

## Examining Coherence in the Written Compositions of Second-Year Students of English at Laghouat University in Algeria

Souhila Korichi

University of Laghouat (Algérie)

### Abstract

This study is an investigation into coherence achievement in the written compositions of second-year students enrolled in English at Laghouat University, Algeria. It spots light on the major traits of coherence inadequacies that Algerian EFL learners may encounter in writing English essays.

Descriptive essays of twenty-two students formed the corpus of the study. Coherence Problems were examined and evaluated, using an analytic rubric scale proposed by Hyland (2003).

The results revealed that major learners' inadequacies appeared in displaying thematic progression, resulting in poor flow of the information; the fact that made them focus on transitions, references and key words repetition as an attempt to get logical relations between sentences and paragraphs.

This finding can be attributed to the differences between the rhetorical patterns of the learners' mother-tongue, Arabic, and the target language, English. Finally, the study recommended that EFL learners' competence in coherence can be maximised by their exposure to the target language through extensive reading, listening and writing.

**Key words:** essay writing, coherence criteria, coherence inadequacies, assessing coherence

### المخلص

تستعرض هذه الدراسة تقييم مستوى التماسق في كتابة المقال لدى عينة من طلاب السنة الثانية بقسم اللغة الانجليزية، بجامعة الأغواط (الجزائر). ولهذا الغرض، تم تطبيق طريقة Hyland(2003) في التحليل؛ حيث كشفت البيانات أن الطلاب يعانون من عسر في تدفق الأفكار، وانسيابها، وتسلسلها؛ الأمر الذي لم يسعفهم في تجسيد عناصر التماسق المطلوبة في فقرات المقال. ويمكن تفسير ذلك، بسبب تأثير اللغة الأم (العربية) على اللغة الثانية (الانجليزية). وعليه، توصي الدراسة بضرورة تكثيف التعاطي باللغة الانجليزية: قراءة، وكتابة، وسماعا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتابة المقال، معايير التماسق والترابط، مشاكل التماسق، تقييم التماسق.

### 1. Introduction

Convincingly, foreign language teaching aims at enabling students to communicate purposively. In writing purposive communication demands producing meaningful texts which should meet certain criteria, among which is coherence.

Being a fundamental dimension in foreign language writing, coherence has been regarded as a crucial quality of effectiveness. Virtually, however, many foreign language students still do not know how to process their knowledge and translate abstract thoughts into coherent written discourse.

On this basis, this study comes out of concerns about the problem of composing in L2 writing. It attempts to examine the compositions written by EFL learners at Laghouat University in Algeria. Second year students at the department of English were selected to form our sample. The problem of the current study is concerned with exploring coherence

problems that students of English at the university encounter while composing their essays in English.

Competence in essay writing will help students pass all their academic courses successfully, and enable them be proficient teachers and action researchers in the future. Thus, the current study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What common problems do university students of English encounter in essay-writing at the levels of coherence and organisation which hinder the students' writing effectiveness?
2. How can such problems be minimised? Can coherence be taught?

## 2. Review of Literature

Assessing coherence in writing has become a necessity and a great challenge for teachers of foreign language that helps diagnose students' errors and their probable sources, and consequently suggest remedial work. Problems of coherence can be more subtle and difficult to handle (Bamburg, 1984; Richards, 1990; Connor, 1990; Roberts & Kreuz, 1993; Lee, 2002; Lee, M. Y. P., 2003; Liu & Braine, 2005). These are aspects of writing that go beyond the mere sphere of language to enter the sphere of logic. For EFL teachers, problems with coherence are rarely addressed and when they are, they are not handled adequately. Hence, when students write in English, they often do not produce coherent texts; while academically involved writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing and analysing ideas.

Producing an effective and coherent essay constitutes a problem for many EFL students worldwide and a major challenge for many students of English at Laghouat University in Algeria, in particular. This fact is probably due to several crucial factors. First, the rhetorical conventions of English texts-the structure, style and organisation-often differ from those of the Arabic language as students' mother tongue.

According to Richards and Renandya (2002) the difficulty emanates both from generating and organising ideas and translating these ideas into readable text. Second, the insufficient exposure to the target language that is usually minimised to a few hours a week may hinder the development of the learners' written communicative competence.

This difficulty is aggravated by the fact that EFL teachers do not often accord adequate attention to developing learners' macro-linguistic abilities in writing. Instead, they focus on the micro-linguistic level, including correct language structures, spelling and punctuation. Most EFL teachers' main objective is to detect errors rather than rethink their students' composition, clarify meaning, and plan paragraphs and essays.

They correct and comment on the papers, return them to the students, who scan the comments, look at the mistakes and above all the grade, and then the teacher assigns the next writing task. The outcomes of this process are usually undesirable, and do not turn out communicatively competent language users, particularly in written expression.

Consequently, the need to develop the foreign language learners' discourse and pragmatic competences has become inevitable as major components of the overall communicative competence and the ultimate goal of teaching a foreign language. Richards (2006: 3), in this respect, holds that communicative competence is the ability "*to use the language for meaningful communication*", and it includes the abilities to know how to use

language for different purposes and functions, vary its use according to the setting and the participants, produce and understand different types of texts, and maintain communication. Richard's definition includes discourse competence that is often defined as the ability to understand, create and develop stretches of language that go beyond the sentence level. Thus, written discourse competence is concerned with the cohesion and coherence of sentences (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983).

Accordingly, students need a suitable language to structure their ideas in the form of a coherent discourse. Their task must focus on the smooth connection of the sentences together. Each sentence should take the reader easily to the progression of thought, and to achieve this, sentences must be arranged in an order showing and exhibiting the connectives between ideas. Interrelations of some elements in the discourse depend on that of others mentioned somewhere in the text. In this respect, Gutwinski's (1976: 27) states:

*'A paragraph is said to have coherence when its sentences are woven together or flow into each other. (...) the reader moves easily from one sentence to the next without feeling that there are gaps in the thought, puzzling jumps, or points not made'.*

The overall coherence of a longer text depends, then, on the coherence within each paragraph or section of the text; each sentence is related to both previous and subsequent sentences. In this point, Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 4) have argued that a piece of writing which implicates composing that involves a cohesive and coherent larger structure contains surface features which connect the discourse and an underlying logic of organisation which go beyond the meanings of the individual sentences.

Indeed, the meaning of a sequence is not merely the sum of the meanings of individual sentences. Instead, meanings of sentences are ordered, so there is a meaning of the whole which can be attained. Van Dijk (1977: 93) defines coherence as a

*"semantic property of discourses based on the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences."*

Hence, for paragraphs to be clear, they must be coherent besides being unified and well-developed (Harmer, 2004).

Linguistically, coherence in written text is considered as a complex notion that covers besides knowing the linguistic rules', knowing how to use them (Widdowson, 1996; Nunan, 1999). Coherence involves, as John (1986: 247) asserts, *"a multitude of reader- and text-based features"*. Text-based features include cohesion (the linking of sentences) and unity (sticking to the point). Reader-based features, on the other hand, mean that the readers interact with the text depending on their prior knowledge. In this line, Crystal (2003: 81) refers to coherence as an underlying functional connectedness of a text that involves the study of the language users' knowledge of the world, the inferences they make and the assumptions they hold, and the speech acts used to mediate effective communication or what is referred to as *"register"* by Halliday and Hasan (1976: 26).

The semantic configurations: register and cohesion combine to make coherence, or texture. Coherence is viewed as the procedures whereby elements of knowledge are made recoverable. These procedures subsume *'[1] logical relations such as casualty and class inclusion, [2] knowledge of how event, actions, objects and situations are organized, and [3] the striving for continuity in human experience'* (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981: 94).

Above all, Raimes (2010: 35) attempts to explain what coherence does imply. She mentions that when a writer (a student) develops his/her performance or text, '*readers expect to move with ease from one sentence to the next, and from one paragraph to the next, following a clear flow of argument and logic.*' She further uses a specific meaningful expression to express the readers' attempt to understand the piece of writing; in that, readers should not be forced to '*grapple with "grass-hopper Prose", which jumps suddenly from one idea to another without obvious connections.* Instead, she maintains, writing must be coherent, with all parts connecting clearly to one another, using transitional expressions and linking words. In this perspective, Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 90-1) indicate that initial states or events should be mentioned before the intermediary states or events, and these, in turn, should be mentioned before the final ones.

This sort of knowledge about events enables the text reader to set up a hypothesis about what will be done or mentioned next in the text. These states and events are ordered according to what Scarry, S and Scarry, J. (2011) call '*time sequence or order*' in narratives and '*spatial order*' in descriptive texts.

Importantly, a number of research papers in the Arab world have spotlighted some problems that Arab EFL learners encounter in writing English and proposed remediation techniques. For instance, to determine the sources of Arabic speakers' errors in English essays, Abi Samra (2003) manages to identify, describe, categorise, and diagnose a number of error types. These are found to be substance (mechanics and spelling), semantic errors, lexical errors, and syntactic errors. Similarly, Umair (2011) has conducted a study to identify the causes of the problems that Arab learners of English encounter in multi-ability academic English writing classes. The author has found that the problems that EFL Arab learners encounter in writing composition can be partly ascribed to the organisation of teaching materials and resources, time allocated to teaching English per week, students' attitudes and differences in their level of understanding. Above all, Arab students' written text revealed that repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices are major sources of incoherence and textual deviation.

Focusing on macro-linguistic problems in English writing, Abdel Hamid Ahmed (2010) investigates cohesion and coherence problems that Egyptian student teachers of English have when they write an English essay. To conduct his study, a mixed method research design was used including a questionnaire and a semi-structured in-depth interview.

The analysis of findings revealed that students encounter some problems in the cohesion and coherence of EFL essay writing. Having a similar focus, Fareh (2014) attempts, in her valuable work, to identify and explain the macro-linguistic errors that Arab EFL learners commit in writing English essays. For the purpose of her study, five hundred essays and the contents of eight EFL textbooks were analysed.

The findings revealed that Arab learners of English encounter major macro-linguistic problems in writing English essays, including coherence problems, cohesion problems, and unawareness of logical relations between sentences, run-on sentences, poor paragraph development, and violation of the maxims of the cooperative principle. It was also found that

teaching materials and the writing activities used in teaching English do not adequately develop students' pragma-linguistic competence.

All in all, coherence refers to the extent to which text segments are structurally and logically linked to other segments. It is achieved through discoursal features such as the use of referencing, linking and logical ideas sequencing, as well as presuppositions and implications connected to general world knowledge.

Coherence, therefore, is the organisation of discourse with all elements present and fitting together logically. This denotes that a coherent essay consists of an introduction, a thesis statement, rhetorical support, and a conclusion. To this end, an EFL writing teacher has to enhance students' thinking, organising ideas, developing their ability to summarise, analyse and criticise, and strengthen students' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language.

### **Teaching Coherence: Is it possible?**

Teaching students to write coherently has been considered as a controversial issue. On the one hand, some researches point out to the difficulty of teaching the concept of coherence and making students produce native-like writing (Witte & Faigley, 1981; Pringle, 1983; Lee, 2002). Witte and Faigley (1981: 201) argue that students in the L2 writing class will not improve the coherence of their writing just by being told in vague and abstract terms that their writing is not coherent, without making a systematic attempt to explain and to teach it. Similarly, Pringle (1983: 94) argues quite strongly that it is not possible to teach students to produce literate writing in any prescribed manner; rather, they will do so from reading good, relevant, interesting, intellectually engaging models. In a similar vein, Lee (2002: 135) regards coherence as an '*abstract and fuzzy concept which is difficult to teach and difficult to learn*'. On the other hand, other researchers disagree; they have stressed the importance and possibility of familiarising learners with such a concept (Fahnestock, 1983; Bamberg, 1984; and Johns, 1986). Fahnestock, for example, claims that '*Helping students understand coherence in terms of the lexical ties and semantic relations possible between clauses and sentences...makes the process of creating a coherent paragraph less mysterious*' (415). Johns (1986) joins her in claiming that it is possible to take the mystery out of producing coherent prose by offering students specific definitions and sequential, task-dependent exercises to improve their coherence. To teach coherence effectively, teachers, then, need not only "*a better understanding of the linguistic features and rhetorical structures that create coherence,*" but also "*greater insight into the problems students experience in trying to use them*" (Bamberg, 1984: 306).

Ultimately, a coherent text is easy to read and understand because there is unity of ideas between sentences and paragraphs. When a text lacks coherence, a reader very often finds himself forced to stop reading it because due to its incomplete sense. A paragraph, for example, is said to be coherent when each sentence contributes to the development of the main topic. Creating coherence in texts requires intensive and on-going training in teaching writing. Most of the problems that students encounter in producing coherent texts are manifest in their inability to maintain information flow of senses in their paragraphs and texts. They move from one idea to another and thus render the text incoherent. Most EFL materials inadvertently fail to draw students' attention to the fact that information in texts should

progress logically and coherently. A text should display thematic progression to qualify as coherent. The essay- effectively addresses the writing task- is well organized and well developed- uses clearly appropriate details to support a thesis or illustrate ideas - displays consistent facility in the use of language. However, one cannot expect all of our students to achieve a high standard of expressive writing in an EFL class. As teachers, we shall be satisfied if they are able to write what they want to say with clarity and precision as Rivers (1981: 295) puts it.

### 3. Methodology Design

#### 3.1 Participants

The study was conducted in an English writing course at the University of Ammar Theliji, in Laghouat, Algeria. Second-year undergraduate students majoring in English Language during the academic year 2012-2013 are required to take compulsory English courses in writing. A group of 22 students (male and female) participated in the study. The class met twice a week for an hour and a half over the course of 14 weeks. To obtain information about the students' background knowledge and writing experience, a questionnaire was designed.

#### 3.2 The Student's Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to the sample during a session that preceded the writing task, and yielded the following results. First, almost all students participated in the study positively argued that their writing had improved throughout the course of the year. However, they still had problems in the overall quality of their English writing.

Second, the respondents' most areas which cause them difficulty in essay writing are ordered according to their gravity as follows: coherence, basic sentence skills, punctuation, grammar, writing the point, unity, developing the theme, generating relevant ideas and ordering them logically, spelling, wording and the overall form of the essay. Third, due to its great importance *vis-a-vis* the overall quality of a piece of writing, building coherence has been regarded as the most difficult area to handle (20 students out of 22).

Though they had courses in coherence, students are still afraid of being poor in having a native-like command of English language writing.

They need to be able to write effectively the point, develop the specific details relevant to support the main theme and reach a unified whole; the task that the students found really challenging. Forth, in addition to coherence, the respondents consider other problems as grave in writing; these include some basic sentence skills, such as parallelism, and inconsistency in voice and tense (16 out of 22 students), as well as grammar and punctuation, including subject-verb agreement, verb tense and form, and run-on sentences (13 out of 22).

To overcome these discourses as well as mechanical inadequacies, and reach the desired proficiency level, twenty respondents proposed reading model essays with the teacher in class to enhance coherence in writing that needs according to them too much practice. The results of the questionnaire are in part used in analysing the written assignments of the students.

### 3.3 Corpus

The corpus of the study consists of an essay-writing. Each student is required to write one descriptive composition in an assigned topic. It is about 'describing their first year experience at university'. This written task was done after they had sufficient input, throughout several weeks, on the process of writing from beginning to end, showing its component parts, including envisaging what to write, planning an outline, drafting, revising and rewriting the whole text, and finishing it in an appropriate form. The sample had also been familiar with the major elements to achieve coherence and essay writing effectiveness. The task was done in class, and the compositions were collected by the teacher at the end of an hour and a half session to be, then, corrected and analysed focusing on coherence problems.

### 3.4. Presentation of Data

In evaluating the students' compositions, Corder's (1973) error analysis procedure was undertaken. It included identifying errors at coherence level, determining whether an element is erroneous or not, explaining why and how a certain form was deviant from acceptable norms, clarifying its type, classifying similar errors together into larger groups so that they can be easily examined and discussed, then quantifying these errors to establish a hierarchy of difficulty that helps us assess the seriousness of each type to be considered in teaching. For analysing coherence errors, an analytic scoring rubric, as proposed by Hyland (2003), with little modification, was maintained; it is, then, criterion-referenced evaluation.

The profile is divided into eight major criteria: message clarity, organisation, logical progression and thorough development of ideas, paragraphs' unity, referencing, and using transitions; in addition to the aforementioned areas, using synonyms and adequate repetition of key words are added as essential elements in coherence (Scarry, L. & Scarry, S. 2011). Each criterion has four rating levels of very poor, poor to fair, average to good, and very good to excellent; a specific score is given for each level respectively: 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 15 and 16 to 20. Being commented on, the compositions are then grouped into four categories: A, B, C, and D, following Hyland (2003).

The percentage has been used to find out the number of the students who managed or failed to achieve coherence in writing. Results obtained from the evaluation of the 22 copies are presented in the following table.

**Table 1. An Analytic Scoring Rubric of Coherence 20 Marks**

Score out of 20	Description of Coherence Criteria	Students' number	Percentage %
16–20 excellent To very good  A	Message followed with ease; well organized and thorough development through introduction, body, and conclusion; relevant and convincing supporting details; logical progression of content contributes to fluency; unified paragraphs; effective use of transitions and reference, appropriate use of synonyms and effective key words' repetition	6	27,27
11–15 good to average  B	Message mostly followed with ease; satisfactorily organized and developed through introduction, body and conclusion; relevant supporting details; mostly logical progression of content; moderate to good fluency; unified paragraphs; possible slight over- or under-use of transitions but correctly used; mostly correct references; mostly appropriate use of synonyms and appropriate key words' repetition	11	50
6–10 fair to poor  C	Message followed but with some difficulty; some pattern of organization—an introduction, body, and conclusion evident but poorly done; some supporting details; progression of content inconsistent or repetitious; lack of focus in some paragraphs; over- or under-use of transitions with some incorrect use; incorrect use of reference; lack of synonyms and key words' repetition	3	13,63
1–5 inadequate  D	Message difficult to follow; little evidence of organization— introduction and conclusion may be missing; few or no supporting details; no obvious progression of content; improper paragraphing; no or incorrect use of transitions; no use of synonyms; lack of reference and key words' repetition contributes to comprehension difficulty	2	9,09

Table1 shows the overall situation of the participants' achievement of coherence in writing. What we found was that only 6 out of 22 students (27, 27%) who tended to be highly successful in having effective written performance due to their coherent pieces. We can believe that these six students are quite informed and well-trained of the concept of coherence as the most important textual feature of successful written performance. This fact is, also, felt in the quality of other 11 scripts (50%), having the grade B- good to average. The overall message in these 17 scripts can be followed with ease and progression of content seems logical. Most students in Grades A and B argued that what helped them write successfully had been reading model essays out of class; in addition to their teacher's suitable and valuable instruction in class about tips of achieving a coherent piece of writing.

Yet, most of them still encounter some problems in generating ideas and supporting with much evidence their central themes. This result can be depicted more in the eleven scripts of the grade B than in those of grade A; which makes writing quality between the two grades a little bit different. Noticeably, five students only out of 22 (13, 63%+ 09, 09%) who wrote unsuccessful pieces, with two scripts being very poor and incoherent. These students



appeared to have little control of the topic; their ideas are very limited, either repeated or somewhat general.

The pieces are too short to show an orderly; there is no clear sense of a beginning; and if the beginning and ending are there, one or both may be too short or too long.

To know which area in coherence is causing much difficulty to the students, a separate score or mark to each criterion is assigned. Each component has clear descriptors of the writing proficiency for that particular level as well as a numerical scale; the mark given is out of 20. For example, very good to excellent organisation has a minimum score of 16 and a maximum of 20, indicating essay writing which is “well-organised with indented paragraphs and thorough development through introduction, body, and conclusion”; while very poor organisation has a minimum score of 1 and a maximum of 5 indicating essay writing with “little evidence of organization-introduction and conclusion may be missing - or not adequate to evaluate” (Hyland, 2003). The numbers of students who managed or failed to achieve each of the traits of coherence are shown in the table below.

Table 2 Students' Numbers in Achieving Traits of Coherence

Marks Areas of Coherence	Grade A 16-20		Grade B 11-15		Grade C 6-10		Grade D 1-5	
	Students' number	Percentage %	Students' number	Percentage %	Students' number	Percentage %	Students' Number	Percentage %
Message followed	4	18,18	9	40,90	7	31,81	2	09,09
Organization	9	<b>40,90</b>	6	27,27	4	18,18	3	13,63
Progression of content	2	09,09	8	<b>36,36</b>	9	<b>40,90</b>	3	13,63
Paragraphs' Unity	3	13,63	5	<b>22,72</b>	9	<b>40,90</b>	5	22,72
Referencing	5	22,72	12	<b>54,54</b>	4	18,18	1	04,54
Use of transitions	3	13,63	9	<b>40,90</b>	5	22,72	5	<b>22,72</b>
Use of Synonyms	1	04,54	5	22,72	3	13,63	13	<b>59,09</b>
Repetition of key words	3	13,63	<b>16</b>	<b>72,72</b>	2	09,09	1	04,54

Table 2 reveals the most areas of coherence that the students found easy or difficult. What can be drawn is that the trait of repeating key words was the easiest area for the students to achieve- 13, 63% + 72,27%), followed by organisation (40, 90%+ 27,27%), referencing (22, 72%+54,54%), and transitions' use (13, 63%+ 40,90%). The students' use of these elements helped to a great extent having messages followed almost with ease (18, 18% in grade A and 40, 90% in grade B). On the other hand, progression of content- including development of ideas and essay unity seem to be the source of much problem to the

participants (40, 90%+ 22, 72% and 40,90%+13, 63%) successively. Importantly noticed, using synonyms as a means to achieve coherence was avoided by almost of students (13, 63%+ 59, 09%). Yet, this fact could not hinder 17 students (6 in grade A+11 in grade B) to achieve coherence and, thus, communicative effectiveness. Evidence of well-planned essay-level was almost found in these scripts. The essays are clear, focused, and details are carefully selected; each of the scripts has an inviting and clear beginning and a satisfying ending. As a reader, I can follow the order of the ideas, paragraphs, and sentences which flow smoothly.

### 3.5. Discussion of Results

In the light of the results presented, it can be detected that six subjects out of 22 (27, 27%) succeeded in writing coherent- unified and well-organised- essays. Each of which is an indented five-paragraph- essay with a clear title; it contains an effective introduction with an interesting thesis statement placed at the end, as well as well-structured body paragraphs, each with a topic sentence clearly stated, and thoroughly developed with evident and supportive detailing sentences, linked with obvious predictable connections.

As such, evidence of well-planned paragraph-level discussion was found in these scripts. This valuable result indicates that these students had understood and assimilated all of thesis statement, topic sentence and topic development, as well as had got an idea about how to achieve coherence through the use of some useful textual properties, such as repetition of key words, referencing, using synonyms and transitional signals, which are key factors in successful academic written performance.

Their high-frequent use in the participants' written assignments can also be found in other 11 scripts (50%), with little difference in terms of quality and appropriateness. This showed that the students did their best to implicate what they had learnt concerning coherence, mainly the use of such attainable devices. However, their use in texts should be appropriate and effective; otherwise the writing may turn to be redundant. Indeed, EFL students are in need for clear and workable tips that may help them write successfully in English.

What is worth noticing is that coherence is not just built by using some textual devices, as cohesive ties, but also by having focused, clear and carefully selected details which should be logically developed to form one whole about one central theme (Harmer, 2004). Information in texts should progress logically and coherently. In other words, a text should display thematic progression to qualify as text.

Less logical and limited ideas result in poor flow of the information and hence incoherent pieces. Though 77, 27% (27, 27% + 50%) of the students were able to obtain good essay form of five indented paragraphs (one introductory-three body paragraphs with one single idea in each-one concluding), still 50% of these students had great difficulty in reaching a successful command in information flow; the fact that makes them resort to using some devices as an attempt to get logical relations between sentences and paragraphs. Students know that connectives, for example, play an important role in creating textual coherence as they signal the logical relations that hold between sentences in a text; as Garcia (2009: 3746) states "*Discourse markers can signal sentential roles holding between sentences in a text.*" This, also, showed the reason behind having much focus on organisation over

content (thematic progression) in their pieces. Thus, this aspect of coherence appeared to be of recognisable importance in effective communication in writing.

The analysis of the writing samples' errors in coherence revealed some major inadequacies. Each error type will be illustrated by at least one example, followed by other examples of coherence successful achievement. The illustrations are taken from the corpus as they are, with no correction.

1. Unawareness of logical relations between sentences: A paragraph consists of a number of sentences that develop one main idea that is usually expressed in the topic sentence. Some students produce a general statement at the beginning of a paragraph, but they do not know which part of this statement is to be developed through supporting details. Consider the following example:

**1. We were 250 students and we lived in the same University City, 25 girls and 225 boys.**

*I was not a good person at making friends, especially girls. This is why I stayed alone during three months. All my friends were boys from different places. The most of the students were very selfish. They don't like to give; they just want to receive; (they eat each other).*

What is in bold is the student's topic sentence. What is noticed, in this example, is the absence of the controlling idea (the point), which is supposed to be present in the topic sentence. The student starts with a general statement that doesn't show any focus for what is coming next. Other students could not know how to put the topic sentence or forget to put it completely in the paragraph:

2. *My classmates first year experience at university was friendly, helpful, respectable, great respect by everyone. All the students are interested. Found a curiosity for something new. **There was a particular relationship between my classmates in the first year at university.***
3. *After achieving my Baccalaureate exam, I realised that I have to change my learning styles to be able integrate with the new environment. Therefore, to be able to achieve a good results. At the university you have to search for your own way to success.*

These examples indicate that the students are not aware of the logical relations holding between sentences, and the paragraph development patterns that require logical sequencing of ideas. Extracted from the corpus, a good example of topic sentence placement and focus is the following:

***My first lecture in the amphitheatre was terrible.** I remember the first lecture was of linguistics with Mr Tiriri, in which I took a place in the first line to listen well to the teacher. The lecture was like a horror movie for me because I didn't understand anything. When the lecture ended I called my mother and told her that I would go back home. So, she gave me some advice to encourage me.*

The topic sentence is clearly stated with a topic (*the first lecture in the amphitheatre*) and a controlling idea (*terrible*). The sentences that follow give logical development and progression of the main idea.

2. Poor paragraph development: Some students were not cognizant of the fact that sentences are the building blocks of paragraphs and essays, and each one should perform a specific role in paragraph development; otherwise, it will be a digression that distorts the flow of the text. In some scripts, there is a tendency to divide one paragraph into three or more sections or sub-paragraphs by indenting each sentence. Examples of this type of error are the following:

1. “ In the period of exam, nobody can be assured. Most of us faced anxious moments before the semester’s result.

The best moments at university cannot be forgot, during it we were well-known for each other. We passed a wonderful memories still now.

It is said “impossible is often untried”, this is true for me because everything is seemed impossible until you have the power to try it. By the time it will be easy for achievements.”

2. “Secondly, charge time when we look the plan of the time to study all the week. In fact the students are very tired in last week.”

The examples above show that students do not know or forget that a paragraph is a number of interconnected sentences that develop one main idea, and that a set of paragraphs form a unified essay. The following is an example of a well- developed paragraph, in which content is logically progressed; thus, paragraph coherence is achieved.

*In my first year I had just three or for good teachers. But, most of the rest were a disaster in the English Language. They were making some silly mistakes that even a student wouldn’t make. They were like sand on my shoe; I didn’t like them, neither their modules. Actually, t always wondered how they became teachers. I think that those teachers made me hate the English Language.*

3. Ineffective introductory paragraph: The introductory paragraph is the first paragraph of the essay. Its purpose is to lead the reader to the thesis statement in an inviting way that will encourage the reader to continue reading. The thesis statement gives the main controlling idea of the whole essay; it tells what the writer intends to prove, defend, or explain about the topic. Although there is no single way to write an introductory paragraph, it is agreed that this most important sentence is usually placed at the end of the introductory paragraph. Some participants, however, tend to write introductory paragraphs which are too general, lack clear thesis statement or poorly developed.

Examples:

1. “*My first year in university was not good neither exciting.*”

This is a one-sentence paragraph. The student is confusing between a paragraph topic sentence and essay thesis statement.

2. *First year experience at university was very hardly, difficult, new world in my life, new faces, teachers and study, responsibility took much time and hard work.*

Again, this is a one-sentence paragraph. There is no dominant impression; just the plan of development which is mentioned with too many details to be developed in one single essay. An example of an acceptable introductory paragraph is the following; the student has placed the thesis statement at the end.

*It was very exciting the idea of being at university. For me it was like a dream because true: I thought that I was making my first step toward my future. Unfortunately, it did not last as expected; once I came to university everything had gone. In fact, **my first year at university was like a terrible nightmare.***

#### 4. Referencing

Generally, to get a coherent whole, writers often need to find other words or phrases to substitute for the key word, so they will not have to repeat it over and over again. Even more common is the use of pronouns to refer to key words (referents) (Scrivener, 2010).

Pronouns commonly used in the corpus are generally personal pronouns (subjective, objective) such as ‘*I, we, they, it, me, us, and them*’, and possessive pronouns, like ‘*me, our, their*’; As well as some demonstrative pronouns (*this, that and these*).

The frequent use of these references and some key terms, including ‘*experience, university, teachers, modules, friends, classroom, campus*’ indicate the unity of the paragraphs to some extent, and the relevance of the ideas to the central theme.

Yet, some inadequacies in using references appropriately are illustrated as follows:

-Omission of the relative antecedent:

\* *We passed a wonderful memories (??) remains till now.*

- Overuse of pronominal reference:

Example: ‘*I came to the department of English. I didn’t know anyone, really*

*I was lonely, later I entered the amphi. I take a sit and I listened to teacher.*’

The repetition of pronominal pronouns reveals the students' lack of familiarity with certain stylistic and textual features of English written discourse. This also implies that the student had little idea on how to write well and develop ideas in a manner that conforms to the conventions of writing in English.

5. What is really lacking in the students’ scripts is synonyms’ use. As pronouns, using synonyms are also considered as a key factor to reach coherence in writing. Almost all the students are unable to cover this area; they still have problems to handle the native-like way of writing, with poor and ineffective vocabulary use.

They just attempt to avoid the use of synonyms to avoid making errors.

6. A limited variety of connectives or discourse markers: Discourse markers are words used to show how discourse is constructed (Swan, 2005); they can signal sentential roles holding between sentences in a text. For example, the connective ‘and’ signals the relation of addition, whereas ‘but’ indicates a sentential relation of contrast between clauses. Students, however, could not vary the use of connectives; what is noticed is the frequent use of some at the expense of others. Transitions commonly used are ‘*and, but, although, because*’, to link

clauses in sentences, and ‘*first of all, first, however, but, on the other hand, eventually, finally, in the beginning, in the end*’, to link ideas in paragraphs. This fact implies the students’ lack competence in using some formal discourse markers.

A relationship of contrast between two sentences or paragraphs, for example, can be indicated through using ‘*although, instead, nevertheless, on the contrary, despite, on the other hand, different from, otherwise, even though, still, in contrast, with whereas...*’ and not simply the connectives ‘*however*’ and ‘*but*’. Some other connectives, if used, are improperly spelled, such as ‘*In other hand, enclusion*’, intended respectively ‘*on the other hand, in conclusion*’.

In addition to the aforementioned inadequacies, other types of errors are found in the corpus causing much difficulty to most of students. Their presence make the compositions sound non-native like. They would have been taken as further coherence components.

- a. Absence of parallel structures: In a complex sentence that consists of two or more clauses, or in case of making a list of things, the participants sometimes list phrases or clauses that are not parallel in structure.

This practice renders their writing awkward. If parallelism was considered as a linking device, then with the absence of parallel structures texts would turn to be incoherent. Example: ‘*I was fearful and thinking for a way (that) help me adapt with them.*’

- b. Run-on sentences: Students most of the time, even those whose scripts were regarded as good, tend to join sentences with each other, using a comma instead of a full stop or a semicolon. A whole paragraph sometimes has only one full stop at the end.

Regard this example:

*Studying at university was hard and very difficult. At the beginning because sure that I will not pass the year because of the modules, the presentations, and the exposes, and also due to the way of teaching especially with LMD system which was not like the secondary school, in this way the teacher is not responsible to teach you everything you have to be self-reliant in which you study outside more than in class and of course it took me much time and a lot of efforts to be familiar with this new method.*

This erroneous example shows that the student does not know some of the basic punctuation conventions. A paragraph is not just a juxtaposition of sentences without being controlled by punctuation rules. This kind of error can be attributed to two main causes. First, errors are due to negative transfer from the students’ mother tongue, Arabic.

In Arabic, it is common to have a paragraph consisting of 7-10 sentences with only one full stop at the end; you can hardly find two or more Arabic sentences without being connected by a conjunction instead of a full stop. Second, teachers’ attention is usually focused on sentence structure, grammatical correctness and spelling rather than the skill of writing and its components.

- c- Style and word choice inappropriateness (pragmatic failures): There are sociocultural rules that determine the choice of words and style in a certain context.

These rules are usually hard to grasp for non-native speakers, and thus they may be misinterpreted in certain situations. The use of the appropriate target style may be influenced by the learner's use of these forms in their mother tongue.

Foreign language learners sometimes make subtle mistakes that may not be accounted for in terms of syntactic accuracy.

Such inadequacies render the students writing vague, awkward and disoriented. In this respect, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) hold that EFL learners and their teachers tend to overlook the effect of pragmatic failures, and consistently rank grammatical errors as more serious than pragmatic ones. Examples of this type of error are the following:

*'Students don't like to give; they just want to receive; (they eat each other).  
Then, by chance I met the director and he opened with me a boring  
conversation.'*

In these examples, the influence of the students' mother tongue can be clearly felt. Though it is a hard task, EFL students need to develop an English way of writing; this will be among the weighable roles and burdensome responsibilities of the EFL teacher. In fact, what was considered in the view of a non-native speaker teacher as coherent and acceptable piece, it might turn to be unacceptable or awkward in the view of a native speaker teacher of English.

### 3.6. Some Causes of Coherence Problems

1. Lack of exposure to authentic texts in English. Insufficient exposure to exemplary and sample texts in the different genres in English reduces the students' exposure to the real language in use.
2. Lack of practice and guidance in writing paragraphs and essays is a decisive factor that may account for the students' inadequate performance.
3. Methods of testing usually focus on micro-linguistic aspects of language rather than on macro-linguistic ones.
- 4- Major problems are greatly associated with the linguistic interferences (negative transfer) due to the cultural differences and overgeneralisation of the rules of the target language in their learning process and their production.

### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

A growing challenge in education at Algerian universities is to develop the skills necessary for the students of English to write effective and eloquent English paragraphs and essays. Students in contexts where English is considered as a foreign language will need English writing skills ranging from a simple paragraph and summary skills to the ability to write whole essays and research papers. University students' mastery of these writing skills will be transferred to their future students when they graduate as English language teachers. Essay writing constitutes a problem for many EFL students worldwide and a major challenge for our students of English at Laghouat University, in Algeria. Since an academic essay is a set of coherent paragraphs, then their real problem lies in paragraph mastery.

Results obtained in the present study showed that most EFL students participated had written acceptable essays in terms of quality; this implies good instruction had been presented to be able write effective and coherent pieces. Moreover, the successful students argued that they had depended on model essays brought from different written sources. What is also remarked is that the organisation of the essay is easier for the learners to assimilate than the matter of content that needs metacognitive strategies undertaken and developed by the learner himself. The teacher, to fulfil this end, has to provide learners with sufficient exposure to authentic written texts, showing the discursal as well as the pragmatic use of the target language.

Accordingly, coherence failures in the compositions of EFL learners can be minimised and their competence in these areas can be maximised by considering the following recommendations:

1. EFL teachers should be made aware of the differences between the rhetorical patterns of the learners' L1 and the target language. These differences should be highlighted, taught and sufficiently practiced.
2. Language learners should be encouraged to maximize their exposure to the target language through extensive reading, listening and writing.
3. Classroom instruction should aim at enhancing students' pragmatic and discourse competences by focusing not only on the accuracy of linguistic forms, but also on the functional uses of language to reach a native-like command and proficiency, mainly in information flow.
4. Students should be taught writing through an eclectic range of process, genre and product approaches, directing their attention to the usefulness of the pre-writing techniques, like clustering, to generate supporting details for their central themes.
5. Testing and assessment techniques of the students' written performance should incorporate components that assess coherence and, thus, discourse competence of the learners.



## References

- Abi Samra, N. (2003). 'An Analysis of Errors in Arabic Speakers' English Writings'. <http://abisamra03.tripod.com/nada/languageacq-erroranalysis.html>.
- Abdel Hamid Ahmed. (2010). 'Students' Problems with Cohesion and Coherence in EFL Essay Writing in Egypt: Different Perspectives'. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ)*, 1(4), 211-221. Helwan Faculty of Education, Egypt.
- Bamberg, B. (1984). 'Assessing Coherence: A Reanalysis of Essays Written for the National Assessment of Educational Progress', 1969-1979. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 18, 305-319.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., and Dörnyei, Z. (1998). 'Do language learners recognize pragmatic violations? Pragmatic versus grammatical awareness in instructed L2 learning'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 233-259.
- Brown, J., and Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Canale, M., and Swain, M. (1980). 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing'. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1-47.
- Canale, M. (1983). 'From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy'. In J.C. Richards and R.W. Schmidt (eds). *Language and Communication*. London: Longman.
- Connor, U. (1984). 'A study of cohesion and coherence in English as a second language students' writing'. *Papers in Linguistics: International Journal of Human Communication*, 17, 301-316.
- Conner, U. (1990). 'Linguistic/rhetoric measures for international persuasive student writing'. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 24, 67-87.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Beaugrande, R., and Dressler, W. (1981). *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. London: Longman
- Fahnestock, J. (1983). 'Semantic and Lexical Coherence'. In *College Composition and Communication*, 34, 400-416.
- Fareh, S. (2014). 'Macrolinguistic Errors in Arab EFL Learners' Essay'. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*. University of Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE, 141, 923 – 933.
- Garcia, M. D. (2009). 'Pragmatic competence in EFL: an analysis of learners' writings with implications for the foreign language classroom'. *ICERI2009 Proceedings*. pp. 3746-3746.
- Grabe, W., and Kaplan, R. (1996). *Theory and Practice of Writing: An applied linguistic perspective*, Longman, London and New York.
- Gutwinski, W. (1976). *Cohesion in Literary Texts: A Study of Some Grammatical and Lexical Features of English Discourse*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Halliday, M. A. K., and Hasan, R. (2001). *Cohesion in English*. Beijing, China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Harmer, J. (2004) *How to teach writing*. Pearson Education Limited, England.
- Hyland, K. (2003). *Second Language Writing*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
- Johns, A. M. (1986). 'Coherence and academic writing: Some definitions and suggestions for teaching'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20 (2), 247-265.
- Lee, I. (2002). 'Teaching coherence to ESL students: A classroom inquiry'. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 11, 135-159.
- Lee, M.Y.P. (2003). 'Discourse structure and rhetoric of English narratives: Differences between native English and Chinese nonnative English writers'. *Text* 23(3), 347-368.
- Liu, M., and Braine, G. (2005). 'Cohesive features in argumentative writing produced by Chinese

- Undergraduates'. System, 33, 623-636.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Pringle, Ian (1983). 'Why Teach Style? A Review-Essay'. In *College Composition and Communication*, 34, 91-98.
- Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J.C. (1990). *The Language Teaching Matrix*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., and Renandya, W. A. (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rivers, W. M. (1981). 'Writing', in *Teaching Foreign Language Skills*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- Roberts, R., and Kreuz, R. (1993). 'Nonstandard discourse and its coherence'. *Discourse Processes*, 16, 451-464.
- Scarry, S., and Scarry, J. (2011). *The Writer's Workplace with Readings: Building College Writing Skills*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn., Wadsworth Cengage Learning. USA.
- Scrivener, J. (2010). *Teaching English Grammar: What to Teach and How to Teach It*. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited.
- Swan, M. (2005) *Practical English Usage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1977). *Text and context: Explorations in the semantics and pragmatics of discourse*. New York: Longman.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1996). 'New Starts and Different kinds of Failure', in Freedanan, and J. Yalden (eds.). *Learning to Write: First language, Second language*. London: Longman (1983), selected papers from the 1979 conference , Ottawa , Canada, and New York (35-47)
- Witte, S. P., and Faigley. L. (1981). 'Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality'. *College Composition and Communication*, 22.189-204.
- Todd, R. W., Khongput, S., and Darasawang, P. (2007). 'Coherence, cohesion and comments on students' academic essays'. *Assessing Writing*, 12, 10-25.
- Umair, N. (2011). 'Problems of Multi-ability Academic English Writing Classes in Arab Countries'. *ArabWorld English Journal (AWEJ)*, 2 ( 2), pp. 230-242.