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Structuring sentences, paragraphs, and essays for clarity and coherence

TESOL instructors engaged in content-based learning find that students are most motivated when the writing and speaking about their own specialties. But while this approach helps the students, it causes difficulty for instructors, who are faced with evaluating essays and oral presentations in areas where they themselves have limited knowledge.

This paper suggests a solution to that difficulty, an application of part of Professor Joseph Williams' cognitively-based studies of discourse coherence. Williams argues that clarity and coherence in discourse is based on only three components.

1. The reader must be able to perceive what Williams calls a 'point' in a document's paragraphs, major sub-units, and in the document as a whole. This point incorporates both the thesis of the unit and the significance of that these to the broader argument made by the entire document.

2. The reader must be able to perceive an 'actor' in every sentence and every unit

larger than the sentence. This actor, which may be a person, object or idea, provides both a principle of unity in the document and the vehicle through with the argument develops.

3. The reader has specific expectations about the shape of a sentence, and that these expectations should be violated infrequently and only when they increase reader comprehension.

This approach addresses a number of the key problems faced by a TEFL instructor. It allows the instructor to resolve the fundamental problems of clear argument, which are prior to any work on grammatically correct prose. It allows a new approach to sentence clarity that reduces the difficulties faced by a student learning to write in a positional language. And it clarifies the differences between written and spoken English, reducing the overuse of phrases that were learned primarily to negotiate the problems of spoken discourse.