Topical structure analysis

As a means of checking the coherence of paragraphs in a student's writing, you can try topical structure analysis (TSA), a technique in writing studies to show the progression of topics from one sentence to the next. Roughly speaking, the topic is what the sentence is about. It may be the grammatical subject of the sentence, but it could also be something else. Topics tend to flow in certain ways, but some students may have overly loose topic flow, with sentences jumping from one topic to another with insufficient transitions, or insufficient development of ideas relating to each topic. In TSA, one scans one or more paragraphs and identifies the different types of topical items:

1. Initial sentence element (ISE) – the first noun or significant word in a sentence, which may not be a grammatical subject, such as a noun within a prepositional phrase (e.g., “Into the room sauntered a strange man”).
2. Grammatical subject – the grammatical subject of the verb.
3. Topical subject – the idea that the sentence discusses, what the sentence is about – this may or may not be the grammatical subject.

After marking the different topics of sentences, one can look at how topics of different sentences are related, and how the paragraph flows from one topic to the next.

1. Parallel progression (PP) – sentence topics are semantically identical (identical topics, even if synonyms are used); two consecutive sentences or clauses have the same topical subject.
2. Sequential progression (SP) – the newer element of a sentence or clause (usually in the predicate) serves as the topical element of the consecutive sentence or clause.
3. Extended parallel progression (EPP) – a topical subject occurs in two sentences or clauses that are not consecutive, i.e. a topic is resumed after one or more intervening sentences.

In this example (Almaden, 2006), ISE’s are in italics, grammatical subjects are underlined, and other topics are in boldface.

For example, one project I set involved the class devising a board game on a nursery rhyme or folk tale for younger children. (2) The class were reasonably enthusiastic about this until they realized that the younger children were fictional, (3) i.e., they would be playing these games with real children apart from each other. (4) I felt a certain amount of shame here, for I realized that the reason there would be no audience was because I had already decided that those games would not be ‘good enough’ for public consumption. (5) I have frequently arranged real audiences for other classes, but only when I have been confident that the finished product would show the class, the school, and most shamefully of all, myself, in a good light. (6) My other error was not to impose a structure to the work of a deadline by which to finish. (7) Because these were low-ability students, my reasoning ran, they would need more time to complete the activity, (8) and in the way of these things, the children simply filled the available time with low-level busy work-colouring in the board, and making the dice and counters, rather than the more challenging activities such as negotiating group responsibilities, discussing the game or devising the rules. (Holden, 1995)