

# These Students Can't Write: An Examination of Cohesion and Coherence in Essays Written by the University of Botswana ESL Undergraduate Students

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## Abstract

University lecturers in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts are generally concerned about their students' writing incompetence. Similarly, at the University of Botswana (UB) lecturers are usually heard saying that "these students cannot write". Previous research attributes problems of writing to, among others, students' lack of mastery of academic writing conventions, inability to analyse topics, and poor sentence skills. These problems undoubtedly contribute to the lack of cohesion and coherence in the students' written essays. The focus of this study, therefore, was to investigate the cohesion and coherence of the essays written by the UB first year undergraduate Social Sciences students by specifically: a) Investigating the type of cohesive devices used in the essays. b) Identifying the problems of cohesion in the essays. c) Examining the coherence problems in the essays. d) Identifying other writing problems in the students' essays. The terms cohesion and coherence in the context of this study briefly refer to the linguistic, organizational and semantic connectedness, readability, meaningfulness and relevance of a text or essay as perceived by the authors of this study who are experts in this field. A mixed research design of analyzing the essays and orally interviewing the students was adopted in this study to identify the cohesive devices used in them. The findings of this study were informed by Halliday and Hassan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesive devices and their framework. The findings revealed that conjunctions and reference were used more frequently than substitution, vocabulary, and ellipsis. Other writing problems identified in the essays include the use of informal language, overlong sentences, redundancy, run-on sentences, fused sentences, comma splices, sentence fragments, awkward and/or meaningless sentences, and use of wrong words.

**Keywords:** cohesion, coherence, essay, quality, language

## 1. Introduction

University lecturers in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts are generally concerned about their students' writing incompetence (Achen, 2018; Holland, 2013; Quible, 2008). Similarly, at the University of Botswana (UB) lecturers usually lament that their students cannot write well. Writing problems have been attributed to, among others, students' lack of mastery of academic writing conventions, inability to analyse topics, and poor sentence skills. In line with the above problems, this study specifically sought to investigate the level of coherence of essays written by UB students as well as to identify the type of cohesive devices used in the essays.

The terms cohesion and coherence in the context of this study briefly and respectively refer to the linguistic, organizational and semantic connectedness, readability, meaningfulness and relevance of a text or essay, as perceived by the authors of this study who are experts in this field. These terms are defined in line with the theory of Cohesion which was postulated by Halliday and Hassan (1976) and improved by his contemporaries as will be explained later on in this paper. An example of an incoherent text, in the context of this study, is simply a piece of writing that jumps from one idea to another without consistency, and it is hard to understand. On the other hand, a non-cohesive text lacks connectedness or comprehension because it does not help the reader to integrate information, as in the following example: *Boyce and Monty went to the workshop. He explained the meaning of ecosystem. Afterwards they had lunch.* The pronoun 'he' in this text is ambiguous or does not clearly specify whether the referent is Boyce or Monty. More information about the theory of Cohesion will be provided later on in this article. The above problem and other related errors are commonly found in various texts written by the UB the students, hence the importance of investigating them.

This study, therefore, was conceived following the need to validate previous research findings that have indicated that EFL learners' writing performance is characterized by numerous coherence problems of unity, transition of ideas, and repetition (Alsariera & Yunus 2021). Furthermore, this research was conducted to fill the gap that exists in the Botswana ESL context because to the best of the authors' knowledge it was the first of its kind to investigate cohesion and coherence of essays at tertiary level in Botswana. Besides, recent scholars have emphasised the need for more research on the analysis of cohesion in writing as it contributes to coherence in prose and might help to provide more insight into some of the writing differences between good and poor student writing.

Essay writing was the focus of this study because it is a genre or academic activity mostly done at university level for practice or for examination purposes. Hopefully, the findings of this study will contribute to the improvement of other academic varieties of writing at this level of education such as reports, journal articles, theses/dissertations, and book reviews. These genres hold great value when written well in a cohesive and coherent manner. Essay writing also equips students with critical thinking skills as well as summarisation, analytic, and organisational skills that motivate students when done properly (Ahmed, 2010 & Rao, 2007). It also facilitates students' ability to express themselves in English and in their own words. This in turn helps the students to avoid plagiarism and to succeed in academic research in the future. Therefore, good academic writing requires a good combination of cohesive ties and coherence features in the text.

## 2. Brief Review of Literature

This section summarises recent and past studies that investigated coherence and cohesion in different geographical environments and contexts. The studies cover the following different areas: the role of lexical cohesion in creating coherence in the EFL context, an investigation of the types of cohesive items frequently used in abstracts of journal articles, an analysis of cohesion and coherence of English narrative writings, a pre-test and post-test experiment to determine the effectiveness of Lee's (2002) method of teaching, an investigation of cohesive features in expository essays, an investigation of relationships between features of textual cohesion as identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976).

The role of lexical cohesion in creating coherence in the EFL Jordanian students' writing was recently examined by Alsariera and Yunus (2021). They analysed 20 written pieces using Hoey's (1991, 2005) model of lexical cohesion. Their study highlighted how lexical bonds held relations between sentences in writing, and that coherence in the students' writings was not so full due to the students' poor knowledge of lexical items and training. In another recent study Ahmad et al. (2019) investigated the types of cohesive items frequently used in 50 abstracts of Pakistani articles retrieved from two journal articles, as well as the functions achieved by those writers in the frequent use of the cohesive devices. The findings of their study showed that the writers frequently used reference items and were more concerned with directive and referential items. Furthermore, the writers minimally used repetition devices to organise texts on a semantic level. Instead, they organised texts on a syntactic level most of the time.

Reference and other aspects of cohesion such as substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction postulated by Halliday and Hasan (1976) were analysed by Andayani et al. (2014) in the English narrative writings of 30 students of the ninth grade in SM Negeri 2 Banjar. The data was also collected through student questionnaires and teacher interviews. Their findings showed that personal reference dominated with 70.77% followed by conjunction (28.51%), substitution (0.57%), ellipsis (0.14%) as well as lexical cohesion dominated by repetition (78%). Andayani et al. (2014) further indicate that the students achieved the coherence of their narratives by developing themes and the generic structure, but on the other hand they had problems with reference in the areas of personal and demonstrative pronouns, as well as additive, adversative, causal and temporal conjunctions. Furthermore, they had limited choice of lexical items.

Cohesive features in 107 expository essays of Chinese undergraduate students were investigated by Meisuo (2000). The essays were analysed by three raters who then used Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesive devices framework. The findings of this study showed that students employed a variety of cohesive devices with some categories of ties used more frequently than others. Furthermore, lexical devices were used most frequently followed by conjunctions and reference devices. Moreover, there was no relationship between the number of cohesive ties used and the quality of writing. Also identified in the essays were ambiguity in reference, overuse and misuse of conjunctions, and restricted use of lexical cohesion.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine cohesion and coherence in essays written by UB students. The definitions of coherence and cohesion in this study are based on Halliday and Hassan's (1976) Cohesion Theory.

#### 3.1 Cohesion Theory

Many linguists such as Halliday and Hasan (1976), De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), Johns (1986), Hoey (1991), and Lee (2002) indicate that cohesion has a critical function in creating effective writing. They maintain that cohesion creates connected sentences via the use of specific cohesive ties that build cohesive relations within the text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) define cohesion as "relations of meaning that exist within the text, and is expressed through the stratal organization of the text... It occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the text is dependent on that of another" (p. 4). Halliday and Hassan (1976) categorised cohesion into grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. They indicate that in grammatical cohesion the surface structure of a text is connected by cohesive devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction. The use of these devices is confirmed by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), Johns (1986), Hoey (1991), and Lee (2002).

Reference indicates the back or forward reference to people, objects or ideas that have been mentioned earlier or that will be mentioned later in a sentence or utterance e.g. 'Michael is such a tall boy. He is going to be taller than his father.' Substitution refers to the process in which one item within a text or discourse is replaced by another e.g. 'You should write the test. If not, you will fail.' Ellipsis refers to deletion or zero substitution used in order to avoid repetition or redundancy in a text e.g. 'We will visit town if we have to.'

Lexical cohesion on the other hand refers to the semantic relations between lexis. It consists of two categories namely, reiteration and collocation. Reiteration uses the same or semantically related vocabulary such as repetition, synonym, superordinate, and general word. On the other hand, collocation refers to co-occurrence of lexical items as illustrated below. Halliday and Hassan (1976) clarify that "cohesion does not concern what a text means, but it concerns how the text is constructed as a semantic edifice"(p. 26). Repetition refers to the repeat of a lexical item e.g. 'He has a car. The car is white.' Synonym refers to words with a similar meaning as in for example: 'I have a car. The automobile is white.' The words 'car' and 'automobile' are synonymous or have similar meanings. Superordinate refers to word that represents a superior position or category within a class of words e.g. 'I have a car. The vehicle is white.' In this case a car is classified within or is a subclass of the superior word vehicle. General word refers to an umbrella word in a category of words e.g. 'I have a car. The small vehicle is white.' Finally, in the term collocation the syllable 'co' is derived from the word 'together' while 'locate' which means 'place' or 'position'. Therefore, it can be predicted for example that the words 'take' and 'risk' usually go together. Other examples of collocation are: go together, feel free, make progress, and humble pie.

However, it is important to note that Carrell (1982) claims that cohesion is not always sufficient to make a text connected or appear a unified whole (as cited in Yule 2008). Carrel argues that too many connections and ties may hamper the interpretation of the message.

#### 3.2 Coherence Theory

This study adopted the simple text-based definition of coherence as the smooth flow of ideas in a text as well as the logical organisation of ideas using cohesive devices. This definition resonates with Halliday and Hasan (1976) who speak of coherence as being cohesive i.e., having "appropriate ties among sentences" (Johns, 1986 p. 249). However, it should be noted that the definition of coherence by Halliday and Hasan (1976) has remained inconclusively challenged for not clearly defining coherence and for what, according to Lee (1988), has left this definition as "fuzzy and elusive" (p.36) or a multifaceted concept with pedagogical implications and applications. As, a result, it has till to date been difficult to define coherence due to its controversial nature (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Attempts to define coherence date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when this term was defined in terms of sentence connections and paragraph structure. For example, Bain (1890) defined it in terms of connections between sentences that create well-structured paragraphs which in turn are linked by linking sentences. This definition narrows down coherence instead of broadly defining it in terms of discourse unity (Lee, 2002). With time, studies emerged that defined coherence in terms of the larger principles of discourse that tie sentences to one another as well as to the context in which the text occurs (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; McCarthy, 2001). In line with the above, Lee (2002) defines coherence as both internal to the text and to the reader.

As indicated earlier, the terms cohesion and coherence in the context of this study briefly refer to the linguistic, organizational and semantic connectedness, readability, meaningfulness and relevance of a text or essay, as

perceived by the authors of this study who are experts in this field. The current study therefore sought to find answers to the following specific research questions:

#### 4. Research Questions

- (1) What type of cohesive devices are used in the students' essays?
- (2) What problems of cohesion are identified in the essays?
- (3) What coherence problems are in the essays?
- (4) What other writing problems are identified in the students' essays?

#### 5. Research Methodology

A mixed research design of analyzing the essays and orally interviewing the students was used in this study to identify, examine, and describe cohesive devices in essays written by University of Botswana Social Science students. Furthermore, the students were interviewed to identify the problems they generally faced in essay writing. This study scrutinized the students' writings to establish correctional measures in the teaching and learning processes in their initiation course to tertiary learning.

The essays used in this study were collected from 100 first year undergraduate students enrolled in the Communication and Academic Literacy Skills (COM) course for Social Science in one of the authors' classes. The students came from various disciplines such as law, psychology, criminal justice, economics, public administration, political science, statistics, and social work all of whom belonged to the Faculty of Social Sciences and did the COM course together. It should be noted that the intention of this study was not to compare the essays from the different academic disciplines in terms of their cohesiveness and coherence. This class taught by one of the authors was selected for convenience and no other specific reason. The students were given different topics from which they were required to write different types of essays including argumentative, narrative, expository, descriptive, and analytical essays. Again, the intention of this study was not to compare the different types of essays but to examine their coherence and to identify the coherence devices used in them. The students were given this exercise after they were tutored about cohesive devices in academic writing. This was a way of putting what they learnt into practice. Furthermore, the issue of gender did not surface in this study, therefore the selection involved both males and females.

Insofar as the interviews are concerned the authors conveniently selected ten students from each class to get an overview of cohesive devices they used in essay writing. What the students said agreed with what the authors found from the students' essays.

##### 5.1 Data Analysis

In line with the specific objectives of this study the essays were specifically analyzed for cohesion and coherence. Cohesion was examined by identifying the following cohesive devices from Halliday and Hasan (1976): 1. Reference, 2. Substitution, 3. Ellipsis, 4. Conjunction, and 5. Vocabulary. These were measured in terms of the number of occurrences in all paragraphs of the essay including the introduction and conclusion, as well as in terms of the appropriacy of their use. Coherence was then examined using the following features: 1. Relevance of essay to the topic, 2. Existence of thesis statement, 3. Flow of ideas, 4. Paragraphs centered around the thesis, Paragraphs have topic sentences, 5. Paragraphs linked by signposts, 6. Conclusion linked to the thesis. These features were measured using the following scale: Poor (1-6), Fair (7-12), Good (13-18), Very Good (19-24), and Excellent (25-30).

#### 6. Results and Discussion

Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesion and coherence was used to interpret the findings of the current study which show that the students used a variety of cohesive devices more frequently than others.

Table 1. Types of cohesive devices

	Reference	Substitution	Ellipsis	Conjunction	Vocab
Frequency	820	6	34	928	32
Total %	45.1%	0.3%	1.9%	51.0%	1.8%

Table 1, for example, shows that conjunctions were more frequently used than references, ellipsis, vocabulary, and substitution. The above findings corroborate Ahmad et al.'s (2019) findings that conjunction and reference items were used more frequently by the writers in their study. The following example of a cause-effect subordinating conjunction used in a sentence was picked from one of the essays in the current study: "Cigarettes should not be

consumed in public places because they put the citizens' lives at risk." Another example extracted from one of the essays is that of anaphoric referencing as follows: "Drugs weaken the immune system and increase the risk of opportunistic diseases. They also cause heart problems when overdosed." Similarly, Andayani et al.'s (2014) findings showed that the personal reference dominated in their students' writing followed by conjunction, substitution, and ellipsis. Quite evidently the students in the current study minimally used substitution, vocabulary, and ellipsis and hence their use of simple sentences. Examples of these cohesive devices have been given in the theoretical framework section above.

One of the interviewees in the current study confirmed the students' lack of mastery of some of the cohesive devices by saying that "I don't think I have mastered some of the types of cohesive devices, most of the times we have been taught conjunctions only, I only understand conjunctions, if I have used others it will be unconsciously". Another student attributed their limited use of substitution to lack of vocabulary when she said that "Substituting words to break the monotony requires having more vocabulary, which could prove to be a problem for those of us who learn English as a third or fourth language". Furthermore, another interviewee indicated that "Good use of cohesive devices goes together with good English, my English is not so good". Additional cohesion problems identified in the students' essays included missing or misplaced cohesive devices as in the following example extracted from one of the essays: "Teenagers and young people today depend on the media for information about everything (missing) the latest gadget, fashion trends, the newest cars in the market, the best places to eat out in the country (missing) finding out (missing) their favorite celebrity is up to." Another common problem was too much repetition of a cohesive device as in the following example from one of the essays: "It has allowed people . . . . It has created a platform . . . . It makes for easy . . . .". All these sentences come from the same paragraph consecutively following one another.

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Table 2. Features of coherence in the essays

Coherence Features	Excellent (%)	Very Good (%)	Good (%)	Fair (%)	Poor (%)
Relevance to the topic	41	23	12	12	12
Thesis statement	5.9	14.7	2.9	47.1	29.4
Flow of ideas	30	10	13.3	40	6.7
Paragraphs linked to thesis	28	18	21	27	6
Topic sentences	35	6	19	34	6
Paragraphs linked by signposts	0	28	6	24	42
Conclusion linked to thesis	15	22	12	24	27

Table 2 shows that 76% of the essays that the students wrote were good-to-excellent in terms of relevance of essays, although the majority (76.5%) failed to write good thesis statements. Furthermore, 66% wrote paragraphs that were not adequately linked by signposts. Moreover, 51% were not able to link the conclusion with the thesis statement. Indeed, the findings of this study validate previous findings that have indicated that EFL learners' writing performance is characterized by numerous coherence problems of unity, transition of ideas, and repetition (Alsariera & Yunus, 2021). For example, the findings of the current study show that 66% of the essays were not linked by signposts and almost half (46.7%) had fair-to-poor in terms of flow of ideas. Numerous unity problems identified particularly in the argumentative essays in the current study included a disjointed introduction sometimes comprising more than two paragraphs in a short essay, a misplaced and/or standalone thesis statement detached from the introduction, no link between the introduction and the conclusion, no or weak topic sentences, and an unbalanced argument. Examples of lack of transition of ideas in the essays included a sentence lost between other sentences, poor paragraph division with ideas packed in one paragraph, and transition words not used to link sentences and paragraphs. Repetition included the use of too many subheadings above almost all paragraphs, and the lack of use of synonyms to create coherence between the sentences.

Other problems that affected the coherence of the essays included the use of informal language, overlong sentences with several ideas in one sentence, redundancy, run-on sentences, fused sentences, comma splices, sentence

fragments, awkward and/or meaningless sentences, and use of wrong words. Mechanical problems included small font, irregular spacing between sentences and paragraphs, and improper punctuation. An example of informal language from the students' essays is: ". . . euthanasia among deceased people who died unexpectedly and with a psychiatric disorder would be 11,4% which is pretty much the highest death reason in the medical field." Another example of a comma splice extracted from one of the essays was: "Technology has resulted in the advancement of education, these days courses can be taken online as it is not everyone who can get into college, says Dj Wardinsky." This example also demonstrates a situation where there is a missing conjunction to connect the two ideas that have been connected by the comma. Moreover, an example of a sentence fragment was: "Which is true." Finally, an example of a fused sentence was: "As argued above we really see that euthanasia can be legalised it can be a benefit in all angles."

## 7. Implications

This study has established that most of the essays examined in this study contained a number of cohesion and coherence problems as previously indicated. These problems can be addressed by for example, as suggested by Ahmed (2010), using focused or explicit instruction of the cohesion devices. For example the teacher or lecturer can show the students a real or image of a jigsaw puzzle that becomes meaningless if one or some of the pieces are missing. He or she can then show the students a meaningless essay with missing cohesive devices. Ahmed reiterates the importance of textual cohesion as a mechanism that facilitates discourse flow. The findings of the current study indeed testify that cohesion and coherence are complex subjects that should be comprehensively explained to the students.

During the interviews the students acknowledged lack of mastery of some of the cohesive devices and registered their willingness to learn more of them. In view of this observation, the authors of the current study propose explicit teaching of cohesive devices that were lacking in the students' essays such as substitution, ellipsis, and vocabulary to improve the students' writing. Furthermore, vocabulary can be increased by encouraging the students to use the thesaurus and dictionaries when writing. As already indicated, one of the students attributed their limited use of substitution to lack of vocabulary when she said that "Substituting words to break the monotony requires having more vocabulary, which could prove to be a problem for those of us who learn English as a third or fourth language".

The findings of this study suggest that the students were concerned about lack of mastery of cohesive devices. The findings also suggest that the teaching of the micro skill of essay writing in the EAP COM course does not get as much attention as the macro skills. The authors therefore, propose a holistic and systematic approach to the teaching of writing, whereby the lecturers do not only focus on the global aspect of writing.

Another suggestion is that the drafting and peer review strategies should be utilized more to improve students' writing. As Achen (2018) suggests, students should be trained to become peer reviewers and be given multiple options for revising their writing. For example, through sharing early drafts and discussing their writing progress.

## 8. Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the sample size and the fact that this study focused on one university and therefore the findings cannot be generalized. To address this limitation, it is therefore advisable that a larger sample size should be accumulated over several semesters in future, preferably from different universities across the country. Despite the above limitation about the sample size, the findings of this study provide information that can help teachers and lecturers who are keen to improve their students' writing skills. Another limitation of this study is that due to the complex nature of the cohesion and coherence concepts and human error, it is possible that not all cohesive items and coherence features were identified in the essays. However, the findings do give a good or reliable picture of the quality of the essays and the areas in which the ESL students should improve in essay writing.

## 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

In recognition of the importance of improving academic writing, the current study has achieved its goal of measuring coherence and identifying cohesive devices used in the essays written by the UB English as a Second Language (ESL) first year students in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Conducting this study was deemed imperative because it was expected to reveal cohesion and coherence problems that affect the organization and presentation of ideas, flow as well as the general readability of the essays written by social sciences students at UB. Poudel and Dhankuta (2018) indicate that a text with more cohesion and coherence is more comfortable for the readers to comprehend and interpret the message of the writer. The findings of this study therefore, showed that even though the quality of the essays in this study was good-to-average, the essays still needed to be improved by the use of a variety of cohesive devices in addition to the reference devices. The findings also showed that the essays needed to be revamped because

the students could not write good thesis statements, topic sentences and conclusions. The students also generally wrote overlong, run-on and fragmented sentences that also affected the coherence of their essays.

Based on the findings of this study, the authors make the following recommendations: a) future research should use a bigger sample to replicate this study across faculties to compare the cohesion devices used by the students so that the teaching of coherence and cohesion can be based on the needs of the students. The larger sample can be accumulated over semesters across universities as suggested earlier in the limitations section, b) Lecturers and teachers should explicitly and systematically teach cohesion and coherence topics with particular emphasis on the devices that are minimally used by the students such as substitution, ellipsis and vocabulary, c) Students should be given more practice on the use of cohesion and coherence devices. This can be achieved by strategically addressing the problem of workload for writing teachers/lecturers to allow for more interaction between the teachers/lecturers and the students. It has been found that workload for teachers hinders students' involvement in writing practice (Ahmed, 2010). d) In essence, it may be necessary to review the course outlines and teach the cohesion and coherence topics from a deeper perspective to improve the quality of the students' essays.

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