduction, body, and concluding paragraph (Stifler, 2002)).

To construct coherent ideas in writing descriptive essays, students must firstly be able to give relevant details (descriptions) about the topic of the essay they are

writing. In relation to this, Kane (2000) explains that the details of a descriptive essay are details that give objective or subjective descriptions. Objective description is how the thing is. It focuses on features that enable others to recognize what the writer is describing. Meanwhile, subjective description is how the thing seems to one particular consciousness. Here, the writer expresses his/ her feelings and evaluations which must be fixed in images, or which color the perceptions. In other words, the subjective descriptions should be rendered to the described objects.

Secondly, students must be able to arrange the objective or subjective details they have in logical and clear order. Dealing with this, Stifler (2002) explains that in the beginning (introduction), he/ she should identify thing to be described, relationships of thing to him/ her, and his/ her attraction for/ interest in thing. In this part, then, he/ she should state his/ her dominant impression about the topic concerning its significant, importance, relevance, or value through a thesis statement. In the middle (body), the writer should give details that illuminate the dominant impression. Here, he/ she should select appropriate details, focus on detail rather than explanation, select an appropriate order. The last, in the end of a descriptive essay (concluding paragraph), the writer needs to restate the dominant impression concerning the key details (see also Alomo College Writing Center, 2010).

Then, to be able to use coherence devices correctly and effectively in writing descriptive essays, the students need to understand how and when to use them. Related to this, Oshima and Hogue (1999) states that even though there is no fixed rule about how often to repeat the key words/ nouns, a writer needs to do it instead of using pronouns when the meaning is not clear. In addition to how to use pronouns, Macfadyen (2007) mentions that in using pronouns, a writer should firstly provide and introduce the actual noun that a pronoun is replacing. In using

transitional signals, then, Capella University Writing Center (2009) states that transitions are words or phrases which show the movement from one idea to another in the same sentence, from one sentence to another in the same paragraph, or from one paragraph to another in the same paper (see also Henning, 2008).

Referring to those theories, it is obvious that the skill of constructing coherent ideas and that of using coherence devices much influence the quality (coherence as well as communicative purpose) of a written descriptive essay. At STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi, in writing class, the students are taught how to construct coherent ideas and how to use coherence devices in the topic of coherence, and are taught how to write descriptive essay in the topic of essay writing. Therefore, this paper, which is derived from the research results conducted in 2011, looks into the skill of the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi in constructing coherent ideas and in using coherence devices in writing descriptive essays.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was a descriptive research conducted at STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi, on March – July 2011. The population of the reserach was all students of the fourth grade English department at STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi who have taken all Writing subjects (from Writing I up to Thesis Writing), registered in 2010/ 2011 academic year. The total sampling was used since the number of students was only 22. Then, the data were collected by administering descriptive essay wrting test three times in different days in which the students were required to write three different topics as well. The data were analyzed by referring to the indicators of ideal skill of constructing coherent ideas and using coherence devices in writing descriptive essays got from the theories which can be seen in table 1 and table 2.

Table 1. The Indicators of Ideal Skill in Constructing Coherent Ideas in Writing Descriptive Essays (Kane, 2000, Zemach and Rumisek, 2005, Chesla, 2006, Rao and friends, 2007)

Indicators	Score/ Category (Hamp-Lyon, 1992)	Criteria
The relevance of ideas	6 (High/ Excellent)	1. All ideas expressed are relevant to the essay topic in term of giving its objective or subjective descriptions
		2. The ideas of all sentences in each paragraph of the essay fit together
The order of ideas	6 (High/ Excellent)	1. Each paragraph of the essay are well ordered based on the essay structure
		2. All ideas expressed in each paragraph of the essay are ordered logically that support its main idea

Table 2. The Indicators of Ideal Skill in Using Coherence Devices in Writing Descriptive Essays (Wyrick, 1987, Oshima and Hogue, 1999, West Florida Writing Lab, 2003, Macfadyen, 2007, Capella University Writing Center, 2009)

Indicators	Score/ Category (Hamp-Lyon, 1992)	Criterion
The repetitions of the key words/ nouns	6 (High/ Excellent)	All paragraphs in the essay contains the repetitions of the key words/ nouns which are well chosen and effectively repeated
The use of pronouns	6 (High/ Excellent)	All pronouns are well chosen and effectively used
The use of transitional signals	6 (High/ Excellent)	Transitional signals are well chosen to indicate the relationships between the ideas they connect and are effectively used

C. DISCUSSION

The focus of the research were divided into two main categories; constructing coherent ideas and using coherence devices in descriptive essays written by the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi. The indicators of constructing coherent ideas are the relevance and the order of ideas, and those of using coherence devices are

the repetitions of the key words/ nouns and the use of pronouns and transitional signals.

a. Constructing Coherent Ideas in Writing Descriptive Essays

In general, the fourth grade English department students' skill in constructing coherent ideas in writing descriptive essays at STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi can be seen in the table 3.

Table 3. The Fourth Grade English Department Students' Skill in Constructing Coherent Ideas in Writing Descriptive Essays at STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi

Student' number	Indicators			
	The relevance of ideas		The order of ideas	
	Score	Category	Score	Category
1	1, 44	Weak	1, 33	Weak
2	1	Low/ Very Weak	1	Low/ Very Weak
3	1, 55	Weak	1, 11	Weak
4	2, 99	Low Average	1, 66	Weak
5	2, 55	Low Average	1, 78	Weak
6	2, 77	Low Average	2	Weak
7	1	Low Average	1	Low/ Very Weak
8	2, 22	Low Average	1, 55	Weak
9	1	Low/ Very Weak	1	Low/ Very Weak
10	1	Low/ Very Weak	1	Low/ Very Weak
11	1, 22	Weak	1, 22	Weak
12	1, 22	Weak	1, 22	Weak
13	1, 22	Weak	1	Low/ Very Weak
14	1, 77	Weak	1, 44	Weak
15	1	Low/ Very Weak	1, 11	Weak
16	1, 66	Weak	1, 44	Weak
17	2, 88	Low Average	1, 78	Weak
18	2, 22	Low Average	1, 33	Weak
19	1	Low/ Very Weak	1	Low/ Very Weak
20	1, 77	Weak	1, 11	Weak
21	1, 88	Weak	1, 33	Weak
22	2, 33	Low Average	1, 77	Weak
Average	1, 71	Weak	1,33	Weak

The table shows that the average skill of the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi in expressing relevant ideas in writing descriptive essays was weak and in ordering the ideas expressed was also weak. As a result, the students' skill in constructing coherent ideas in such writing was weak. The students could not express ideas which are well – focused and could not arrange their ideas in a clear pattern which make the essays difficult to understand as well as unable to achieve its communicative purpose. These findings

proved the theories proposed by Harmer (2004) who explains that a coherent text can make readers understand easily the purpose and the line of thoughts of writer. Moreover, the findings are in line with one of the findings of the research conducted by Hamzah and Karuppiah (2010) who found that ESL (English as Second Language) students do have problems dealing with coherence in writing.

From the findings of the relevance of ideas, it was identified that the students had several weaknesses. Firstly, no one of the students could express ideas which only

give objective or subjective descriptions about the topic of the descriptive essays they wrote. Many of them attempted to focus on talking about the essay topic but did not give its descriptions which made the ideas they expressed considered to be irrelevant. This is in line with the theories from Kane (2000), which are stated previously, who explains that in writing descriptive essays, a writer must give objective or subjective descriptions about the essays' topics. Such conditions indicate that the students were unable to differentiate which kind of relevant ideas that should be expressed in the descriptive essays to support the essay topics as well as to achieve the essay purpose. Secondly, no one of the students could make the ideas of the essay paragraphs fit together. In the essay paragraphs, besides expressing irrelevant ideas, most of the students talked about more than one ideas. In other words, the students did not support the topic sentences of the paragraphs they wrote. Even, it was difficult to recognize the topic sentences of the essay paragraphs produced by some students. Dealing with this, Kane (2000) also adds that a paragraph must fulfill its topic sentence and a writer may not wander from the topic.

Then, from the findings of the order of ideas of the students' descriptive essays, it can be seen that no one of the students could arrange their ideas in logical, effective, and clear order. Moreover, none of the students' essays contains all parts of

the essay. In other words, the students could not arrange their ideas in logical order. Related to this, Chesla (2006) states that in writing descriptive essays, a writer should be able to move around the described object logically. In relation to the findings of this research, it seems that the students could not move around the objects they described logically. As a result, readers could not have clear patterns in their minds about things described.

In accordance with the findings of constructing coherent ideas in writing descriptive essays of this research, the fourth year students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi could not achieve coherence of the descriptive essays they wrote that make readers difficult to recognize things they are describing. Such findings support the theories from Basturkmen (2002) who states that the major source of coherence derives from the relationship of ideas that is the order of ideas and how thing order expresses the relationship between ideas. Therefore, the students need to improve their knowledge of how to construct coherent ideas in such writings, particularly concerning with the relevance and the order of ideas.

b. Using Coherence devices in Writing Descriptive Essays

The general description of the fourth grade English department students' skill in using coherence devices in writing descriptive essays can be seen in table 4.

Table 4. The Fourth Grade English Department Students' Skill in Using Coherence Devices in Writing Descriptive Essays at STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi

Student's number	Indicators					
	The repetitions of key word/ nouns		The use of pronouns		The use of transitional signals	
	Score	Category	Score	Category	Score	Category
1	1	L/ V W	3, 66	H A	3, 44	H A
2	1	L/ V W	3	L A	2, 99	L A
3	1, 33	W	3, 33	H A	3, 44	H A
4	1, 99	W	4, 89	G	3, 99	H A
5	2, 11	L A	3, 55	H A	3, 11	H A
6	2, 77	L A	4, 77	G	4, 11	G
7	1	L/ V W	3, 77	H A	3, 55	H A

8	1, 11	W	4, 89	G	3, 11	HA
9	1	L/ V W	3, 66	HA	2, 89	LA
10	1	L/ V W	3, 77	HA	3, 22	HA
11	1	L/ V W	3, 77	HA	3	LA
12	1, 89	W	3, 77	HA	3, 33	HA
13	1, 22	W	4, 89	G	3, 77	HA
14	1, 55	W	3, 33	HA	3, 44	HA
15	1	L/ V W	3, 67	HA	3, 66	HA
16	1, 66	W	4, 89	G	3, 78	HA
17	1, 55	W	3, 99	HA	3, 44	HA
18	1, 33	W	3, 11	HA	3, 22	HA
19	1, 11	W	3, 22	HA	3, 66	HA
20	1, 33	W	3, 11	HA	3, 22	HA
21	1, 22	W	3, 33	HA	3, 33	HA
22	1, 89	W	4, 89	G	3, 33	HA
Average	1, 41	W	3, 88	HA	3, 41	HA

Note : G (Good), HA (High Average), LA (Low Average), W (Weak), and L/ VW (Low/ Very Weak)

The table shows that the average skill of the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi in repeating the key words/ nouns was weak, in using pronouns was high average, and in using transitional signals was high average. Therefore, the students' skill in using coherence devices in writing descriptive essays was low average. It means that the students were unable to use coherence devices appropriately and effectively.

The repetitions of the key words/ nouns are the easiest way to achieve coherence in writing. Even though there is no fixed rule about how often to repeat the key words/ nouns, a writer needs to do it instead of using pronouns when the meaning is not clear or to remind readers the main nouns of the paragraphs. In addition, the repetitions done may not dominate the paragraphs because they can make readers feel bored. By repeating the key words/ nouns, the ideas expressed will become a coherent statement and are tied together (Wyrick, 1987, Oshima and Hogue, 1999, West Florida Writing Lab, 2003, and Macfadyen, 2007).

In relation to the findings of the repetitions of the key words/ nouns found in the descriptive essays produced by the fourth year students of STBA Haji Agus

Salim Bukittinggi, the theories above are proved. Most of the paragraphs of the essays produced by the students talked about more than one nouns which affect the paragraphs coherence. This condition, then, makes readers difficult to understand which of parts of the things (the topic of the essay) that were being described. Moreover, most students did not repeat the main nouns effectively. Some of these students did not repeat the key nouns in the essay paragraphs and some others dominate their paragraphs by always repeating the main noun. Such ways make the essay boring.

Next, concerning the use of pronouns, it was found that the students' skill in using pronouns was high average. The fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi were able to choose the correct pronouns to replace to the previous nouns but could not use them effectively. Some of them overused the pronouns and some others dominated the essays by the repetitions of nouns. As a result, it was sometimes confusing to recognize which of the nouns the pronouns refer to. These findings supports another theory of how to use pronouns from Macfadyen (2007) who adds that a writer must firstly provide or introduce the actual noun that a pronoun is replacing to avoid readers' confusion.

Then, dealing with the use of transitional signals, it was found that most students were able to correctly choose which one of the transitional signals to use even though occasionally or sometimes, the students were not able to use them effectively. These conditions affect readers' understanding because readers found some ambiguous relationships of ideas due to the ineffectively used of the transitions.

Based on the findings of the students' skill in using the three kinds of the coherence devices that were analyzed in this research, the fourth grade English

department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi need to improve their knowledge of how to use the devices effectively and correctly. This is aimed at improving coherence of their writings, particularly descriptive essays.

Referring to the research results in points a and b, it could be identified that the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi had several weaknesses in constructing coherent ideas and in using coherence devices in writing descriptive essays. The weaknesses are illustrated in table 5.

Table 5. The Fourth Grade English Department Students' Weaknesses in Constructing Coherent Ideas and in Using Coherence Devices in Writing Descriptive Essays at STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi

SKILL	INDICATORS	THE STUDENTS' WEAKNESSES
CONSTRUCTING COHERENT IDEAS	1. The Relevance of Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The students could not express relevant ideas (objective or subjective descriptions of the essay topics) only in the essays they wrote. b. The students could not write descriptive essays in which all paragraphs are unified around a single topic.
	2. The Order of Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The students could not arrange the ideas they expressed based on the function of each part of descriptive essays. b. One or more parts of the descriptive essays written by the students were missing. c. The students could not write the essay paragraphs in which all ideas expressed are ordered logically.
USING COHERENCE DEVICES	1. The Repetitions of the Key Words/ Nouns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The key words/ nouns of some paragraphs of the essay were not repeated by the students. b. The repetitions of the key words/ nouns attempted by the students were sometimes ineffectively. c. A few students wrote descriptive essays with no repetitions of the key words/ nouns in all paragraphs of the essay
	2. The Use of Pronouns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Some students used the pronoun "it" ineffectively. b. Some students over used the pronoun "it". c. A few students misused the pronoun "they" which functions as the subject of a sentence.

	<p>3. The Use of Transitional Signals</p>	<p>a. Some students over used the transitional signal “and, but” even though it functions as giving additional ideas.</p> <p>b. Some students misused the transitional signal “and”</p> <p>c. Some students over used the transitional signals “even though” and “but” since they are used in one sentence.</p> <p>d. Some students were still confused of the use of transitional signals which function as introducing a result such as “therefore, hence, consequently”, etc.</p> <p>e. Some students were still confused to differentiate transitional signals which function as sentence connectors from those which function as clause connectors (transitional signals which function as giving additional ideas, as introducing an opposite ideas, as introducing conclusion, and as showing time relationship)</p>
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D. Conclusion

Constructing coherent ideas and using coherence devices still became a problem for the fourth grade English department students of STBA Haji Agus Salim Bukittinggi, registered in academic year 2010/ 2011, in writing descriptive essays. In constructing coherent ideas, the students were unable to express relevant ideas which only give objective or subjective descriptions about the essay topic as well as unable to produce unified paragraphs. They also could not write descriptive essays in which the ideas expressed are clearly ordered. The order of the ideas found in the students’ descriptive essays do not reflect the function of each part of the essay structure and that found in each paragraph of the essay were not ordered logically and effectively as well. Then, in using coherence devices, no one of the students could do it effectively.

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