



## Coherence in the Argumentative Essays of First Year College of Liberal Arts Students at De La Salle University

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**Abstract:** The study investigates five textual features of coherence in the students' argumentative essays for text comprehensibility and overall writing quality. Specifically, it examines (1) how comprehensible the students' argumentative essays considering the following: (a) Focus, (b) Organization, (c) Cohesion, (d) Support and Elaboration, and (e) Conventions; and (2) the relationship between the textual features and the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays. The data consists of 13 argumentative essays written in ENGLCOM class first year College of Liberal Arts students of De La Salle University. Two techniques were used to analyze the data. First, an analytic and holistic scorings using a four-point writing rubric were used to evaluate each of the textual features of coherence and comprehensibility, respectively. Second, correlational analysis was performed to determine the relationship between the coherence features and the comprehensibility of the students' texts and between the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays.

**Key Words:** writing essay; coherence; language acquisition

### 1. BACKGROUND

#### 1.1 Introduction

Part of the role of English teachers is to ensure that the students gain competence in the four macro skills in communication: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. In the four macro skills, writing is a common link to the rest of the macro skills. Written text are read, delivered through speaking, and heard by someone who is reading the text. This is one of the main reasons why students are expected not only to read authentic text, but also to produce comprehensible texts that effectively

communicate certain information and ideas to others. However, it is common to hear teachers complain that although the students are taught the basic techniques of writing in great detail, they still do not know how to write coherently. In this case, how can teachers adequately deal with students' difficulty producing comprehensible texts? What are the best ways to respond to the students' writing? What procedure do teachers need in handling the subject?

Numerous approaches have been taken toward the study of text. Researchers have tried to understand the fundamental properties of text and have proposed some theoretical accounts of writing often in terms of linguistic theories of discourse. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) stress that a text is a communicative occurrence which has to meet seven



standards of textuality: (1) cohesion, (2) coherence, (3) intentionality, (4) acceptability, (5) informativity, (6) situationality, and (7) intertextuality. Cohesion and coherence are text-centered notions, involving operations directed at the text materials, whereas the other five standards of textuality are user-centered, entailing the activity of textual communication by the producers and receivers of texts. Cohesion concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text are mutually connected within a sequence, while coherence concerns the ways in which the components of the textual word, i.e., the concepts and relations which underlie the surface text are mutually accessible and relevant. Both cohesion and coherence indicate how the components of the text fit together and make sense. Intentionality pertains to the producer's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer's intentions. Acceptability, on the other hand, relates to the receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use of relevance for the receiver. Meanwhile, informativity refers to the extent to which the occurrences of the text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown/uncertain. Situationality includes the factors which make a text relevant to a situation of occurrence, whereas intertextuality comprises the factors which make the utilization of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts. All these definitions of the seven standards of textuality are provided by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981, pp. 3-10). Accordingly, if a text does not satisfy any of these standards, it is treated as a non-communicative text or non-text. This approach on the standards of textuality, known as a theory of text linguistics, has emerged as one of the most influential textual analysis techniques.

In the more recent development, text linguistics further clarified how coherent text is structured and some of the ways in which it might be produced.

Although coherence is of increasing interest to researchers around the world, they often consider coherence as a complex phenomenon, involving a variety of facets within the text as well as requiring an integration of reader expectations and text realization. They also regard coherence as an abstract, elusive, and controversial concept that is difficult to teach and difficult to learn. Enkvist (1990)

also maintains this view and further remarks that coherence is very difficult to study and to teach because it embodies a large number of variables. He specifically identifies seven areas that pose problems to the study of interpretability of coherence in discourse: (1) the relation between cohesion and coherence; (2) messages and metamessages; (3) inference in interpretability; (6) text strategies, text categories, and patterns of exposition and argument; and (7) strategy, structure, and process. Likewise, Nunan (1999) also expresses the view that producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language.

According to Pilus (1996), incoherence is a recurring problem in the students' writing and can be a major obstacle to their success in writing classes. Consequently, this problem of producing a coherent text has become a growing concern in school not only among English teachers but among other subject teachers and academic staff because students seeming incompetence to write good compositions as reflected in the lack of coherence, unity, and emphasis in their writing. Teachers usually complain about the standard or quality of writing exhibited by the students particularly among first year university students since their piece of writing failed to communicate effectively and meaningfully by means of its coherence and its conforming to the expectations of its prospective readers. They find it impractical to correct whole composition since errors in coherence are often more difficult to handle as they involve a chunk of units, such as a series of sentences or paragraphs, unlike grammatical errors which can be easily corrected. This problem is aggravated by the students' lack of interest in and indifference towards the task of writing. Generally, students consider the English writing class as boring, time consuming, and difficult, and they find the writing task to be enormous and demanding. Because of this, students usually go to their writing composition classes with a great deal of apprehension especially if they do not know what to write about, or if ever they have any idea at all, they do not know how to start writing it. Some students entering college today have little practice in writing since at one extreme, they have written only simple book reports, reflection papers, etc. Students also seem to demonstrate a minimum writing competence. More so, they are now much inclined into listening rather than writing. Universities require freshmen to take communication or English courses to solve the



insufficient competence of students in the English language. In De La Salle University, the freshmen are required to take English Language Communication (ENGLCOM) as part of their course or program they are taking. The aim of ENGLCOM is to enhance students' English language communicative skills which they need for their future profession. It is for this reason that this study was conducted to find out if the problem of incoherence in students' writing is prevalent and to check the extent of ENGLCOM's efficacy in helping students to enhance their writing competency.

## *1.2 General Concept of Coherence*

In order to understand best the concept of coherence, it is first important to provide definition of what coherence in writing is. Coherence refers to how the parts of a piece of writing are linked together to form a whole – the extent to which it is perceived to “hang or link together” to form an integrated whole rather than being a set of unrelated sentences. Bain (1866) first examined the concept of coherence in consonance with the notion of paragraph. He defines paragraph as a “collection or series of sentences with unity of purpose or with comparative closeness of relationship” (p. 87). He further stresses that a paragraph is not a string of random or detached utterances, but a connected whole, the nature of the connections must be made apparent.

McCrimmon (1980) supports Bain's (1866) idea about coherence and states that a coherent paragraph has sentences that are woven together or flow into each other. He argues that “if a paragraph is coherent, the reader moves easily from one sentence into each other. He argues that “if a paragraph is coherent, the reader moves easily from one sentence to the next without feeling that there are gaps in thought, puzzling gaps, or points not made” (p. 82). He also indicates that the writer needs to provide transitions – bridges – between the thoughts expressed in the sentences. Toward this end, coherence is viewed as the quality that enables a writer and a reader to move easily from one sentence to the next and read the text as an integrated whole,

rather than a series of separate sentences. This will be a first step towards a model of coherence.

Fleckenstein (1992) asserts that “coherence is as much a reader-based phenomenon as it is a writer-based creation” (p.81). O'Brien (1995) expresses a similar view when he states that there is an implicit agreement between the writer and the reader, and in turn the reader interprets what is written according to a plan or scheme which makes the intention of the writer evident. O'Brien (1995) posits that the “structure, plan, or schema is the procedure that guarantees coherence and therefore communication” (p. 107). Indeed, structure is a necessary attribute of coherence.

Lee (2002, p. 33), sums up the idea of coherence by including the following five features:

1. A macrostructure that provides a pattern characteristic and appropriate to its communicative purpose (Hoey, 1983; Martin & Rothery, 1986). Macrostructure is an outline of the main categories or functions of the text. It helps writers and readers understand how sentences in a text are related to each other and how they contribute to the overall coherence of a text.

2. An information structure that guides the reader in understanding how information is organized and how the topic is developed (Danes, 1974; Firbas, 1986). This means that coherent texts often comply with the principle of giving old information before new information – schema building or giving the context of situation.

3. Connectivity of the underlying content evidenced by the relations between propositions (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; van Dijk 1980). A proposition is an assertion. It is through the relationships between propositions that the coherence of a text is established. In order to develop coherence in writing, it is helpful to justify a proposition or exemplify it with elaboration.

4. Connectivity of the surface text evidenced by the presence of cohesive devices. Cohesive devices are words or phrases that help to establish relationships between different sentences or between different parts of a sentence. Some examples are pronoun references (he, she, it, this, that),



conjunctions (but, also, therefore, however) (Halliday&Hasan, 1976), and content lexical ties such as repetition, synonymy/antonymy, and superordinates/hyponymy (animals/cats)(Liu, 2000)

5. Appropriate metadiscourse features (Crismore, Markkanen, &Steffensen, 1993; VandeKpple, 1985). Metadiscourse markers in texts help readers organize, interpret, and evaluate information.

In relation, coherence can be defined in terms of macrostructure, information structure, propositional development, cohesion, and metadiscourse.

Connor and Lauer (1985) conducted a study on the features of coherence wherein they labeled with their own categories of coherence based on Bamberg's (1984) four-point coherence rubric. In their study, they identified six different categories, and these categories are focus, context, organization, cohesion, closure, and grammar. Interestingly, Bowen and Cali (2003) also use the features of coherence such as focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions in teaching effective writing to their students. Similarly, almost all of these elements except style were also included in the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT, n.d.) writing scale and in the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP, 1993) persuasive scoring guide. Red (2002) also utilized the writing features like focus, organization, development and conventions. Cali (2003) suggests that the writer must fulfill the assignment of the writing prompt and should avoid digressing from the subject matter presented in the prompt or addressing it too broadly to establish a clear and strong focus in writing. After establishing a focus, the writer should address the next feature of effective writing which is Organization. According to Beers (2000), Organization refers to the writer's ability to set forth thoughts and related ideas that are both logical and communicative on a given topic. It is the clarity of the logical flow of ideas and explicitness of the text structure or plan (IGAP, 1993). It includes the arrangement of the content or information in the text and the development of details according to a

discernible structure or plan that is sustained throughout the essay. Richards (1990) stated that a text structure or schema is a component of coherence. It is the framework of a text's beginning, middle, and end closely associated with the introduction, body, and conclusion, respectively, of a typical three-part essay. In Martin's (1985) three-part function-based text structure, he defines the beginning as the part in which the thesis of the text is introduced. It also contains background where the materials leading to the situation of the thesis are presented. The middle presents the supporting evidence to develop the thesis, and the end is where the thesis is restated and the conclusion is made.

On the other side, different types of genres of writing have different purposes and different audiences and thus require different text structures. They are evaluated as more or less appropriate and coherent according to the degree of fit between the genre and the text structure. Two important patterns of text organization proposed by Winter (1977) and Hoey (1979, 1983) are problem-solution and general-particular patterns. According to Hoey (1979), the problem-solution pattern, which is a common text structure for argumentative texts, has the following organization:

1. Introduction
  - a. Direct the reader's attention to the subject or problem.
  - b. Explain your experience with the subject – the reasons why you can write with your authority.
  - c. Establish bridges with the readers by pointing out shared beliefs, attitudes, and experiences.
2. Background
  - a. Explain the nature of the problem, its history, and causes.
  - b. Explain its relevance to the reader's problems, desires, and interests – the reasons why the problem is important to the reader.
3. Argument
  - a. State the major premise. Include any information necessary to make it clear and acceptable.



- b. State the minor premise, again including necessary information.
  - c. State your conclusion.
  - d. Show your position is better by pointing out defects in the premise or inferences of alternative positions. Explain why the alternatives cannot solve the problem; or if they can why your solution solves it better.
4. Conclusion
    - a. Explain the implications of your argument.
    - b. Summarize your argument: the problem (2a), your conclusion (3c), and the reasons for accepting it (3a and 3b).

With reference to organizational pattern, it is important to describe the location of the main idea(s) or thesis placement. According to Hirose (2003), a writer's position statement either for or against is considered as a main idea. The location of this opinion-stating sentence can be identified as one of the following four: (1) Initial (stated in the introduction), (2) Middle (in the middle section), (3) Final (in the conclusion), or (4) Obscure (not clearly stated). Furthermore, a macro-level pattern is categorized as one of the following: (1) Explanation (the writer's opinion precedes a supporting reason), (2) Specification (the writer's opinion and a preview statement of a supporting reason are followed by the reason), or (3) Induction (a supporting reason precedes the writer's opinion). The Explanation (the writer's opinion on the topic is presented and then supporting reasons are enumerated or a supporting reason is presented by comparing or contrasting two elements) and Specification are considered instances of deductive style, whereas Induction (the writer's opinion is realized in the final section and preceding arguments constitute supporting premises or reasons which are arranged in a form of enumeration) is regarded as inductive style (Hirose, 2003, p. 190).

Aside from the text structure, cohesiveness is important to achieving a well-knit piece of writing. Connor (1996) defines cohesion as the skillful use of explicit linguistic devices to link sentences and/or paragraphs and parts of texts. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) further explain that cohesion

concerns the way in which linguistic items of which a text is composed are meaningfully connected to each other in a sequence on the basis of the grammatical rules of language. According to Renkema (1993), cohesion is the connection which results when the interpretation of a textual element is dependent upon another element in the text.

Relative to coherence in writing is the feature on Support and Elaboration, which pertains to the extension and development of the topic/subject. According to Angeles (2005), it refers to building support or evidence through depth and breadth of facts, examples, descriptions, illustrations, explanations, reasons, etc. In other words, support and elaboration is the degree to which the main point is elaborated and explained by concrete, specific details and sufficient, relevant information. The key to developing support and elaboration involves two important concepts: sufficiency and relatedness. According to Cali (2003), sufficiency refers to the amount of details used in writing. This means that good writers supply their readers with sufficient details to comprehend what they have written not only by incorporating enough information to support their purpose, but also by providing information that is credible and accurate. Accordingly, sufficiency in support and elaboration is exemplified by the effective use of concrete, specific details that help develop the topic, whereas insufficiency is often characterized by undeveloped details, redundancy, and repetitious paraphrasing of the same point. However, sufficiency is not enough since support and elaboration as means of securing coherence in text is determined less by the quantity of the details than by their quality. To be supportive of the subject matter, details must also be related to the focus of the writing task. Good writers select only the details that will support their focus, deleting irrelevant information. In sum, Support and Elaboration involves the use of sufficient and relevant details to develop the topic.

The last feature of coherence concerns with the mechanical aspects of writing. Hagemann (2003) described conventions as the use of standard written English, involving correctness in sentence formation



and structure, grammar, usage, and mechanics that include capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. These “are a courtesy to the reader, making writing easier to read by putting it in a form that the reader expects and is comfortable with” (Cali, 2003, p. 2).

In a nutshell, the various facets of writing such as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions are relatively significant measures of coherence in writing.

### *1.3 Approaches to the Study of Coherence*

“Coherence is not a well-defined notion” (van Dijk, 1977, p. 93). The vagueness in its definition may be related to the fact that coherence is an “interpretative process,” created by the reader while reading the text (McCarthy, 1991, p. 26). Despite its arbitrariness in definition, coherence can be generally viewed in two aspects: text-based and reader-based coherence (Johns, 1986). Text-based coherence pertains to the features associated with the internal structure of the text itself, whereas reader-based coherence deals with the meaningful aspect of writer-reader interaction. Within this framework, a text is said to be coherent if it fulfills the following conditions:

#### Text-based Coherence

Unity of Ideas. An assertion made in a piece of writing should be related to all other elements. This simply means that each idea must relate to the main idea (topic sentence) of the particular paragraph it is in and also to other ideas in the same paragraph. Unity in a piece of writing can be achieved by: (1) discussing only one principal thought in a paragraph; (2) avoiding digression – excluding all material essential to the adequate development of a single topic; and (4) using a topic sentence to indicate the unifying thought, the main point of the paragraph (Carlos & Ceballos, 1986).

Organization of points. This aspect in producing a coherent text concerns the need of the points to progress in a logical sequence from the beginning till the end of the essay. It depends upon

orderliness in the arrangement of the sentences composing the paragraph.

Link and reference (cohesion). This concept is associated with the surface marking of coherence which signals the ties between sentences and points being made. However, it should be noted that cohesion is only part of the convention of coherence (van Dijk, 1985), for the elements of a text can be seen as “connected, with or without overt linguistic connections between these elements” (Brown & Yule, 1983).

#### Reader-based Coherence

This aspect concerns the ability of a text to be understood by the reader. Apart from displaying the characteristics discussed earlier, the content of a text must also be consistent with the reader’s previous knowledge and experience or his/her expectations based on his/her world knowledge. Put otherwise, it is “an aspect of comprehension that is established in the mind of the reader as a result of a perception of relatedness among a text’s propositions and between the text and the knowledge that the reader possesses of the world” (McCagg, 1990, p. 113). Before the reader reads, he/she will have certain basic assumptions and expectations about the communication such as what is important and relevant to that particular discourse. For the reader to make appropriate inference, the writer will have to conform the communicative principles by being “informative, relevant, and sufficiently clear” (van Dijk, 1985, p. 113) to establish coherence and continuity in the text. The writer has to consider the questions such as: To what extent will my reader understand and sympathize with my purpose? What kinds and amounts of information should my reader be given? How should I present this information in order to achieve my purpose in writing?

Coherence between the writer (and text) and the reader can be established through the fit between the schemata of the reader (or audience) and the organization, content, and argument of the text. The schema theory clearly explains the complexity of the relationship between the writer (and text) and the reader. Schema is generally described as the knowledge of the world or, from everyday knowledge



to very specialized knowledge. It covers the background knowledge relative to the content domain of the text (content schema) (Carrell, 1987) and the world knowledge of text and forms (formal or textual schema) in terms of organization, language structures, vocabulary, grammar, and level of formality/register (Singhal, 1998). In addition, schema is the building block of cognition, the mental representation of objects, ideas, and phenomena-organizational structure in which the reader stores personal representations of meaning. It provides the interpretative framework for assigning meaning to words and ideas and is dependent upon the reader's background experiences, the situational context, and cues provided by the text (Ohlhausen & Roller, 1998; Pearson & Spiro, 1980; Pritchard, 1990).

Like frame theory, schema theory suggests that the readers' knowledge and expectations about the world will strongly affect their ability to understand new information by providing a mental framework within which that new information might fit (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988). According to Nunan (1999), given the fact that making sense of a text is a process of using both their linguistic knowledge and content knowledge, these schemata or "mental film strips" are extremely important. Thus, what controls text interpretation and comprehension is "not only the readers' knowledge of the mechanics of syntax but also the extent of their ability to retrieve relevant information out of their schemata, scripts and other organized deposits of knowledge" (Enkvist, 1990, p. 21). Certainly, the readers' previous knowledge plays a crucial role in determining coherence in writing.

### *1.3 Studies on Coherence and Writing Quality*

Research exploring coherence of texts has focused on macrostructures (or text themes), logical relations among clauses and text units, and information structuring in texts (given-new information, topic-comment, theme-rheme, focus-presupposition structures). All these subsets of coherence notions have proved important for

research on writing as well as for writing instruction (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996)

A number of investigations have been carried out to examine whether and how coherence is achieved in students' texts. In a study of high school writing, Bamberg (1983) found that a text was judged coherent when the writer announced the topic, established a context for information, and followed an organizational plan. He argues that structural connections are more significant than lexical ties and that a global unity of meaning should be achieved before the writer starts producing actual sentences.

Brostoff (1981) identifies three causes of incoherent writing: failure to make logical connections between ideas, failure to form a well-structured hierarchy of relationships among ideas, and failure to make relationships clear to the reader. He suggests that writing programs should first of all address these causes.

Informational structure research of learner texts has been carried out along several lines. One major line is represented by topical sentence structure, developed by Lautamatti (1978), using topic-comment analysis to examine written discourse. Her theory of topical development in discourse examined the relations between the topic of discourse, the topical subject of a sentence, the syntactic subject, and the initial sentence element. Nothing that these notions do not always overlap, she explored the various possible patterns in written texts. This approach is important because it shows that certain patterns of topical progression may be more readable than others (Burneikaite & Zabaliute, n.d.).

Another line of research in sentence-based functional discourse analysis centers on the topic and given information. Following Lautamatti (1978), White (1985) developed a topical structure approach to study differences in high- and low-quality writing. Looking for topical and sequential chaining patterns in student essays, Witte found that low-rated essays did not provide enough appropriate given information and forced the reader to make too many inferences. Low-rated essays used fewer sequential



chaining patterns, making it harder for the reader to perceive main topics in the essay. Such texts were not reader-friendly. Overall, differing patterns of topical structure appeared to provide good predictors of student writing quality.

Moreover, a number of research into the quality of student writing with the aim of establishing linguistic and textual features that contribute to the overall good or poor quality of student text have been conducted. The following studies examine students' texts written in English to identify text features that differentiate the high-quality writings from the low-quality writings. They also seek to determine which text features can contribute to coherence in writing and to establish the linguistic and textual characteristics of effective texts and ineffective texts.

According to Walegign (n.d.), high-rated texts could be characterized by (1) a higher incidence of complex, rather than compound sentences; (2) a higher incidence of appropriately used discourse connectives; (3) a greater tendency to confine the discussion to a limited set of topics directly linked to the discourse topic; and (4) a greater tendency to rely more on semantic subordination rather than on semantic coordination (Christensen, 1965, as cited in Walegign, n.d.).

Davies (1996) conducted a study to determine the presence of particular language features that characterize the quality of examination essays of first and second year dental students and to identify the features of text that contributed to non-formation of coherent text. This study shows that high-rated essays displayed a clear global strand of coherence, depending on an organizing introductory statement that functions to refer forward in the text (with overt and/or overt forward reference), whereas low-rated essays had a significantly greater number of new sentence topics (the number of sentence subjects whose referents have not been previously mentioned in the text). Furthermore, this study reveals that the barriers to coherence identified in the low-rated essays could mostly be attributed to problems relating to the organization of the writer's thoughts, demonstrated in the presentation of

information and the introduction and maintenance of successive topics.

Meanwhile, Govardhan (1994) studied the quality of 30 ESL graduate student essays on the English placement examination. They represented five each of high-rated, intermediate-rated, and low-rated essays for 1992 and 1993. The results indicate that high-rated essays were generally longer and had longer sentences with embedded clauses and longer and larger numbers of error-free T-units than the other two groups. They addressed the task adequately, developed ideas maximally, and presented a discernible pattern of organization appropriate to the task. The results further indicate that intermediate-rated essays were longer than the low-rated essays. They exhibited good command of English, but they had underdeveloped topics and lacked organization and presentation. The low-rated essays, were short and lacked organization, identifiable theme, and fully developed ideas. The study presents evidence about the clear differences in the quality of the essays that had been rated high, intermediate, and low.

In the previous study of Angeles (2005) which the researcher anchored the present study, 30 argumentative essays of the freshman students of Ateneo De Zamboanga University were evaluated using the analytic and holistic scoring (IGAP, 1993; Beers, 2000, PALS, n.d.) to check the student's quality of writing. The results indicate the students' argumentative essays that were considered comprehensible employed different characteristics of good writing and that they were mostly rated as moderately comprehensible based on their obtained mean score points. The results further reveal that the textual features of coherence (Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, Conventions) showed significant positive correlations with comprehensibility. Of the five features, conventions received the highest correlation with comprehensibility while cohesion had the lowest.

### *1.3 Objectives of the Study*





This study aims to provide evidence of the efficacy of the ENGLCOM subject in terms of affecting students' writing comprehensibility. In particular the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How comprehensible are the students' argumentative essays considering the following:
  - a. Focus
  - b. Organization
  - c. Cohesion
  - d. Support and Elaboration
  - e. Conventions?
2. Is there a relationship between the textual features such as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Convention and the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays?

Hypotheses

1. The students' argumentative essays are moderately comprehensible considering the following features:
  - a. Focus
  - b. Organization
  - c. Cohesion
  - d. Support and Elaboration
  - e. Conventions
2. There is a significant relationship between the textual features such as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions and the comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essays.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the descriptive-correlational method of research since its major purpose was to describe the writing quality of students' argumentative essays by examining the different textual features of coherence. Furthermore, these coherence features were used to determine the degree of comprehensibility of the students' written texts.

The participants in this study were thirteen (13) first year college students of De La Salle University. They were taking AB courses under the

College of Liberal Arts (CLA) and were enrolled during the third trimester of academic year 2011-2012. ENGLCOM was particularly chosen since this is a three-unit course on English Language Communication for first year undergraduate students. Also, this English course aims to develop the four macro skills in communication. The researcher considered the ENGLCOM class under the CLA since the courses in this college requires students to be competent in English communication.

Thirteen (13) compositions by first Year College of Liberal Arts (CLA) students enrolled in one ENGLCOM class in the third trimester of academic year 2011-2012 were collected. Since this study aimed to describe students' writing, it was appropriate to use only the first draft since it reflected the actual writing of the students without much revision/editing and any teacher intervention in terms of feedback and/or evaluation.

As for the writing task, the researcher provided the writing prompt with the subject "Should De La Salle University increase the tuition fee for AY2012-2013" which is a timely issue during the period of writing. The students were specifically asked to take a stand whether they agree or disagree with the increase of tuition fee and to present their arguments.

As regards the selection of topic, it was of critical importance to ensure that students were able to write something on the topic they were given. In order for them to attend to the topic as intended, the researcher made sure that the writing task was as realistic, appropriate, relevant, and feasible as possible. Moreover, the choice of the writing topic was guided by the principle of schema building. The researcher believed that familiarity with the topic and structure helped the students in their writing of argumentative essay since the respondents may have heard the topic from their peers or professors, or may have read the topic in the campus paper.

The writing activity was conducted in class by the students' respective ENGLCOM class teacher, and the writing session was good for 45 minutes only.

The corpus of data consisted thirteen (13) argumentative essays written in class by first year



college students based on a given writing situation: topic with expected content, purpose and prospective readers.

The researcher first sought permission from the Department Chair of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics (DEAL) at De La Salle University by submitting a letter of permission. Included in the letter is the purpose of the study which is to examine the argumentative essays of an ENGLCOM class in the College of Liberal Arts. After seeking permission to the Department Chair, a referral letter was also submitted to a teacher of an ENGLCOM class in the College of Liberal Arts. The researcher preferred to gather data on the last day of the ENGLCOM class since the aim of the study is to reveal the extent of students' quality of writing after taking the ENGLCOM class. In the actual gathering of data, the researcher adapted the procedure used by the previous study of Angeles (2005). However, some modifications were done because of time and respondents considerations. The teacher introduced the researcher and asked the students to listen for the instructions of the researcher. The researcher distributed twenty-five (25) copies of the essay answer sheet where the respondents can write their essays, however, only thirteen (13) copies were answered since the other students decided not to attend the session which is their last day. Indicated in the essay answer sheet is the topic for their argumentative essay. After gathering the necessary data, the researcher gathered the raters to explain the procedure for rating. They were also given a copy of the criteria and scoring guide for the argumentative essays. The compositions were analyzed individually by two independent raters using analytic scoring (IGAP, 1993; Beers, 2000) to account for the presence of the different features of coherence – Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions. Furthermore, based on holistic scoring taken from Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS, n.d.) of Fairfax County Public Schools, these essays were collectively rated for overall text comprehensibility by the same interraters – all English major graduates who had experience in teaching and evaluating

writing. To insure reliability, each essay had received two independent scores varying by no more than one point (e.g. 3,2) within a 1 to 4 point range. In this study, holistic scoring scheme was used to rate the overall essay comprehensibility (the writing quality reflected in a given student writing). Both analytic and holistic scorings were useful; the first one provided diagnostic information useful for improving writing performance, and the other gave the global judgment of the writing performance. Likewise, both scoring rubrics (scoring guides) consisted of one to four levels or bands, each of which corresponded to a score and a set of descriptors. These descriptors in the rubric can be either general or fairly specific. Scores for each writing sample were entered into Statistica software.

To answer the first research question, each writing sample was scored by two independent raters using two different measures: analytic scoring for each of the features of coherence and holistic scoring for comprehensibility of the students' essays. Analytic scoring procedures involved the separation of the various features of a composition into components for scoring purposes. The argumentative essays in this study were rated on such features as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions. On the other hand, holistic scoring was based on the view that the construct of writing was a single entity, which can be captured by a single scale that integrated the inherent qualities of the writing, and that this quality can be recognized only by carefully selected and experienced readers using their skilled impressions (White, 1985). In other words, it was assumed that good writing is more than a sum of the individual elements that go into writing and that holistic scoring captures this total impression of the work.

Key considerations for scoring Focus in writing included clarity of subject or topic, clarity of position or point of view, clear presentation of major divisions and subpoints, preview of reasons, sufficiency, and closure. For Organization, the criteria were explicitness of overall plan/structure, logical flow of ideas, transitions between sentences



and between paragraphs, and paragraphs logically supported with relevant evidence and adequately developed with specific details. Cohesion required smooth and logical transition between sentences and/or paragraphs. Support and Elaboration, on the other hand, required sufficiency, specificity, relatedness or relevance, significance, and building support through depth and breadth of examples, descriptions, explanations, etc. As for Conventions, the emphasis was on correct sentence structure, word usage, grammar, and mechanics. On the other hand, the main criteria for rating comprehensibility of the students' argumentative essay were readability/understandability, superior completion of the writing task, and relevant and adequate response to the writing prompt.

The analytic scoring rubrics for the different coherence features, adapted from Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP, 1993) Persuasive Scoring Guide and Beers' (2000) Evaluating Student Writing Guidebook, reduced the original rating scale to 1 to 6 to 1 to 4 to simplify some categories for the present study and incorporated a set of descriptions for each of the features, specifically for Cohesion, which is not included in the said sources.

Meanwhile, the holistic scoring scheme for comprehensibility of students' argumentative essays taken from Fairfax County Public Schools Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS, n.d.) also included some characteristics for task completion found in the same source (PALS).

To answer the second research question, a correlational analysis was conducted.

## *2.1 Theoretical Framework*

Writing is regarded as a communicative event in which the writer intends to communicate certain information and ideas to a particular audience. This view of writing as an act of communication suggests an interactive, meaning-making process, which takes between the writer and the reader via the text.

The theoretical bases for the present study are that of Text Linguistic Theory by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) and Functional Grammar (Givon, 1993). According to Connor (1996), a theory of text linguistics provides a descriptive apparatus for describing textual cohesion, structures of texts, theme dynamics, and metatextual features. Most recent publications treat text linguistics as an analysis of written texts that extends beyond the sentence level and considers the communicative constraints of the context (van Dijk, 1985). One of the most promising approaches to text linguistics is the one taken by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981). Their analysis draws heavily on a view of text as a communicative interaction and centers on the seven standards of textuality. The seven standards of textuality are also considered as constitutive principles in that they define and create textual communication as well as set the rules for communicating. On this premise, there are also at least three regulative principles that control textual communication: "the efficiency of a text is contingent upon its being useful to the participants with a minimum of effort; its effectiveness depends upon whether it makes a strong impression and has a good potential for fulfilling an aim; and its appropriateness depends upon whether its own setting is in agreement with the seven standards of textuality" (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981, p. 11).

On the other hand, Givon (1993) described Functional Grammar as concerned with the ways in which language serves communicative purposes. Within a functional framework, the grammar of language is regarded as a "set of strategies that one employs in order to produce coherent communication" (Givon, 1993, p.1). This approach to language is sensitive to cognitive considerations such as word order and information order when studying the functional implications of syntactic or grammatical choice. This theory is relevant in the present study since language conventions are one of the features of textual coherence.

Aside from the two theoretical bases stated earlier, this study is also guided by the underlying principles involving the different elements of writing

like the writer, text, and reader, operating within the same writing context.

From an English for Specific Purposes orientation, Silva (1990) explicates that writing is the production of prose that will be acceptable in the academic community. The writer is pragmatic and oriented primarily toward academic success, meeting standards and requirements, while the reader is a seasoned member of the hosting academic community who has well-developed schemata for academic discourse and clear and stable views of what is appropriate.

Notably, writing as a purposeful and contextualized communicative interaction includes the basic elements such as “the writer (in terms of personal knowledge, attitudes, characteristics, cultural orientation, language proficiency, motivation, etc.), the reader (primary audience for academically oriented, college-level writing), the text (in terms of genre, aims, modes, discourse structures, intersentential phenomena, syntax, lexis, and print-code features), and the writing context (cultural, political, social, economic, situational, and physical), and the interaction of these elements” (Silva, 1990, p. 18). In other words, writing involves the meaningful account of the contribution of the writer, reader, text, and context, as well as their interaction.

## 2.1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 provides a schematic model of the different elements involved in writing. It particularly illustrates the different textual features of coherence in the text production as measures of the varying degrees of comprehensibility as interpreted by the reader.



Fig 1. A schematic representation of the conceptual framework

The arrows in Figure 1 indicate the general direction of the present study. The double-headed arrows show the interaction between the elements of the writing situation (writers’ and readers’ interactions with texts – and through texts, with each other). The single-headed arrows point to the specific characteristics of the writer, the different features of text coherence, and the parameters of comprehensibility.

As reflected in the diagram, within the writing context, three important components of composition operate in the interpretation and evaluation of writing quality: the writer, reader and text, and the writer’s and readers’ interactions with texts – and through texts, with one another.

The first component in the diagram is the writer. The writers in this particular study are the thirteen (13) First Year College of Liberal Arts students of De La Salle University. The second component is the text, which is confined to students’ argumentative essays. The argumentative essays serve as a link between the writer and the reader. In this study, the argumentative essays are subjected to textual analysis to determine the textual features such as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions. After the textual analysis, the readers will determine the comprehensibility of the text whether it is highly comprehensible, comprehensible, moderately



comprehensible, or incomprehensible. Comprehensibility is the end result of the writing activity which binds and intersects all the components of the writing context.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The argumentative essays of the First Year College of Liberal Arts students manifested varying levels of the textual features of coherence such as Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Conventions. Table 1 shows the ratings of each textual feature of coherence.

Table 1. Rating of each textual feature of coherence

Variable	N	Mean	Min	Max	SD
Focus	13	2.46	1.5	3.5	0.594
Organization	13	2.46	1.5	3	0.519
Cohesion	13	2.42	1.5	3.5	0.672
Support and Elaboration	13	2.19	1.5	2.5	0.325
Convention	13	2.85	2	3.5	0.516

Based from the ratings of textual features of coherence, convention received the highest rating among the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students with the mean score of 2.85 and with a standard deviation of 0.516. Ratings from the inter-rater results of convention textual feature of coherence show that the minimum rating average of convention is 2 which is considered as the highest minimum rating among the textual features of coherence. The student essays which received the minimum rating under convention are student essays number 8 and number 9. However, the convention textual feature of coherence received the highest maximum rating of 3.5 which are evident in students essay numbers 1, 2, and 10. On the other hand, support and elaboration received the lowest rating among the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students with the mean score of 2.19 and with a standard deviation of 0.325. Moreover, support and elaboration textual feature of

coherence received a minimum rating of 1.5 which is evident in student essay number 8 and the maximum rating of 2.5 which can be seen in student essay numbers 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, and 11.

Meanwhile, Table 2 shows the correlation analysis of the textual features and the comprehensibility of the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students.

Table 2. Correlation between textual features of coherence and comprehensibility of text

Textual Features	Comprehensibility	Relationship
Focus	0.876	High
Organization	0.878	High
Cohesion	0.927	Very High
Support and Elaboration	0.576	Moderate
Convention	0.492	Moderate

$p > .05000$   $N=13$

Among the textual features of coherence, Cohesion received a very high relationship with comprehensibility with the value of 0.927 while Support and Elaboration and Convention received a moderate relationship with comprehensibility with 0.576 and 0.492 values respectively.

In terms of comprehensibility of the argumentative essays of students, Table 3 shows the inter-rating holistic rating of comprehensibility based from the holistic rubric (PALS, n.d.).

Table 3. Inter-rater rating of comprehensibility of student essays

Student Essay Number	Mean
S1	2.5
S2	2.5
S3	3.5
S4	3.5
S5	3.5
S6	2.5
S7	1.5



S8	2
S9	2
S10	3
S11	3
S12	2.5
S13	2
Total Mean	2.62

Among the students' argumentative essays, the student essay numbers 3, 4, 5 received the highest inter-rater rating with the mean of 3.5. The mentioned student essays are leaning High Comprehensible but are considered as Comprehensible. However, only student essay number seven received the lowest inter-rater rating with the mean of 1.5 which is considered as Incomprehensible yet leaning towards Moderately Comprehensible. The overall mean which is 2.62 indicates that most students' argumentative essays are gearing towards the Comprehensible yet considered Moderately Comprehensible.

The results show that all the textual features of coherence are correlated with the comprehensibility of text. Support and Elaboration and Convention are the only textual features of coherence which achieved the moderate relationship while Focus and Organization received a high relationship and Cohesion got the very high relationship. Furthermore, results show the following implications for the ENGLCOM class:

1. The ENGLCOM class focused more on enhancing mechanics (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) rather than creating meaningful communication.
2. Other textual features of coherence especially Support and Elaboration should be considered in aligning the revision of the ENGLCOM program or subject.
3. ENGLCOM should gear to authentic teaching of communication especially in writing to make it more meaningful for the students.

4. In connection with authenticity, activities in ENGLCOM should relate to the community of the students to make it more authentic (i.e. issue on classrooms, tuition fees, etc.). According to Purcell-Gates & Duke (2004), teachers that use authentic writing activities find that their students experience greater growth in the ability to write and comprehend new genres.

Based from the findings, the following recommendations are given:

1. The next researchers who will adopt the study should consider conducting the study in a large sample size (i.e. to a whole college or department).
2. Future studies related to the present study could also focus on finding out the relation of comprehensibility to a particular textual feature with other textual features.
3. The present study focused on the product of the argumentative essays which leads to the suggestion of conducting a study which would also focus on the process of writing in relation to comprehensibility.
4. Future studies could also verify the findings of the present study and likewise re-conduct the study to a different college (i.e. college of business, college of engineering, etc.)
5. Aside from textual features and comprehensibility, the future study could also explore other indicators influencing the text.
6. Aside from examining argumentative texts, future studies could also dwell on other forms of writing in relation to Comprehensibility.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The textual features of coherence which consist of Focus, Organization, Cohesion, Support and Elaboration, and Convention were analyzed in the argumentative essays of first year College of



Liberal Arts students at De La Salle University. The Convention textual feature which consists of the command in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, usage, and sentence structure received the highest rating among the argumentative essays of the students. However, the Support and Elaboration textual feature which consist of the thoughtful or insightful presentation of ideas received the lowest rating among the argumentative essays of the first year College of Liberal Arts students. On the other hand, the students' argumentative essays holistic rating are leaning towards Comprehensible but are considered Moderately Comprehensible. Since textual features of coherence can affect the comprehensibility of students' essays, the ENGLCOM program should consider the areas to improve in order to promote higher comprehensibility among student writers.

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