



Analysis of Coherence and Cohesion in Paragraphs Writing of EFL Students

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Abstract

This study examines coherence and cohesion in paragraphs written by high school students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, data were gathered through cluster random sampling, with one class selected as the study sample. The students' recount paragraphs were analyzed using both quantitative scoring and qualitative content analysis to capture a comprehensive understanding of their writing skills within the EFL context. The results revealed a high level of coherence, with an average score of 83, indicating that students were able to organize ideas logically and connect sentences clearly. These findings underscore the critical role of EFL educators in developing students' mastery of coherence and cohesion, which are essential for effective writing. The study highlights the importance of teachers possessing strong evaluative skills to identify strengths and weaknesses in student writing, thereby enabling targeted instruction that can enhance writing proficiency in EFL settings.

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1. Introduction

Writing is a complex process that demands mastery of two fundamental skills: constructing grammatically correct sentences and effectively formulating and organizing ideas. Constructing proper sentences involves understanding grammatical components such as word types (nouns, verbs, adjectives), their placement, verb tenses, and syntactic relationships or "agreements" between words (Hyland, 2004). Well-formed sentences serve as building blocks that contribute to clear and meaningful writing, enabling a smooth and coherent flow akin to a chain where each sentence links logically to the next (Sword, 2012).

Beyond sentence-level accuracy, the organization of ideas within a paragraph plays a crucial role in writing effectiveness. Coherence refers to the logical, meaningful connection of ideas, allowing readers to follow the writer's train of thought seamlessly (Yani, 2022; Zahara et al., 2023). When sentences and ideas within a paragraph are unified, the paragraph conveys a clear, focused message that supports successful communication (RahmtAllah, 2020). To achieve coherence, writers use techniques like transitional words, consistent thematic focus, and logical sequencing. Coherence is deeply connected to cohesion, which provides the linguistic glue that ties sentences and ideas together within



a text (Kafes, 2012). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is realized through grammatical devices—referents, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions—and lexical relations such as repetition and synonyms. These cohesive devices function at the sentence level to create networks of meaning that support overall coherence. Thus, coherence is the logical flow of ideas at the paragraph level, and cohesion is the linguistic practice that links sentences to create that flow.

Despite these theoretical frameworks, EFL students frequently encounter difficulties producing paragraphs that are both coherent and cohesive (Ailinah (2022); Darussalam & Fahrinawati, 2023; Mahayoni et al., 2024; Pradnyana et al., 2022; Widyasari et al., 2022). This challenge transcends mere vocabulary and grammar knowledge, involving the complex integration of idea organization and cohesive device usage to maintain clarity and logical flow (Nunan, 2000). Factors such as first-language interference, limited vocabulary and grammar proficiency, and insufficient exposure to authentic English texts exacerbate these difficulties (Arta et al., 2019; Dwihandini et al., 2013; Fareed et al., 2016).

While prior research has broadly examined coherence and cohesion in EFL learners' writing (Riswanto, 2021; Putra et al., 2022), most studies tend to focus either on general qualitative descriptions or broad quantitative measures of cohesion frequency. There is a lack of focused, fine-grained analysis that specifically investigates how EFL students systematically apply cohesive devices to maintain coherence within paragraph writing. Moreover, studies often overlook the interplay between different types of cohesive devices and their combined effect on paragraph clarity and understanding. This leaves a critical gap in understanding the consistency and functionality of cohesion from the learners' perspective. In addition, the majority of existing research on Indonesian EFL learners concentrates on either grammatical accuracy or surface-level vocabulary use without a deep dive into the organizational aspects of writing that shape meaning and reader comprehension. Few studies have directly linked the theoretical concepts of coherence and cohesion to practical writing outcomes, particularly in the context of paragraph-level composition by learners who are still developing their proficiency.

The novelty of the present study lies in its dual focus on both coherence—the logical organization and unity of ideas—and the specific types and frequencies of cohesive devices employed by EFL students. By analyzing these elements together, the study aims to provide fresh insights into the strategies learners use to create meaningful, connected writing. This approach not only adds specificity to the investigation of cohesion and coherence but also offers practical implications for teaching writing skills that address these nuanced challenges. The study's localized context with Indonesian EFL learners further enriches this contribution by providing culturally relevant evidence that can inform tailored pedagogical strategies.

The present study aims to investigate in detail the coherence of paragraphs produced by EFL students and to identify the specific types of cohesive devices they employ. The study's research questions are:

1. How coherent are the paragraphs written by EFL students?
2. What types of cohesive devices do EFL students use in their paragraph writing?

3. Method

This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-method design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to address two main research questions. First, students' ability to create coherence in their paragraphs is assessed quantitatively by two raters using a scoring rubric, followed by a qualitative analysis focusing on topic sentences, supporting details, and paragraph organization to provide deeper insight. Second, the study examines the types of cohesion used in the students' writing



by quantitatively determining the frequency of various cohesive devices and then describing these findings qualitatively. This combined approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both coherence and cohesion in the students' paragraphs.

The data for this study were collected using the document collection method. Initially, the researcher conducted observations—both direct and through online communication with the English teacher—to identify which classes could serve as research subjects. Following this, the teacher assigned recount paragraph writing tasks to the students during class, which the students completed at home and submitted the following week. The researcher then obtained these completed assignments from the teacher. Additionally, after consulting with the teacher, the researcher requested previously completed recount writings from tenth-grade students as part of their regular assignments.

To analyze the data on students' coherence in paragraph writing, two raters independently scored each student's paragraph. Both raters held at least an undergraduate degree in English and had teaching experience. One rater was the students' own English teacher, while the other was a different qualified teacher. This selection ensured that the raters had sufficient expertise to evaluate the writing accurately. The scoring was based on a rubric consisting of three components (clarity, relevance and accuracy of sentences, relationship between writing purpose, diction, and content, and appropriateness of information), which guided the raters in assessing various aspects of coherence in the paragraphs.

To analyze the data on coherence qualitatively, the study first identified the topic sentences within each paragraph, regardless of whether they appeared at the beginning, middle, or end. Each topic sentence was then examined to distinguish the main topic from the controlling idea. Five student paragraphs were selected as representative samples for this detailed analysis. The coherence of each paragraph was assessed by evaluating the logical connection and continuity between the topic sentence and the paragraph's content, as well as the relationship between the topic sentence and the conclusion, ensuring relevance and consistency throughout. A paragraph was considered coherent if the topic sentence, supporting details, and conclusion were well integrated and demonstrated a logical flow. The average coherence score of the students' paragraphs was calculated, followed by detailed explanations regarding the development of the topic, content, and conclusion. Additionally, the study analyzed the types of cohesion used by calculating the percentage occurrence of various cohesive devices based on an assessment rubric. Qualitative explanations were then provided to clarify the meaning and function of these cohesive devices, supporting the quantitative findings. This combined approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both coherence and cohesion in the students' writing.

4. Findings

Several criteria determine paragraph coherence, mainly paragraph structure and the connection between sentences. A complete structure includes a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence; missing any part weakens clarity. These criteria were used to evaluate recount paragraphs written by 21 tenth-grade EFL students. Two expert raters assessed the students' work, and their scores were averaged to provide an overall coherence score as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Students Writing's Coherence

Text	1st rater	2nd rater	Score	Mean Score
T1	70	72	142	71
T2	80	80	160	80
T3	85	83	168	84
T4	75	75	150	75

T5	77	75	152	76
T6	83	85	168	84
T7	80	85	165	82,5
T8	85	85	170	85
T9	90	85	175	87,5
T10	88	90	178	89
T11	74	75	149	74,5
T12	80	78	158	79
T13	80	80	160	80
T14	76	75	151	75,5
T15	75	75	150	75
T16	75	75	150	75
T17	85	83	168	84
T18	88	85	173	86,5
T19	80	83	163	81,5
T20	80	83	163	81,5
T21	76	80	156	78
Average				80,21

The coherence of recount paragraphs written by participants was assessed by two evaluators—an experienced English teacher and a newer teacher. The average coherence score was around 80-83, indicating generally strong coherence with clear connections between ideas. Most paragraphs (19 out of 21) had very good scores, showing complete structure with clear orientation, events, and conclusion parts, along with good diction and logical flow. However, 2 paragraphs scored lower due to incomplete structure, especially in the orientation section, and contained diction and grammatical errors. While many paragraphs had consistent ratings from both evaluators, some showed slight score variations. The lower-scoring paragraphs suggest areas for improvement in logical flow, transitions, and idea connections to enhance coherence. For the second analysis, the focus is on identifying and quantifying the various cohesive devices employed by the students, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, to understand how these elements contribute to the overall coherence of their writing as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Students Writing's Cohesion

N	Form of Cohesion Relationship	Frequency	Percentages
1	Reference	175	20.09%
1 1	Exophoric	0	0.00%
1 2	Endophoric	175	35.80%
	Anaphoric	171	19.63%
	Kataphoric	4	0.46%
2	Substitution	136	15.61%
2 1	Nominal	68	7.81%
2 2	Verbal	11	1.26%



2 3	Clause	13	1.49%
3	Ellipsis	44	5.05%
4	Conjunction	136	15.61%
4 1	Additive	68	14.20%
4 2	Adversative	11	2.30%
4 3	Causal	13	2.70%
4 4	Temporal	44	9.20%
5	Lexical Cohesion	125	14.35%
5 1	Repetition word	77	8.84%
5 2	Synonym	10	1.15%
5 3	Superordinate relations	2	0.23%
5 4	Use of Common words	36	4.13%

The analysis of cohesion in the text reveals a predominant use of internal referencing through endophoric references, which constitute the largest portion of cohesive devices employed. Specifically, anaphoric references dominate, indicating that the writer frequently refers back to previously mentioned information to maintain continuity, thus reinforcing textual coherence. The complete absence of exophoric references suggests the text is highly self-contained, relying exclusively on internal textual elements rather than external context or shared knowledge. Moreover, the equal frequency of substitution and conjunction (15.61% each) highlights two prominent strategies: substitution serves to avoid repetition and maintain fluidity by replacing elements, while conjunctions—especially additive conjunctions—link ideas logically, contributing to the clear progression of arguments or points. The relatively lower occurrence of ellipsis (5.05%) indicates that while some information is omitted for brevity, it is less frequently used as a cohesion strategy. Lexical cohesion, accounting for 14.35%, predominantly through word repetition and common word usage, demonstrates that vocabulary choice also plays a significant role in creating and sustaining cohesion. Although less frequent, the presence of synonyms and superordinate relationships suggests subtle variation in lexical ties to avoid monotony and enrich textual connections.

Overall, the findings suggest that the text relies heavily on endophoric referencing and explicit cohesive devices to construct a coherent and unified paragraph. This pattern reflects a conscious effort by the writer to ensure a logical flow of ideas and maintain clarity for the reader, typical of effective academic or formal writing. The lack of exophoric references further emphasizes that coherence is achieved primarily through structured internal connectivity, which aligns with best practices in paragraph writing aimed at clear communication without requiring external contextual assumptions.

5. Discussions

The analysis of tenth-grade students' recount paragraphs reveals a commendable level of coherence and structure. A significant 81% of the writings were categorized as "Good," while the remaining 19% achieved a "Very Good" rating. This distribution indicates that students have effectively internalized the principles of recount writing. The absence of lower ratings such as "Fair," "Bad," or "Very Bad" suggests a uniform understanding of the genre's requirements. The students' ability to



construct well-organized paragraphs reflects their grasp of chronological sequencing and topic development. This outcome underscores the efficacy of current instructional strategies in enhancing writing coherence.

The findings reveal that EFL students exhibit a notably strong level of coherence in their descriptive writing, as evidenced by an average coherence score of 83. This score aligns with and even surpasses coherence levels reported in previous studies, which often highlight challenges in maintaining textual unity among EFL learners (Alsariera & Yunus, 2023; RahmtAllah, 2020). The hierarchy of cohesive devices employed by the students further elucidates their writing strategies: Reference emerges as the most frequently used device, followed by Substitution, Conjunction, and Lexical Cohesion, with Ellipsis being markedly less common. This pattern suggests that students rely heavily on referential ties to establish connections within their texts, a strategy that facilitates clarity and reader comprehension. The relatively low use of Ellipsis indicates a potential gap in students' familiarity or comfort with this device, which is often more complex and less explicitly taught in EFL contexts. Such findings underscore the nuanced ways in which learners navigate cohesion, reflecting both their linguistic competence and instructional exposure.

The predominance of Reference as a cohesive device highlights its fundamental role in maintaining textual coherence, particularly in descriptive writing where establishing clear referents is essential for guiding the reader through detailed imagery and information. Reference devices, such as pronouns and demonstratives, enable writers to avoid redundancy while preserving continuity, thereby enhancing the fluidity of the narrative (Nurhidayah & Jismulatif, 2020). Conversely, the underuse of Ellipsis suggests that EFL students may not fully exploit this device's potential to create concise and cohesive texts. Ellipsis requires an understanding of implicit meaning and context, which can be challenging for learners still developing their pragmatic and syntactic skills (Zahara et al., 2023). This gap points to the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that explicitly introduce and practice Ellipsis, enabling students to diversify their cohesive strategies and improve overall writing proficiency. Incorporating focused exercises and awareness-raising activities on less familiar cohesive devices could foster more sophisticated writing skills and better prepare students for advanced academic tasks.

Based on the findings, future pedagogical interventions should focus on broadening learners' mastery of cohesive devices beyond the current heavy reliance on endophoric referencing and additive conjunctions. Instruction should include explicit teaching and practice of less frequent but important cohesion strategies such as exophoric references, ellipsis, and a greater variety of conjunction types to help learners create more nuanced and contextually connected texts. Additionally, expanding learners' lexical cohesion through vocabulary-building activities that encourage diverse word choices like synonyms and superordinate terms can prevent repetition and enrich textual coherence. An integrated approach to teaching cohesion and coherence together is essential, incorporating analysis of model texts, peer reviews, and revision exercises to help learners understand how cohesive devices function collectively to produce logical flow. Contextualized writing tasks that encourage connections beyond the text will foster skills in relating writing to external contexts, addressing the absence of exophoric references observed. Finally, formative feedback focusing on both the frequency and appropriateness of cohesive ties can develop learners' metacognitive awareness and self-regulatory ability in writing. These pedagogical strategies, tailored to the specific patterns and gaps revealed in your study, aim to enhance learners' proficiency in producing coherent, cohesive, and engaging writing in EFL contexts.

6. Conclusion and Suggestion

The research concludes that the EFL students demonstrate strong coherence in their descriptive writing, with an average coherence score of 83. The most frequently used cohesive device is Reference,



followed by Substitution, Conjunction, and Lexical Cohesion, while Ellipsis is used less often, indicating students may be less familiar with it. Although this study provides valuable insights into the use of cohesive devices in the analyzed text, there are some limitations to consider. First, the analysis focuses solely on one text or a limited sample, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other genres, contexts, or EFL learner populations. Second, the study primarily examines frequency and types of cohesive devices but does not incorporate qualitative assessments of their effectiveness or appropriateness in context, which could provide deeper interpretive insights. Third, the absence of exophoric references might reflect specific characteristics of the text itself rather than a broader learner tendency, so caution is needed when extrapolating this result. Additionally, the study does not explore how individual differences such as proficiency level, cultural background, or instructional environment may influence cohesion use. Finally, as the research is based on written data only, it does not capture the role of spoken discourse cohesion or multimodal elements which are also important in language use. Suggestions for teachers include enhancing instruction on a variety of cohesive devices, implementing writing workshops with peer reviews and model texts, providing individualized feedback on cohesion, and encouraging extensive reading and writing to internalize cohesive techniques. For students, recommendations are to expand their knowledge of different cohesive devices, revise and edit their writing for better coherence, increase awareness and practice of underused devices like ellipsis, and actively seek feedback from teachers and peers to improve their writing skills.

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