

EXPLORING COHESION AND COHERENCE PROBLEMS IN ESL STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC ESSAYS

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic structural analysis of the core challenges and structural complications ESL students encounter regarding text cohesion and conceptual coherence in academic writing, proposing targeted pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: academic discourse, textual cohesion, logical coherence, cohesive devices, error analysis, second language acquisition, essay structure.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada ikkinchi til sifatida ingliz tilini o'rganayotgan talabalarning akademik va insho yozish jarayonida bog'liqlik va mantiqiy izchillikni ta'minlashda duch keladigan asosiy muammolari tizimli tahlil qilingan hamda tegishli tavsiyalar ishlab chiqilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: akademik nutq, diskurs tahlili, mantiqiy izchillik, bog'lovchi vositalar, xatolar tahlili, ikkinchi til, insho strukturasi.

Аннотация: В данной статье систематически анализируются основные проблемы и трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты ESL при обеспечении когезии и когерентности в академических эссе, а также предлагаются эффективные педагогические стратегии.

Ключевые слова: академическое письмо, дискурсивный анализ, когерентность, когезивные средства, анализ ошибок, второй язык, структура эссе.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing represents one of the most intellectually demanding components of higher education, functioning not merely as a mechanical reflection of grammatical competence but as a sophisticated vehicle for complex knowledge construction and logical argumentation. Within the domain of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), mastering the subtle nuances of academic discourse poses a profound challenge for English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduate and postgraduate students who frequently struggle to transform isolated grammatical sentences into a unified, fluidly integrated text. The structural integrity and rhetorical persuasiveness of an academic essay depend heavily on two deeply intertwined linguistic and cognitive properties: cohesion and coherence. While cohesion refers to the overt lexicogrammatical ties and explicit connective markers that physically link surface sentences together, coherence denotes the underlying conceptual unity, macrostructural organization, and logical flow that enable a reader to effortlessly track and comprehend the writer's central thesis. Previous corpus-based investigations and error analysis frameworks indicate that ESL learners routinely treat text generation as a linear accumulation of separate sentences rather than a hierarchical network of semantic relationships, resulting in disjointed prose, confusing thematic progressions, and rhetorical ambiguity. Consequently, this study aims to systematically investigate, categorize, and quantify the specific cohesion and coherence violations manifested in the academic essays of ESL students at the higher education level, thereby offering explicit, data-driven insights into pedagogical frameworks that can effectively remedy these pervasive writing deficiencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical foundation of text linguistics and discourse analysis regarding written texts was pioneered by Halliday and Hasan, who conceptualized cohesion as a distinct semantic relation whereby the interpretation of an element in a text depends heavily on that of another, defining specific grammatical and lexical categories such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion [1, B. 4]. Building upon this seminal framework, subsequent scholars noted that while cohesion is explicitly marked on the textual surface, coherence is an internal cognitive property created through the interaction between the reader’s background knowledge and the text’s thematic progression, implying that a text may possess numerous cohesive links yet utterly fail to establish structural coherence [2, B. 12]. In the context of second language pedagogy, Reid demonstrated that ESL students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds exhibit highly distinct rhetorical patterns, often overusing explicit conjunctions to artificially force a sense of logical transition where underlying semantic continuity is fundamentally lacking [3, B. 28].

To empirically assess these phenomena, this research implemented a rigorous quantitative and qualitative corpus-based descriptive methodology. The sample consisted of 60 academic argumentative essays (totaling approximately 30,000 words) written under controlled mid-term examination conditions by intermediate to advanced ESL undergraduate students. The analytical procedure involved a meticulous line-by-line manual error analysis focused on identifying, tagging, and categorizing structural deviations in both cohesion and coherence based on modified taxonomies derived from modern discourse studies. Cohesive errors were systematically classified into reference errors, conjunction misuses (overuse, underuse, or semantic mismatch), and weak lexical cohesion. Concurrently, coherence complications were evaluated based on macrostructural criteria, including thesis deviation, abrupt topic shifts, and illogical paragraph transitions.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The empirical database compiled from the corpus analysis revealed a dense concentration of structural inconsistencies across all examined essays, demonstrating that grammatical accuracy alone does not guarantee the production of a rhetorically acceptable academic text. The collected research data regarding specific lexicogrammatical cohesive discrepancies indicates that mechanical transition markers are frequently misunderstood by ESL writers. Instead of utilizing cohesive ties to establish nuanced logical dependencies, students regularly rely on a restricted repertoire of repetitive, superficial connectors like "furthermore," "besides," and "in a nutshell," often placing them in structurally inappropriate contexts.

Table 1: Distribution and frequency of cohesive errors in ESL academic essays

Error Typology	Specific Manifestation within the Essay Corpus	Total Occurrences	Percentage of Total Cohesive Errors
Mechanical Conjunction Misuse	Overuse of additive markers, semantic mismatch of contrastive connectors, and informal transitions.	142	41.5%
Faulty Pronominal Reference	Ambiguous pronoun antecedents, missing reference links, and incorrect number/gender agreement.	118	34.5%
Deficient Lexical Cohesion	Repetitive vocabulary selection, complete absence of varied synonyms,	82	24.0%

Error Typology	Specific Manifestation within the Essay Corpus	Total Occurrences	Percentage of Total Cohesive Errors
	and weak collocations.		

As illustrated in Table 1, errors involving mechanical conjunction misuse constituted the largest portion of cohesive issues, representing 41.5% of the total identified cohesive errors. This stems from a pedagogical trend where students are instructed to use transitional words but fail to grasp their exact semantic boundaries, leading to sentences where a contrastive connector like "however" is mistakenly utilized to introduce a complementary point. Faulty pronominal reference was also highly prevalent (34.5%), creating severe processing obstacles for the reader because pronouns like "it," "this," or "they" routinely lacked clear, identifiable noun antecedents in the preceding text.

Beyond surface-level cohesive links, the deeper rhetorical value of the essays was frequently compromised by macrostructural coherence problems. The qualitative evaluation focused on how effectively students sustained a central argument and transitioned between paragraphs without disorienting the reader.

Table 2: Macrostructural coherence problems identified in the student corpus

Coherence Issue Category	Primary Rhetorical Consequence	Frequency of Occurrence	Impact Severity Rating
Abrupt Topic Shifting	Lack of explicit sentence-to-sentence thematic progression; introducing new claims without development.	56	Critical
Thesis Drift / Deviation	Background paragraphs and supporting evidence gradually lose focus and diverge from the core thesis statement.	38	High
Illogical Paragraphing	Arbitrary paragraph division lacking a singular topic sentence or cohesive internal structural unity.	29	Moderate

The data presented in Table 2 emphasizes that abrupt topic shifting is the most frequent macrostructural flaw, occurring 56 times across the corpus. This occurs when an ESL writer jumps rapidly from one conceptual claim to another without establishing a logical bridge, assuming the reader will intuitively construct the missing logical connections. Thesis drift (38 occurrences) also significantly weakened the academic persuasive power of the essays, as students often began with a clear argumentative stance but introduced irrelevant historical summaries or descriptive prose in subsequent body paragraphs, distorting the overall communicative purpose of the academic assignment.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a detailed structural analysis of the specific cohesion and coherence challenges that continuously impact the quality of academic essays written by ESL undergraduate students. The quantitative findings demonstrate that achieving surface grammatical fluency does not automatically lead to cohesive or coherent academic discourse. Instead, ESL writers face

persistent challenges with both microstructural text dynamics and macrostructural organization. At the microstructural level, students rely heavily on overusing and misapplying explicit conjunctions, using transition words mechanically rather than semantically to mask gaps in their arguments. This is compounded by ambiguous pronominal references and weak lexical variation, both of which repeatedly break the text's continuity. At the macrostructural level, the widespread presence of abrupt topic shifts and thesis drift indicates that many students lack a clear understanding of thematic progression, struggle to maintain a unified focus, and find it difficult to organize paragraphs around a single topic sentence.

These findings carry clear pedagogical implications for higher education ESL writing curricula. Traditional language instruction often prioritizes sentence-level grammar, syntax, and isolated vocabulary retention, leaving students underprepared for the complex demands of extended academic prose. To bridge this gap, writing instructors must shift toward a explicit, discourse-centered pedagogical model. Cohesive devices should not be taught as isolated vocabulary lists to be memorized; instead, they must be introduced alongside their precise semantic constraints and rhetorical functions within authentic academic texts. Furthermore, explicit instruction in paragraph structure, thematic progression patterns, and outline generation should be systematically integrated into writing courses. This approach helps students learn to view essay writing as an interconnected hierarchical structure rather than a linear sequence of independent sentences. By moving beyond basic sentence mechanics and focusing on discourse-level organization, educators can better equip ESL learners to produce logically sound, coherent, and persuasive academic papers that meet the rigorous standards of higher education.

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