Coherence and Unity of Students’ Writing on Background of the Study of Research Proposal

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Abstract
This study aims to find out the coherence and unity of students’ writing on background of the study of research proposals, the problems faced and the causes of difficulties encountered. The type of this research was descriptive research. The source of data was the background of the study and the instruments used were documents and interview. The finding shows that most of the students’ writing had coherence and unity. Nevertheless, they still faced a number of problems. The problems in coherence were no repetition of key nouns, inappropriate use of pronouns, transition signals, logical order and in unity were unclear topic sentences, stating more than one idea, irrelevant sentences, not showing general-specific structure, and unclear thesis statements. Next, difficulties faced were lack of students’ knowledge, lack of paragraph writing skills, and low English proficiency. In conclusion most of the students’ writing on background of the study had coherence and unity.

Keywords: writing, coherence, unity, background of the study, research proposal

Introduction
Academic writing is a type of writing related to academic field. It is used to write, for example, essays, papers, and articles. In addition, such writing is applied in writing research proposals, theses, and dissertations. Then, academic writing has a number of essential elements; coherence and unity are two of them. Therefore, every academic writing needs to have coherence and unity. In short, academic writing is a type of writing that needs to have coherence and unity.

One type of academic writing that needs to have coherence and unity is research proposal (RP). After taking and learning Literary Research Methods (LRM) subject, the students of English Department of Andalas University are required to write a RP as a final project at the end of the semester. Before taking LRM subject, they also have been taught all writing courses offered. Hence, being taught several writing courses as well as LRM subjects, the students are expected to be able to write a coherent and unified background of the study of research proposal (BSRP). However, writing a coherent and unified background of the study (BS) is not an easy task for them. In fact, they face a number of problems. These problems might be caused by a number of reasons. Therefore, it is important to be researched.

There are a number of reasons why this research needs to be conducted. First, BS must have coherence and unity. Then, it is a type of academic writing that is required for students to write as a prerequisite before conducting a research and accomplishing their thesis. Based on those reasons, this research was conducted to find out the coherence and unity of students’ writing on BSRP, the problems faced by them, and the causes that may influence those to occur.

Coherence has been defined by a number of experts. According to Oshima and Hogue (1999: 40), in order to have coherence in writing, the sentences must hold together, i.e. the movement from one sentence to the next (and in longer essays, from one paragraph to the next) must be logical and smooth without sudden jumps. Then, Lee (2002:32) states that coherence is “the relationships that link the ideas in a text to create meaning for the readers.” To make the relationships, the ideas need to be sequenced and arranged in a clear and logical way. In short, coherence is a clear, smooth, and logical
flow of ideas, i.e. from one sentence to another and from one paragraph to the next that creates meaning for the readers.

There are several ways achieve coherent writing. Oshima and Hogue (2006: 22-34) explain that there are four ways to achieve coherence in writing; repeating key nouns, using consistent pronouns, using transition signals to link ideas, and arranging ideas in logical order. Repeating key nouns means the use of pronouns consistently. Transition signals refer to words and phrases used to connect the ideas between one to another sentence. Logical order deals with the way the writers organize their paragraph or writing in certain patterns.

Unity has been defined by a number of writing experts. According to Oshima and Hogue (2006:18), unity means that “a paragraph discusses one and only one main idea from beginning to end.” This main idea then needs to be supported by supporting sentences that directly explains or proves the main idea stated in the topic sentence. Furthermore, Clare and Hamilton (2004: 41) state that “unity is to do with forming the separate parts of the text into a whole.” It connects the parts of the text to be unified as a whole. It is in a line with Zemach and Rumisek (2005:78) who say that the connection of all ideas to a single topic as unified writing. Briefly, unity in writing is connection of all ideas into a whole with a single topic.

There are a number of problems in writing coherent and unified BSRP faced by the students. Dealing with coherence, the first problem is no key nouns or repetition of key nouns. It occurs when the key nouns are absent or are not repeated. The second one is missing and inappropriate use of pronouns. It occurs because of the absence or the use of pronouns inappropriately. Another problem is missing and inappropriate use of transition signals. It occurs since there is missing link between and among the ideas in background of the study. The next problem is missing and inappropriate use of logical order. It arises due to the absence or inappropriate use of writing organization.

Regarding to unity, there are several problems faced by the students. According to Juzwiak (2009:204-208), there are four major problems with unity faced by the students when writing a paragraph. They are a flawed topic sentence, an unstated or unclear support point, missing transitional expression, and digressive details. Then, another problem is introducing more than one idea. Introducing more than one idea in a paragraph breaks the unity of the paragraph. Oshima and Hogue (1997: 98) say that all of the sentences in a unified paragraph discuss only one main idea. Finally, it is not showing GS structure and stating thesis statement. GS structure and thesis statement are two important elements that contribute to students’ unified BS writing besides one single topic. Swales and Feak (2012:55) state that BS is one type of GS writings that moves from general statements to more specific ones. Furthermore, they say that the structure of this type of writing is ended by broader statement i.e. to state thesis statement.

In writing coherent and unified BS, the students face a number of problems. These problems may be caused by several factors. The first factor is lack of knowledge that refers a basic competence for students to possess in order to produce a coherent and unified BS. The second factor is a lack of paragraph writing skills. Paragraph writing skills play an important role to construct coherent and unified BS writing. Moreover, BS consists of several paragraphs, these skills are very needed in order that the ideas written are well-organized. The problem occurs when the students are unable to organize their ideas due to a lack of writing skills they have. According to Sarfo (2015:145), a lack of paragraph writing skills may affect paragraph unity and coherence due to unorganized ideas in the essay.

Next, dealing with coherence, Ahmed (2010: 213) mentions that there are several factors that influence students’ incoherent essay writing. They are the effect of topic-specific background knowledge, low English proficiency, the tendency to follow certain techniques, overuse of coordinate sentences and misuse of topic sentences. Moreover, Fengjie et al (2014:389) state that there are a number of factors that influence students’ incoherent writing. They are lack of self-identity in English writing, limitation of English vocabulary, poverty in English grammar and lack of awareness for revising and summarizing.
Furthermore, regarding to unity, Ayub (2013: 2) say that there are some factors that influence students’ writing less unified. First, the students get difficulties not only in generating and organizing ideas but also in translating the ideas into readable texts. Second, they are able to find exact words in their writing but are not able to connect them logically throughout the sentences in the paragraphs which cause the problem to occur. Hence, their paragraphs become less unified.

BSRP is a part of introduction. It contains background information about the proposed research plan. It tells what the BS is about. According to Clare and Hamilton (2004: 8), the BS is “a section that explains the context of the study in greater detail than is provided in the introduction.” It introduces the reasons why the research needs to be conducted.

Writing the BSRP needs to follow a certain pattern. According Swales and Feak (2012:55), writing the BS needs to follow GS since it is one type of GS writings or texts. Furthermore, they say that the structure of this text moves from broad statements to more specific ones. It is started from general statement, then followed by elaboration of the statement, and continued with more detailed elaboration. They also say that this structure can widen out again at the end of the text so that it’s shape is similar to a glass or funnel with a base. The widened part is to state thesis statement which reflects the candidate researcher’s purpose and content of a research proposal as a whole.

Method

The design of this research was descriptive research. The source of data was the BSRP written by English Department students who took LRM class in academic year 2016/2017. LRM class consisted of two classes; class A and class B. Class A consisted of 39 students, class B had 19 students. Thus, there were 58 BSRP. To get the data, proportional random sampling was used. The data were taken from 30% of each class. Therefore, there were 18 BSRP writings obtained as data.

The instruments used in this research were documents and interview. The documents refer to students’ writing on BSRP. In analyzing the data, a number of indicators were used. From these indicators, scoring rubrics were constructed. Before being used, the instrument was validated by expert. The second instrument was interview. It was used to collect information related to the causes influencing students’ incoherent and disunified writing on BSRP. The interview was conducted for a number of students who had more problems in writing coherent and unified BS and recorded by using a cellular phone. Before interviewing them, interview guide was designed and validated by expert.

To determine how the coherence and unity were constructed by the students was done by giving score to each component. The score then was categorized into the following category as in Panduan Akademik UNP that was adapted for this research as in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Category</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>81-100</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>66-80</td>
<td>Good</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>41-55</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>0-40</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
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</tbody>
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Results and Discussion

1. The Coherence and Unity of the Students’ Writing on Background of the Study

Dealing with coherence, it was found that the students’ mean score for coherence is 86 and the mean score for each indicator; repetition of key noun, consistent pronoun, transitions signal and logical order is 89, 82, 82, and 93 respectively. From 18 documents, 14 documents (77.8 %) are in very good category (very coherent), 3 documents (16.7 %) are in good category (coherent), and the rest, 1 document (5.5 %) is in fair category (less coherent) as seen in table 2. The finding shows that most students’ writing on BS had coherence.
Table 2. Percentage of Coherence of Students’ Writing on Background of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>81-100</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>41-55</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-40</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Very poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding to unity, it was found that the students’ mean score for unity is 78 and the mean score for each indicator; discussing one single topic, showing GS structure and stating thesis statement is 69, 96, and 68 respectively. From 18 documents, 5 documents (27.8 %) are in very good category (very unified), 12 documents (66.7 %) are in good category (unified), and the rest, 1 document (5.5 %) is in fair category (less unified) as seen in table 3. The finding shows that most students’ writing on BS had unity.

Table 3. Percentage of Unity of Students’ Writing on Background of the Study

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>27.8%</td>
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</table>

2. The Problems Faced by the Students in Writing Coherent and Unified Background of the Study

It was found that most of the students faced a number of problems in writing coherent BSRP. The problems were no key noun or repetition of key noun, missing and inappropriate use of pronouns, missing and inappropriate use of transition signals, missing and inappropriate use of logical order in one or more paragraphs of the BS.

Next, it was found that a number of students faced several problems in writing unified BSRP. The problems were unstated or unclear topic sentences, flawed topic sentences, stating more than one idea, unstated or unclear support points, irrelevant sentences, not showing GS structure in one or more paragraphs of the BS, and unstated or unclear thesis statement. In addition, it was found other problems out the predetermined indicators in students’ writing. They are one–sentence paragraph, repetition of paragraph or part of paragraph and using direct quotation as supporting sentences inappropriately. These problems deal not only with coherence but also with unity that make the students’ writing incoherent and disunified.

3. The Causes that Influence the Students’ Writing on Background of the Study Incoherent and Disunified

It was found that there are a number of factors that may cause the students write incoherent and disunified writing on BS. The first factor is lack of knowledge. Based on some students interviewed, it was found that they had lack of knowledge especially about the topic so that they had lack of ideas to write. The second factor is lack of paragraph writing skills. Lack of paragraph writing skills make the students get difficulty to express the ideas they have in their minds. The third factor is low English proficiency. Low English proficiency is also the cause of incoherent and disunified BS writing. It is obviously seen on grammar and vocabulary. The fourth factor is lack of concentration. Lack of concentration makes the students not focused to write their BS writing.

The findings above show that most of the documents of the students’ writing on BS were very coherent since most of their writings applied the four indicators of coherence as stated by Oshima and Hogue (2006: 22): repetition of key nouns, the use of consistent pronouns, the use of transitional signals, and logical order. Next, the findings above reveal that most of the documents of the students’
writing on BS were unified. Nevertheless, one out of three indicators used, discussing one single topic showed opposite result. A lot of paragraphs of students’ writing were disunified as they did not discuss one single topic. In contrast, the other two indicators; showing GS structure and stating thesis statement showed different result. Most of the students’ writings showed GS structure and stated thesis statement. Thus, although the score for the first indicator was low, when it was accumulated with the other two indicators and scored with the scoring rubric used, the result was high average. That is why most of the documents of the students’ writing on BS were categorized unified.

Then, findings show that there were a number of problems faced by the students. Dealing with coherence, the problems were no key nouns or repetition of key nouns, missing and inappropriate use of pronouns, missing and inappropriate use of transition signals, missing and inappropriate use of logical order. Those problems occur as the students did not repeat or use the right key nouns, pronouns, transition signals, and logical order in one or more paragraphs of their writing or when they repeated or wrote them, they did not do them appropriately. Such findings are along with some findings of Erika (2016) who found that most students had problems with the use of consistent pronoun, the use of transition signal, and a small number in repetition of key noun.

In addition to the problems, the other problems found were one-sentence paragraph, repetition of paragraph or part of paragraph, and using direct quotations as supporting sentences inappropriately. The first problem is regarded incoherent and disunified since the paragraph only consists of one sentence. Similarly, the second problem is regarded incoherent and disunified either. It is due to the reason that such information has already been mentioned so that the movement of ideas from one sentence to another cannot run logically and smoothly. Likewise, the third one is regarded incoherent and disunified since those sentences did not support and cohere with the topic sentence and they did not belong to the students’.

Regarding to unity, the findings show a number of problems encountered by students. The first problem is an unstated or unclear topic sentence. It occurred since the students did not state the topic sentence. When they wrote it, it was not obviously stated. The second problem is a flawed topic sentence. It happened because there was misrepresentation of the main idea of the paragraph. The third problem is stating more than one idea. It occurred because the students stated more than one idea in a paragraph. The fourth problem is an unstated or unclear support point. It happened because the students did not state one or more support points stated in the main idea or when they stated it, it was not clearly stated. The fifth problem is irrelevant sentences. It occurred since the students provided information unrelated with their main idea. Finally, not showing general-specific structure and unstated or unclear thesis statements were the next problems encountered by the students. They happened because the students did not follow a GS pattern in one or more paragraphs of their BS and stated unclear or did not state thesis statements. Such findings are in line with some findings of the research conducted by Erika (2016) who found that the students had problems with topic sentence, stating main ideas, and intervening sentences.

Next, the findings show that there are a number of factors that may cause the problems to occur. The first factor is lack of knowledge. Lack of knowledge led the students’ writing had lack of coherence and unity. Such finding is along with one of the findings of Erika’s study (2016) who found that one of the causes that influenced students’ writing less coherent and unified was the lack of competence in developing coherent and unified writing.

Furthermore, when the students had the ideas in their mind, they faced difficulties at expressing them. It was due to the lack of paragraph writing skills they had. They knew what to write but they did not know how to write it. In other words, they were unable to organize the ideas in their mind and express them into written form.

Another factor is low English proficiency. It is obviously seen from the students’ lack of English grammar and vocabulary. First is lack of English grammar. The students were not proficient enough at English grammar so that they still made a number of grammatical mistakes. Although they have learned English for such a long time, they are still rather unfamiliar with and have a relatively insufficient knowledge of English grammar (Fengjie et al, 2014). Second is lack of English vocabulary.
Lack of English vocabulary also contributes to students’ incoherent and disunified writing. The findings show that some students had other problems in writing coherent and unified BS; one-sentence paragraph, repetition of paragraph or part of paragraph, and using direct quotations as supporting sentences inappropriately. These problems are mainly caused by lack of English vocabulary. The students had insufficient vocabulary so that they met difficulty to compose their paragraph as they needed vocabulary to create the sentences in order to develop as well as to support their paragraph.

The next one is lack of concentration. The findings show that some students had lack of concentration when writing their research proposal so that it affected the coherence and unity of their writing. They were not focused when writing their research proposal as they were being chased by the deadline. It was because by the time they were writing their research proposal, they had many tasks to do at the same time. They had other courses that required many tasks and projects done at the end of the semester. Consequently, they did not pay much attention to the coherence and unity of their writing.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that most of the students’ writing on BSRP in English Department of Andalas University is very coherent as most of paragraphs of their writing repeated the right key nouns, used consistent pronouns, employed appropriate transition signals, used appropriate logical order, and unified as most of paragraphs of their writing discussed one single topic, showed GS structure, and stated thesis statement. It indicates that most of them are able to write coherent and unified BSRP. However, they still face a number of problems both in writing coherent and unified BSRP which are caused by a number of factors.

References


