



Patterns and Problems of Coherence in EFL Students' Essays

Dian Agustina Purwanto Wakerkwa^a, Desi Antri Astuti^b

^a*Musamus University, Merauke, Indonesia,*

^b*Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, Sukoharjo, Indonesia*

*Corresponding author: dianapurwantow@unmus.ac.id

Abstract

In academic essays, coherence plays a central role in shaping well-structured and meaningful texts that effectively communicate complex ideas. It enables readers to follow the flow of arguments and grasp the writer's intended message. This study examines coherence-related problems in ten cause/effect essays written by ten Indonesian EFL students. Using a reader-based approach, two professional raters analyzed the essays to identify issues affecting the clarity and organization of the texts. The analysis reveals recurring issues in readability, idea development, sentence and paragraph connections, flow of ideas, and overall organization. These issues often resulted in unclear meaning, redundancy, and inconsistent message delivery, hindering reader comprehension. The findings not only highlight the need for more explicit instruction in organizing and linking ideas in L2 writing but also provide insight into specific aspects of coherence that require greater attention and instructional support. This study offers valuable implications for improving EFL writing pedagogy and guiding students in producing more coherent academic texts.

Keywords: Coherence, cause-effect essay, EFL students, essay writing

1. Introduction

For decades, L2 writing has been a central focus of interest among second language researchers. This sustained interest reflects the growing recognition of L2 writing as a distinct and complex area within second language studies. It was highlighted by Matsuda (1999) that L2 writing has been an issue for some time, even before it began to attract the attention of L2 specialists in the 1960s. This growing attention to L2 writing has led researchers and educators to examine what makes writing effective, especially in terms of its impact on the reader (Kroll, 1984; Nystrand, 1990; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Rijlaarsdam et al., 2009; Land, 2020). One key insight from this growing focus is that good writing is not merely constructing grammatically correct sentences; rather, it is closely tied to how well it resonates with the reader or how clearly it communicates its purpose and meaning.

Quality writing is not just about how well the writing is—it is more about the reader. Good writers can convey their intended messages to the reader effectively while maintaining the structure of the text. This clarity and organization enable the reader to follow the flow of ideas and grasp the writer's intent without confusion. Such engagement occurs when the reader can fully immerse themselves in the text and understand its communicative

purposes and meanings. Among several contributing factors, this smooth flow in writing is largely achieved through the effective use of cohesion and coherence.

Cohesion and coherence are closely related and function together to create a clear, logical, and unified piece of writing. They help connect ideas, guide the reader through the text, and “contribute to the clarity and readability of the text” (Wakerkwa, 2024, p. 56). While they share a common goal, they serve distinct roles within a text. Cohesion focuses on how sentences and paragraphs are tied together within a text, and is achieved through the use of linking words and other devices to maintain a smooth flow of information. Coherence, on the other hand, refers to the logical structure and overall meaning, ensuring that the ideas are communicated clearly and are understandable. Theoretically, cohesion is how the sentences stick together, while coherence is how the ideas make sense.

The reader’s understanding of a text depends largely on the coherence of ideas in the text. As stated by Waller (2015) that, “without coherence, readers cannot interpret a text; hence, the aim of writing the text is not met” (p. 31). Some passages can be cohesive, where the sentences are connected properly, yet they still lack coherence. This occurs when the reader is unable to imagine a meaningful context in which the passage makes sense. In other cases, some passages can be both cohesive and coherent even though there is no apparent link between their parts because the reader can imagine the context in which the text takes place, such as a casual short asking-answering interaction between interlocutors. That is to say, the realization of textual coherence relies on the context and the reader’s background knowledge and interpretive imagination (Mohseni & Samadian, 2019).

Halliday and Hasan (1976) pointed out that if a native speaker of English encounters a passage longer than one sentence, they can normally determine without difficulty whether it constitutes a coherent whole or merely a collection of unconnected sentences (p. 1). However, this is not always the case for L2 learners, particularly novices, as several studies on EFL have shown. For instance, Ahmed (2010) investigated Egyptian student teachers of English and found that they encountered problems in cohesion and coherence in their English writing. In their study of Omani students, Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova (2014) discovered that even though less prominent than other difficulties, organizing ideas coherently was experienced by many students as well. Similar findings were found by Tso (2024) in which the cultural differences between the English and Chinese languages highly influence students’ difficulties in constructing cohesive text and ensuring coherence in their English academic writing. To this day, cohesion and coherence continue to be one of the challenging issues in L2 writing.

According to Connor (1984), evaluating writing quality requires attention not only to cohesion but also to coherence within the text (p. 302). In the same year, Hasan (1984) proposed a theory suggesting that textual coherence is determined by the degree and frequency of the cohesive ties between ideas in the text. However, more recent statistical findings present a different perspective. For example, Alarcon and Morales (2011) found no significant relationship between the use of cohesive devices and overall writing quality. Adopting the view that cohesion and coherence are distinct features, the present study focuses primarily on the coherence of EFL students’ English essays by examining how ideas are logically developed and connected throughout the text. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for the development of more effective L2 writing instruction, particularly in enhancing learners’ ability to construct coherent academic texts.

2. Methods

2.1. Data Source

To answer the aim of the study, the sample data was taken from English cause/effect essays of ten Indonesian university students majoring in English Education. The students were selected based on their level of English proficiency and familiarity with English writing practices. The limited number of students is due to the location of where the study took place where English is not considered as a second language but merely a foreign language and is only used during English classes with Indonesian serves mostly as the language of instruction. Moreover, English majors do not attract the interest of many students here, leading to low enrolment in this discipline.

The essays are on “The Cause and Effect of Depression” and were created as part of classroom assignments in an essay writing course. The students have been introduced to this type of essay, its communicative purposes, generic structure, and common linguistic features. Before writing, the students engaged in a collaborative briefing to explore ideas for development and construct preliminary outline and later proceeded to work on their essay independently.

2.2. Data Analysis

Coherence can be examined through two approaches: text-based and reader-based. As this study focuses on how the reader interpret and understand the text, the reader-based approach was employed in the analysis. This approach highlights the reader’s active role in creating meaning and assessing coherence. In that sense, reader’s background knowledge and expectation are key factors in interpreting meanings and evaluating the logical connection of ideas within a text. To ensure objectivity in the assessment process, the essays were rated by two English lecturers from two different universities who have relevant expertise. Coherence was measured based on several criteria: readability, development of ideas within paragraphs, connection between sentences, paragraph unity, flow of ideas, and the overall organization of the text.

3. Results

The results are presented in several parts according to the patterns and problems of coherence investigated in students’ essays.

3.1. Readability

Readability signifies how easy a text is for the reader to read and understand. It is influenced by several internal elements of the text, such as sentence length and structure, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, as well as clarity and conciseness. More than half of the total essays were found to have poor or very poor readability. The ideas were difficult to comprehend, and the flow was somewhat ‘topsy-turvy’—all over the place. Information in these essays was not conveyed concisely, resulting in unclear meanings. Understanding the writers’ messages was challenging due to sentence length and structure, vocabulary choices, improper use of punctuations, and incorrect use of transition signals.

Another significant factor contributing to unreadability was the unclear in-text referencing. In some parts of the essays, the writers mentioned a specific idea that referred to another part of the essay. However, the referred

part did not exist. For example, a new cause or effect was suddenly introduced in the concluding paragraph without being mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. This problem appeared in some essays and could potentially disrupt the reader's concentration. However, some essays demonstrated a good level of readability. These essays received the highest overall evaluation scores from the raters. They incorporated moderately long sentences with appropriate vocabulary choices throughout, making them easier to understand.

3.2. Development of Ideas and paragraph

Seven students were found to struggle with idea development in their essays. The issue was saliently evident in their inconsistent methods of communicating their messages. In some parts, they used a direct approach, while in others, they included excessive and unnecessary wording. This inconsistency often resulted in repetition and lack of clarity, as ideas were either overstated or presented without clear purpose. Most of the essays contained redundant information, with certain ideas restated without purpose.

Additionally, several sentences were underdeveloped and failed to convey complete thoughts. As a result, the intended meanings were often unclear or incomplete, leaving readers to infer or speculate about the writers' intended messages. For instance, two essays mentioned a severe effect of depression that should have been explained in more detail but lacked sufficient supporting information. Another common issue was the improper construction of thesis statement. This problem was particularly serious because the thesis statement serves as the central argument or main idea of the essay. Moreover, in some cases, the concluding paragraphs did not effectively restate the thesis statement or summarizing the main ideas of the essay.

3.3. Connection between Sentences and Paragraphs

Proper connection between words within a sentence and between sentences within a paragraph can be achieved by using appropriate linking devices to maintain the unity of ideas. Unfortunately, most students' essays lacked these proper connections, with eight out of ten essays receiving poor or very poor scores in this evaluation aspect. Many students failed to establish cohesive relationships between ideas. For example, some adjacent sentences were not logically correlated, and ideas often shifted abruptly from one to another without clear transitions, leading to confusion and misunderstanding in many parts of the text. Inaccurate use of synonyms also contributed to meaning distortion in some essays.

It is also found that some essays did not maintain the unity of ideas between paragraph. This lack of unity often disrupted the rational progression from one paragraph to another, making the transition feel abrupt and disjointed. Additionally, rough transition between paragraphs significantly affected the overall coherence of the text. As a result, some information appeared to be illogical due to the absence of coherent connection between the sentences and the adjacent paragraphs. The lack and improper use of transition signals were key reasons for this issue. Raters identified this as one of the major coherence problems that requires more focused attention for students' improvement.

3.4. Flow of Ideas and Overall Organization

Flow in coherence refers to how ideas in a text are connected both clearly and smoothly, allowing the reader to easily understand and follow the content. Most of students' essays followed the basic structure of moving from general to specific information. However, a smooth flow of ideas also depends heavily on other supporting factors,

many of which were lacking in students' writing, particularly in the development of ideas. Sudden transitions between sections of the essays often disturbed the flow, making the content difficult to follow. One notable finding was that some essays contained missing information within paragraphs, which caused difficulty in comprehending the overall meanings. This issue was closely related to a previously mentioned problem: the presence of unfinished statements in several essays. Such gaps left ideas incomplete and affected the coherence of the writing.

On a more positive note, three of the essays received good evaluation scores for the flow of ideas. These essays demonstrated strong flow of ideas by providing sufficient relevant and supporting details for their arguments and by logically connecting those arguments. Additionally, the natural and clear manner in which the students conveyed their messages contributed positively to the overall flow. While the overall organization was problematic in several essays, it was satisfactory in others. Both raters agreed that students need further support and practice in organizing their texts to develop a more coherent and engaging flow of ideas.

4. Discussion

A text, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976), can be any stretch of language—regardless of its form or length—as long as it functions as a unified whole. According to them, a text is best viewed as a semantic unit and not as a unit of form (p. 2). It emphasizes the importance of communication of messages and meanings can transcend the importance of technical elements. The main purpose of a text is to communicate something to a reader, whether to spread information, to persuade, to express personal thoughts, or to entertain. All of these various communicative purposes can only be achieved when the reader can clearly understand the writer's intended message and meaning. In this context, coherence serves as a fundamental element in facilitating successful communication. This study takes a reader-based approach in measuring the coherence in EFL students' essays believing that coherence lies heavily in the readers' perception. It is supported by Yule (2006) in which he argues that coherence comes from people's interpretation, rather than words or structures.

The results of this study reveal that students' essays have a number of issues related to coherence. The first apparent issue is the poor readability of the text which is analogous with the results of Mohseni and Samadian's study (2019). The students seem to be unable to maintain consistency throughout their essays. The sentence length and structure, vocabulary choices, improper use of punctuations, and incorrect use of transition signals are the factors that cause the poor readability of their text. However, these are not the only factors influencing the readability, through the lens of reader-based coherence, this study finds that unclear in-text referencing is also proved to promote the readability of a text. These findings suggest that readability is a complex term which cannot be measured by fixed criteria. It involves more than what is written in the text; it also draws on the reader's background knowledge and expectations. One of the aspects in Lee's coherence framework (1998) also emphasizes on the importance of knowing the reader's need and expectations. What is readable for a reader might not be the case for other readers. It aligns with Bailin and Grafstein (2001), who argue that readability cannot be determined by a single, simple measurement; instead, it emerges from the interaction between the reader and the text, influenced by a number of different factors.

The second issue concerns the extent to which ideas are effectively developed to provide adequate information for the reader to comprehend the overall meaning. Many of the students' essays contain poorly elaborated sentences and irrelevant details projecting incomplete thoughts. A similar finding was reported by Mohseni and Samadian (2019) in their study of Iranian intermediate EFL students' essays, where more than 50% of students demonstrated problems with developing their ideas, particularly in the introduction and conclusion. In the current study, the thesis statement and concluding paragraph are also among the least developed components of students' essays. This result is understandable, as one of the primary functions of a conclusion is to restate the main idea presented in the thesis statement. The thesis statement is the central argument of an essay and should be clear, concise, and focused. Consequently, when the thesis statement lacks development, it is highly likely that the concluding paragraph will also be underdeveloped.

Coherence is established when all elements of the text are linked and support a unified, clear message. Brown and Yule (1983) explain that when a reader reads sentences in a text, they naturally think the sentences are connected and try to understand each new sentence by linking it to the one before. However, some students fail to create this cohesive experience for the reader. In some parts of the essays, ideas shift abruptly, disrupting transitions and affecting the unity between sentences and paragraphs. Furthermore, in academic writing, it is recommended to repeat the key words strategically to emphasize the writer's argument and to remind the reader about the topic and writer's stance. Substituting certain words with their synonyms is a good strategy to maintain lexical variety and to sound more professional. Unfortunately, some students misinterpret these strategies by either overusing repetition or replacing key terms with synonyms that are not appropriate for the context.

The last aspect of coherence—text flow and organization—also requires a lot of attention. Some essays are difficult to comprehend due to missing information and incomplete statements. To ensure a smooth flow of ideas, paragraphs should be arranged logically, with each one focusing on a single supporting point that contributes to the thesis statement. Poor paragraph organization often leads to poor text's overall organization. This can make the essay difficult to follow and can hinder the reader's understanding of the main points. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that some students' essays demonstrate strong flow of ideas and receive positive evaluations for their overall flow and organization.

The results indicate that students still require a lot of practices to enhance their understanding of coherence and to be able to produce written texts that fully meet the criteria for coherence. Many students struggle to identify the main point of their essay or to articulate it in a compelling manner. It is important for them to recognize that coherent texts are more easily understood (Meyer, 2003). They can start by making sure that every linguistic element in the text serves a unified purpose and consistently refers back to a central topic. Each sentence and paragraph should be built upon the previous one, adding relevant information that supports and strengthens the overall argument. One of the most important responsibilities of a writer is to anticipate how the reader will interpret the message by presenting information in a structured and meaningful way. As Johns (1986) emphasizes, writers should keep their audience and task in mind throughout the entire writing process.

5. Conclusions

This study identified key coherence issues in cause/effect essays written by Indonesian EFL students, particularly in idea development, sentence and paragraph connections, and overall flow and organization. Common problems included redundancy, underdeveloped ideas, weak thesis statements, and ineffective transitions, which hindered the clarity and flow of the essays. These findings highlight the need for targeted instruction in organizing and linking ideas effectively. EFL writing programs should focus on teaching students to develop ideas coherently, use appropriate transitions, and ensure logical consistency throughout their essays, and to always keep the reader in mind by considering their needs, expectations, and the clarity of the information. By addressing these areas, instructors can better support students in producing clear, cohesive academic texts. In addition to instructional focus, incorporating peer feedback and revision practices can further help students enhance coherence. Future research could explore the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies in improving coherence, offering further insights into enhancing EFL writing pedagogy.

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