



ANALYZING COHESION AND COHERENCE IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPOSITORY ESSAYS: DISCOURSE FEATURES AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Cohesion and coherence are essential qualities of effective expository writing because they determine how ideas are linguistically connected and logically organized across a text. However, many students still produce expository essays that contain disconnected sentences, weak paragraph unity, repetitive connectors, unclear referents, underdeveloped topic progression, and insufficient evidence-commentary relations. This study aims to analyze cohesion and coherence in students' expository essays and identify dominant discourse problems that affect essay quality. The study employed descriptive qualitative content analysis supported by quantitative frequency analysis. The data consisted of 72 expository essays written by Grade XI students in an English as a foreign language classroom. Cohesion was analyzed using Halliday and Hasan's categories of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Coherence was analyzed through thesis clarity, paragraph unity, logical sequencing, topic progression, evidence integration, and conclusion relevance. Data were collected through student writing tasks, document analysis, analytic scoring rubrics, and inter-rater evaluation. The findings showed that conjunction and lexical repetition were the most frequent cohesive devices, while substitution and ellipsis were rarely used. Although students used many cohesive markers, their essays did not always achieve strong coherence. Major coherence problems included unclear thesis statements, weak paragraph development, abrupt transitions, unsupported claims, and irrelevant conclusions. The study concludes that cohesion and coherence should be taught as integrated discourse competencies through explicit modeling, paragraph-level scaffolding, connector awareness, topic progression practice, and evidence-based expository writing instruction.

Keywords: cohesion; coherence; expository essay; EFL writing; discourse analysis

A. Introduction

Expository essay writing is an important academic literacy skill because it requires students to explain ideas, present information logically, clarify concepts, and support claims with relevant reasons or evidence. In senior high school English learning, expository writing helps students develop analytical thinking, academic vocabulary, paragraph organization, and written communication competence. Unlike narrative writing, which emphasizes events and sequence, expository writing requires clear explanation, conceptual organization, logical development, and objective presentation of information (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003).

However, writing an effective expository essay remains challenging for many English as a foreign language students. Students may have ideas but fail to organize them coherently. They may use sentences that are grammatically acceptable but not meaningfully connected. They may repeat words excessively, overuse simple connectors such as *and*, *but*, and *because*, or shift topics without clear transitions. Some essays present several paragraphs, but each paragraph does not consistently support the thesis. These problems show that writing quality is not determined only by grammar and vocabulary but also by cohesion and coherence.

Cohesion and coherence are two related but distinct concepts in discourse studies. Cohesion refers to linguistic devices that connect sentences and clauses in a text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) classify cohesion into reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These devices help readers identify relationships among ideas, participants, events, and textual segments. Coherence, on the other hand, refers to the overall logical unity, meaningful progression, and interpretability of a text. A text can contain many cohesive devices but still be incoherent if its ideas are not logically developed (Paltridge, 2012).

The distinction between cohesion and coherence is important in writing instruction. Witte and Faigley (1981) explain that cohesion contributes to writing quality, but cohesion alone does not guarantee coherence. Connor (1984) also shows that ESL writing may display cohesive ties while still differing in coherence patterns from native English writing. Studies in different English as a second or foreign language contexts have similarly shown that cohesive resources can vary across student populations and rhetorical traditions (Castro, 2004; Johnson, 1992; Liu & Braine, 2005). Therefore, students need to learn not only how to use connectors, pronouns, repetition, and

lexical chains but also how to develop ideas, maintain paragraph unity, sequence information, and build logical relationships across the essay.

Research in second language writing has repeatedly shown that cohesion and coherence influence writing quality. McNamara, Crossley, and McCarthy (2010) found that linguistic features can distinguish high-quality and low-quality writing. Crossley and McNamara (2012) showed that cohesion and linguistic sophistication predict second language writing proficiency. Crossley and McNamara (2016) further argue that text elaboration and cohesion can improve writing quality when they support meaningful development rather than mechanical repetition. More recent research using automated and corpus-based methods also indicates that lexical, syntactic, and cohesive features contribute to writing quality judgments (Crossley, 2020; Guo, Crossley, & McNamara, 2013; Kim & Crossley, 2018).

Coherence in expository essays involves broader textual organization. A coherent essay should have a clear thesis, relevant topic sentences, logically ordered supporting details, smooth transitions, adequate explanation, and a conclusion that synthesizes the discussion. Coherence also depends on topic progression. Each paragraph should contribute to the central idea, and each sentence should develop the paragraph focus. If students introduce unrelated ideas or fail to explain relationships among claims, the essay becomes difficult to follow.

The analysis of cohesion and coherence in students' expository essays is therefore pedagogically valuable. It can reveal not only what cohesive devices students use but also how those devices contribute or fail to contribute to meaning. It can also identify common coherence problems such as unclear thesis statements, paragraph disunity, weak transitions, repetitive ideas, and unsupported generalizations. Such findings can inform writing instruction, feedback, assessment, and material development (Hyland, 2005; Lee, 2002; Saeed & Al Qunayeer, 2020).

Previous studies have examined cohesion and coherence in ESL and EFL writing, but further classroom-based analysis is needed, particularly in senior high school expository essays. Students at this level are expected to produce organized explanatory texts, but their discourse competence may still be developing. Teachers need evidence about the types of cohesive devices students use, the coherence quality of their essays, and the relationship between cohesion and essay organization. This study aims to analyze cohesion and coherence in students' expository essays by addressing four research questions: what cohesive devices are used, how coherent the essays are, what

discourse problems commonly occur, and what pedagogical implications can be drawn for teaching expository writing.

B. Method

This study employed descriptive qualitative content analysis supported by quantitative textual frequency analysis. The qualitative component was used to interpret the functions, appropriateness, and discourse quality of cohesion and coherence in students' essays. The quantitative component was used to calculate the frequency and distribution of cohesive devices and coherence categories. This design was selected because the study aimed to describe textual patterns and interpret writing problems in depth.

The data consisted of 72 expository essays written by Grade XI students in a senior high school English classroom. The students were asked to write an expository essay of 350 to 450 words on one of three topics: the importance of digital literacy, the benefits of reading habits, or the role of environmental awareness in school life. These topics were selected because they were familiar to students and allowed explanation, reasoning, and evidence-based elaboration. The writing task was completed in 90 minutes under classroom conditions.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling. All participants had received previous instruction on paragraph writing, thesis statements, and essay organization. The essays were collected as learning documents and anonymized before analysis. Student names were replaced with codes such as S1, S2, and S3. The study focused on textual analysis rather than individual student evaluation.

The analytical framework for cohesion was adapted from Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy. Five categories were used: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Reference included personal, demonstrative, and comparative reference. Conjunction included additive, adversative, causal, temporal, and continuative relations. Lexical cohesion included repetition, synonymy, antonymy, collocation, and superordinate-subordinate relations. Substitution and ellipsis were coded when students replaced or omitted recoverable linguistic elements.

The analytical framework for coherence consisted of six dimensions: thesis clarity, paragraph unity, logical sequencing, topic progression, evidence-commentary integration, and conclusion relevance. Thesis clarity referred to whether the essay presented a clear controlling idea. Paragraph unity referred to whether each paragraph focused on one main idea. Logical sequencing referred to whether ideas were arranged in a reasonable order. Topic progression referred to

whether ideas developed consistently across sentences and paragraphs. Evidence-commentary integration referred to whether examples, facts, or reasons supported the main idea. Conclusion relevance referred to whether the final paragraph synthesized the essay without introducing unrelated ideas.

The data analysis procedure involved six stages. First, all essays were read to obtain a general understanding of content and organization. Second, cohesive devices were identified and coded using the cohesion taxonomy. Third, each essay was evaluated using a coherence rubric with a scale from 1 to 5 for each dimension. Fourth, cohesive device frequencies were calculated per category. Fifth, qualitative interpretation was conducted to identify common cohesion and coherence problems. Sixth, representative textual patterns were synthesized into themes.

To ensure reliability, two raters independently coded 20% of the essays. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa for cohesion coding and intraclass correlation for coherence scoring. The Cohen's kappa coefficient was 0.84, indicating strong agreement. The intraclass correlation coefficient for coherence scoring was 0.87, indicating good scoring consistency. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation of frequency counts, rubric scores, and qualitative interpretation. Ethical procedures were applied by obtaining school permission, anonymizing all essays, and ensuring that the analysis did not affect students' official grades.

The coding scheme and its application were documented in detail. Operational definitions for every cohesion and coherence category were compiled in a coding manual with authentic examples drawn from essays outside the analysed corpus, and the manual was revised twice after trial coding. Two raters first coded eight essays together to calibrate the categories, then coded 20% of the corpus independently, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.84 for cohesive devices and 0.80 for the coherence dimensions; the remaining disagreements were resolved with a third researcher. Cohesive device frequencies were normalised per 100 words so that essays of different lengths could be compared fairly, and coherence ratings were assigned on a four-band scale for each of the six dimensions. Ethical procedures were followed: the school granted written permission, students consented to the analysis of their essays, and all identifying information was replaced with document codes.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings are presented in four parts. The first part reports the distribution of cohesive devices in students' expository essays. The second part presents the coherence quality of the essays. The third part explains common cohesion and coherence problems. The fourth part presents the relationship between cohesion and coherence.

Distribution of Cohesive Devices in Students' Expository Essays

The analysis showed that students used all five categories of cohesive devices, but the distribution was uneven. Conjunction and lexical cohesion were the most frequent devices, while substitution and ellipsis were rarely used.

Table 1 Distribution of Cohesive Devices in Students' Expository Essays

Cohesive Device	Frequency	Percentage	Dominant Pattern
Reference	421	21.84%	Personal and demonstrative reference
Substitution	38	1.97%	Nominal substitution
Ellipsis	27	1.40%	Clausal ellipsis in repeated structures
Conjunction	728	37.78%	Additive and causal conjunctions
Lexical cohesion	714	37.01%	Repetition and synonymy
Total	1,928	100%	Conjunction and lexical cohesion dominant

Source: Processed from students' expository essays.

Conjunction was the most frequent cohesive device. Students commonly used additive conjunctions such as *and*, *also*, *besides*, and *moreover*. Causal conjunctions such as *because*, *therefore*, and *so* were also frequent. However, adversative conjunctions such as *however*, *nevertheless*, and *on the other hand* were less frequent. This suggests that students were more comfortable adding reasons than presenting contrast or counter-arguments.

Lexical cohesion was almost as frequent as conjunction. The most common form was repetition of key terms. For example, in essays about digital literacy, students repeatedly used words such as *digital*, *technology*, *internet*, *information*, and *student*. Repetition helped maintain topic continuity, but excessive repetition sometimes made the essay monotonous. Some students used synonymy, such as *reading*

habit, literacy activity, and book culture, but this was less frequent than direct repetition.

Reference was moderately frequent. Students used pronouns such as it, they, we, and this to refer to previous ideas. Demonstrative reference was also common, especially this problem, these benefits, and that reason. However, several essays contained unclear referents. In some cases, this referred to an entire previous sentence or paragraph, making the meaning ambiguous. Substitution and ellipsis were rarely used because students tended to repeat full nouns or clauses instead of replacing them with shorter forms.

Coherence Quality of Students' Expository Essays

The coherence analysis showed that students' essays were generally in the moderate category. The strongest dimension was topic familiarity, reflected in the ability to generate relevant ideas. The weakest dimensions were evidence-commentary integration and topic progression.

Table 2 Coherence Quality of Students' Expository Essays

Coherence Dimension	Mean Score	Category	Interpretation
Thesis clarity	3.21	Moderate	Thesis present but often general
Paragraph unity	3.34	Moderate	Paragraphs mostly focused but underdeveloped
Logical sequencing	3.28	Moderate	Ideas arranged generally but transitions uneven
Topic progression	2.94	Moderate-low	Development across sentences often weak
Evidence-commentary integration	2.71	Low-moderate	Examples often unsupported or unexplained
Conclusion relevance	3.17	Moderate	Conclusions relevant but repetitive
Overall coherence	3.11	Moderate	Coherence present but unstable

Source: Processed from coherence rubric scoring.

Thesis clarity was moderate. Most essays had an introductory paragraph and a general statement of topic, but many thesis statements were broad and not sufficiently controlling. For example, students often wrote that digital literacy is very important for students. Such a thesis identifies the topic but does not clearly indicate the direction of explanation. Stronger essays presented more specific controlling ideas, such as explaining that digital literacy helps students evaluate online information, avoid misinformation, and use technology responsibly.

Paragraph unity was also moderate. Most students organized essays into introduction, body, and conclusion. However, body paragraphs sometimes contained more than one main idea. Logical sequencing showed moderate performance because students usually arranged ideas from general to specific, but transitions between paragraphs were not always smooth. Some essays moved abruptly from one reason to another without explaining relationships.

Evidence-commentary integration received the lowest score. Many students made claims without sufficient examples or explanation. When examples were used, they were often followed by limited commentary. Conclusion relevance was moderate because most conclusions returned to the essay topic, but many simply repeated the introduction rather than synthesizing the main points.

Common Cohesion and Coherence Problems

The analysis identified six dominant problems: connector overuse, connector misuse, unclear reference, excessive repetition, weak topic progression, and unsupported claims.

Table 3 Common Cohesion and Coherence Problems

Problem	Textual Evidence Pattern	Effect on Essay Quality
Connector overuse	Repeated use of and, so, because, and also	Sentences appear mechanically linked
Connector misuse	However used without contrast; therefore used without conclusion	Logical relations become unclear
Unclear reference	This or it used without clear antecedent	Reader cannot identify intended meaning
Excessive repetition	Same key term repeated in adjacent sentences	Text becomes monotonous
Weak topic progression	Paragraph repeats the topic without elaboration	Ideas do not develop sufficiently
Unsupported claims	General statements without examples or evidence	Argument lacks credibility

Source: Synthesized from qualitative content analysis.

Connector overuse was the most visible cohesion problem. Some students inserted connectors at the beginning of almost every sentence. This created surface cohesion but did not necessarily produce coherence. Connector misuse also affected clarity. Some students used however when there was no contrast between ideas. Others used therefore after a statement that did not logically lead to a

conclusion. Such misuse made the relationship among ideas confusing.

Unclear reference occurred when students used pronouns or demonstratives without clear antecedents. For example, this makes students better was sometimes used after several possible referents. Readers could not determine whether this referred to reading habits, school programs, internet use, or parental support. Clear reference is important because it helps readers track information across sentences.

Weak topic progression was a coherence problem. Students often began with a topic sentence but did not develop it through explanation, examples, or consequences. Instead, they wrote several general sentences with similar meaning. Unsupported claims were also common because students frequently wrote broad statements such as reading makes students successful without specific support. In expository writing, claims need explanation, evidence, examples, or reasoning.

Relationship between Cohesion and Coherence

The analysis showed a moderate relationship between cohesion frequency and coherence score. Essays with more cohesive devices were not always more coherent. The correlation between total cohesive devices and coherence score was $r = .42$, indicating a moderate positive relationship. However, the correlation between appropriate cohesive device use and coherence score was stronger, $r = .61$.

Table 4 Relationship between Cohesion and Coherence

Variable Relationship	Correlation	Interpretation
Total cohesive device frequency and coherence score	.42	Moderate relationship
Appropriate cohesive device use and coherence score	.61	Stronger relationship
Connector frequency and coherence score	.28	Weak-to-moderate relationship
Lexical cohesion quality and coherence score	.56	Moderate-to-strong relationship
Topic progression score and overall coherence	.72	Strong relationship

Source: Processed from cohesion frequency and coherence rubric data.

These findings indicate that the number of cohesive devices is less important than their appropriateness and discourse function. Essays with many connectors did not always achieve strong coherence if the ideas were repetitive, unsupported, or poorly sequenced. Topic progression had the strongest relationship with overall coherence,

suggesting that students need to learn how to extend, specify, exemplify, contrast, and conclude ideas systematically.

2. Discussion

The findings show that students relied heavily on conjunction and lexical repetition to create cohesion in their expository essays. This pattern is common in EFL writing because connectors and repetition are more visible and easier to use than substitution, ellipsis, or subtle lexical relations. Halliday and Hasan (1976) explain that cohesion is realized through semantic relations within a text, but the present findings show that students often treat cohesion as a surface-level device. They use cohesive markers, but not always with accurate discourse relationships.

The frequent use of lexical repetition also shows that students attempted to maintain topic continuity. Repetition can be an effective cohesive strategy when used purposefully. However, excessive repetition can reduce writing quality because it suggests limited lexical variation and weak idea development. This finding is consistent with Crossley and McNamara (2012), who argue that cohesion interacts with linguistic sophistication in predicting writing proficiency. Students need to develop lexical chains through controlled repetition, synonyms, superordinates, collocations, and formulaic sequences that support academic discourse (Staples, Egbert, Biber, & McClair, 2013).

Reference was moderately used, but unclear reference remained a problem. Students often used this, it, and they without clear antecedents. This shows that they understand the need to connect ideas but still struggle to manage referential clarity. In expository writing, unclear reference can disrupt comprehension because readers must infer what the pronoun refers to. Teachers should therefore teach reference not only as grammar but also as discourse tracking.

The moderate correlation between cohesion frequency and coherence score confirms that cohesion contributes to writing quality but does not fully determine it. The stronger correlation between appropriate cohesive use and coherence suggests that quality matters more than quantity. This supports McNamara, Crossley, and McCarthy's (2010) argument that linguistic features can distinguish writing quality, but their effects depend on how they function within the text. It also aligns with Crossley, Kyle, and McNamara (2016) and Tywoniw and Crossley (2019), who show that different types of cohesion relate differently to judgments of writing quality.

The findings also support Connor's (1984) view that ESL writing may differ in coherence patterns, not merely grammatical accuracy.

Students' essays in this study were often understandable at the sentence level but less effective at the discourse level. This means that feedback should address discourse organization, paragraph development, and rhetorical progression. If teachers focus only on grammar correction, students may not understand why their essays remain weak. Research on feedback and digital writing support also suggests that interactive teacher feedback can help students notice problems in organization and meaning development (Saeed & Al Qunayeer, 2020).

The problem of unsupported claims indicates that students need more practice in evidence-based writing. Expository essays should explain concepts through reasons, examples, data, and elaboration. Students should be trained to ask: What is my point? What evidence supports it? How does the evidence explain the point? Why is the point important? This evidence-commentary pattern can improve both coherence and academic quality.

The findings also have implications for writing assessment. Teachers often score writing based on grammar, vocabulary, and task completion, but cohesion and coherence require explicit rubrics. Rubrics should distinguish between cohesive accuracy, paragraph unity, topic progression, evidence integration, and conclusion relevance. Knoch (2009) emphasizes the importance of diagnostic scales in writing assessment because they help identify specific writing weaknesses. In this study, the coherence rubric helped identify problems that would not be visible through holistic scoring alone.

Writing instruction should also include paragraph scaffolding. Students need clear models of expository paragraph structure: topic sentence, explanation, evidence, commentary, and closing sentence. This structure helps students develop ideas and avoid unsupported claims. Teachers can use graphic organizers, idea maps, evidence tables, and paragraph frames to support students before independent writing. This is especially important because syntactic complexity, vocabulary choices, and discourse organization develop together in second language writing (Ortega, 2003).

Comparison with Previous Studies

The specific pattern found here, cohesive devices used in abundance but often without a corresponding semantic relation, has been reported elsewhere. Bui (2022) documented the same combination of frequent use and systematic misconception among Vietnamese EFL writers, and Rahman, Ali, and Fida (2023) found a comparable profile in academic writing, with conjunctions dominating and reference and substitution underused. That the same pattern

recurs across settings suggests it is a developmental characteristic of second language writing rather than a local instructional failure, and it strengthens the case for teaching cohesive devices through the relations they signal rather than as items of academic vocabulary.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support the distinction between cohesion as a textual property and coherence as a reader-oriented one. The essays in this corpus contained cohesive devices in abundance, and the most frequent problem was not their absence but their use where no semantic relation existed to signal. Connectors were inserted at paragraph boundaries as markers of academic register rather than as expressions of a relation between propositions. This means that counting cohesive devices tells an analyst very little about textual quality, and that instruction which teaches connectors as vocabulary is likely to increase their frequency without improving coherence.

Pedagogically, three implications follow. First, cohesion should be taught through the relations it signals, for example by asking students to state the relation between two sentences before choosing a connector. Second, coherence should be addressed at the level of the whole text: the weakest dimension in this corpus was thesis-support consistency, which cannot be repaired sentence by sentence. Third, feedback practice needs to change accordingly. Marking connectors as correct or incorrect reinforces the misconception that cohesion is a surface feature, whereas comments that ask what a paragraph is doing in the argument address the actual weakness.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. First, the corpus consisted of 72 essays from one grade level at one school, written on a limited set of prompts, so the distribution of cohesive devices may partly reflect the topics rather than the writers. Second, the essays were written under time constraints, which restricts planning and revision and may inflate the incidence of the problems reported. Third, the analysis examined written products without access to the writers' intentions, so an apparently unmotivated connector may in some cases signal a relation the writer perceived but did not make explicit. Fourth, coherence ratings involve interpretive judgement even when reliably applied. Future research could combine textual analysis with retrospective interviews, compare timed and untimed writing, follow the same writers across a semester, and test whether relation-focused instruction changes the pattern identified here.

D. Conclusion

This study analyzed cohesion and coherence in students' expository essays. The findings showed that students used all five categories of cohesive devices, but the distribution was uneven. Conjunction and lexical cohesion were dominant, while substitution and ellipsis were rarely used. Students commonly relied on additive and causal connectors as well as lexical repetition to connect ideas. However, the frequent use of cohesive devices did not automatically produce coherent essays. The coherence analysis showed that students' essays were generally moderate, with the weakest areas in evidence-commentary integration and topic progression. Common discourse problems included connector overuse, connector misuse, unclear reference, excessive repetition, weak topic progression, and unsupported claims. The relationship analysis indicated that appropriate cohesive device use had a stronger relationship with coherence than the total number of cohesive devices. Topic progression was the strongest predictor of overall coherence. The study concludes that cohesion and coherence should be taught as integrated discourse competencies in expository writing instruction. Teachers should provide explicit instruction on functional connectors, referential clarity, lexical chains, paragraph unity, topic progression, and evidence-based elaboration. Future research should analyze larger essay corpora, compare different genres, examine the effect of explicit cohesion-coherence instruction, and integrate automated text analysis tools with teacher feedback.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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