ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN THE USE OF COHERENCE AMONG JORDANIAN EFL STUDENTS IN WRITING ACADEMIC ESSAYS

*1Anas Hashem Alsariera & 2Kamariah Yunus

1 Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, Fahad Bin Sultan University, Tabuk, 47721 Tabuk, Saudi Arabia.

2 Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: alsarieraa@fulbrightmail.org

Received: 21.03.2023 Accepted: 20.06.2023

ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Writing a coherent written composition is a challenging task for many English foreign learners, especially among English as Foreign Language (EFL) Jordanian students, as many of those learners cannot achieve writing well coherent essays at the university level due to various reasons such as lack of lexical competence and lack of motivation. Due to the fact that very limited studies have focussed on investigating this phenomenon in-depth, especially in the Jordanian context, the present study aims to explore issues and challenges faced by Jordanian students in using coherence in academic essays under the perspectives of writing course instructors.

Methodology: This study used a qualitative approach to gather data. The sample comprises eight male instructors from two Jordanian universities. They were selected using a purposive sampling method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gain their insights into the issues and significant challenges faced by the students and the potential strategies to overcome the challenges. 20 academic essays produced by 4th year undergraduate students from the two universities were observed for the purpose.

Findings: The instructors found that the EFL Jordanian students were unable to achieve coherent writing in the essays mainly due to their limited vocabulary knowledge. They attributed this lack to learners’ inadequate attempts to enhance their writing and limited reading experience. Generally, they
agreed that insufficient awareness of the importance of incorporating effective educational practices to enhance their students’ writing as the major contributing factor to their students’ failure to observe coherence in writing. The findings encompassed some potential strategies to cope with the current obstacles, such as training the EFL instructors and employing modern techniques and practices in teaching.

**Contributions:** Teaching and learning of coherent writing is very necessary at all higher learning institutions. The findings of the study have implications on all the stakeholders as a means of enriching the instructional practices widely.

**Keywords:** EFL Jordanian students, EFL writing, writing challenges, writing strategies, coherent writing, coherence.


**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Writing is a critical skill that is viewed as a human means of communication which enables humans to convey messages, thoughts, and experiences (Tankovica, Kapes, & Benazic, 2023; Ngoc Anh, 2019). Nunan (2003) provides another definition of writing as “a physical and mental act” (p. 9) since it is about composing words, generating and organizing ideas in an appropriate form to its reader. Emmons (2003) conceives this skill as a “basic skill that needs to be mastered by all English Language major students” (p. 33). It is captured as a demanding skill for students to become proficient and effective writers.

Teaching academic writing to ESL and EFL learners is one of the English language skills that plays a key role in the process of learning English in ESL / EFL context. Abdulwahed (2010), on the other hand, states that English writing allows students to think critically and motivates them to study other aspects of academic writing, such as the appropriate use of words and expressions. Academic writing, moreover, is prepared by students or academics, and it is seen as the utilization of methods and techniques taught by writing instructors in various academic institutions such as planning, generating ideas, organizing, critical thinking, and developing structure and vocabulary.

Academic writing can take a wide range of forms, such as journals, textbooks, and genres, which are used to address and discuss problematic academic issues. In this prospect,
Tardy and Courtney (2008) argued that this type of writing “is used to describe a wide range of writing, from personal writing in educational contexts to very specialized disciplinary writing” (p. 73). Additionally, Pilus (as cited in Rassouli & Abbasvandi, 2013) asserts that academic writing ranges from mechanical control to creativity. Pilus also maintained that this type of writing requires good knowledge of form, lexical items, the topic of issue, style, and others characteristics. Grabe and Kaplan (2014) also noted that the structure of texts varies due to differences in purpose, position, writer, interlocutor, subject matter, and type of text. Besides, texts are affected by variables like the contact between the writer and the text, the reader’s knowledge anticipation, the material, and the context of a situation. As Limon (2007) reported, the writer develops both a textual and a public interface that focuses on patterns such as subjectivity-objectivity, remoteness-approximation, respect of authority, and formality-informality. Therefore, academic texts are generated by some “external and text-internal features” like epistemological exchanging semantics, text types, and social and cultural rules (Johns, 1986, p. 125).

In connection to this, some researchers and scholars in the field of linguistics believe that academic writing embrace a group of cardinal constituents and some important conditions, such as its audience, purpose, organization of ideas, and writing style (Swales & Feak, 2009). They also argued that the non-native speakers should be familiar with writing methods, components, and features of the English language. Thus, these conditions and features should be recognized and highlighted here.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Coherence is about hanging all the elements of the written discourse together to achieve its interpretation effectively. Halliday and Hasan (1989) stated that coherence is achieved when a text is interrelated. They contend that surface textual elements produce coherence. They also viewed it with two features: “cohesion (i.e., ties between sentences) and register (i.e., coherence with a context)” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 248). They demonstrated that coherence may establish cohesive ties that are appropriately used to link the different elements of the text. It, furthermore, helps the reader recover the linkage of the content-based connections between words that make them produce sense.

In Hoey’s (1991) view of coherence, “coherence is a facet of the reader’s evaluation of a text” (p. 12). It is apparent that it is dependent on the receiver’s understanding of the written or spoken discourse in varying degrees. Additionally, he viewed coherence a as product achieved by mixing all the text components together. Accordingly, coherence takes place
because of the writer and the reader’s understanding and proper knowledge of the context, so that the reader can make sense of the text appropriately.

Coherence is the essence and real spirit of the written text where the presentation of ideas leading to a unified text is logically and consistently formed. Therefore, coherence assists the ideas and thoughts in a text to be organized and allocated together, so the attained meaning can be gained easily by the reader. Campus (2017) supported this view by stating that coherence creates logical relations (meaning) existing in the text. Coherence, thus, is a key component of writing. If a text lacks this component, then it is difficult for the reader to follow the ideas and meanings of expressions. To sum, it is an important element in written discourse, as it ensures the success and readability of the text.

Lately, this area has been under the spotlight of many scholars, linguists, and researchers writing research for the past several decades (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981; Peters, 1986; De Beaugrande, 1987; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; White & Arndt, 1991; Phillips, 1985; Emmons, 2003; Shokpour & Fallahzadeh, 2007; August & Shanahan, 2010) who indicated that writing is a complex activity and that many students face difficulties to learn and write meaningfully, especially in an EFL context. It is widely agreed that writing is the most challenging skill among the four language skills. EFL learners often face many difficulties in the process of creating a well-formed and consistently written text. These difficulties include creatively generating ideas, using the appropriate sentence structure, words, and phrases, and creating coherent written texts. The challenges and issues that EFL learners face in the process of writing and creating coherent texts have been pointed out by many researchers and scholars such as White (1988), Lee (2002), Han and Hiver (2018), and Hynninen (2018). Lee (2002), for instance, sheds some light on the issue of the difficulties that learners face in the process of developing and learning how to form a coherent text, particularly in an EFL context. He threw light on the issues that learners of composition in an EFL context are unable to use language correctly in natural situations, mainly due to coherence and cohesion difficulties.

In the same line, Ahmed (2019) admitted that many Arab students are incapable of maintaining coherence in their writing. Hence, many of the Arab students’ texts show the primary sources of incoherence and textual deviation due to lengthy sentences, lack of parallelism, and the inability to use cohesive devices and parallelism. Recently, other studies conducted in Jordan examined the written compositions of Jordanian learners (e.g. Rababah, Alshehab, & Melhem, 2018). These studies observed that the Jordanian EFL learners had problems with creating creative and coherent written texts due to their lack of unity and coherence, inadequate vocabulary, and lack of support. The studies showed that the students
were unable to write unified and coherent written text. Overall, this has affirmed that EFL learners in Jordan encounter difficulties when they attempt to write coherently.

Additionally, Modhish (2012) claimed that EFL learners’ written texts were weak due to the lack of using discourse markers. The researcher showed that the students did not have sufficient practice on the use of discourse markers, and they did not have enough adequate exposure to linguistic items. Furthermore, Alodwan and Ibnian (2014) noted that creating coherent texts is probably the most challenging aspect of EFL writing. Additionally, Saud (2016) examined a sample of 50 texts created by EFL students in Saudi Arabia. She found that they were unable to construct a coherent text in English. It is indicated that these texts were characterized by their poor organization, the limited vocabulary, and also the misuse of cohesive devices. However, many of the recent studies showed that there is lack of cohesion in the EFL learners’ writing (e.g. Al Amro, 2019). In light of the previously mentioned studies, it can be deduced that cohesion has a significant contribution to facilitating discourse flow. In this regard, many of the Jordanian researchers demonstrated that EFL learners are not fully aware of the importance of lexical cohesion.

In connection to this, Han and Hiver (2018) suggested that these difficulties depend on the instructors of EFL writing who tend to concentrate more on teaching learners the grammar and appropriate language structures. Cavdar and Doe (2012) argued that the educational system has played a major part in students’ common problematic issues in writing among learners. They also explained that these problems include a weak or missing evaluation of theoretical assumptions, inadequate argument building, lack of supporting arguments, disordered thinking presentation, lack of development and integration, and lack of critical evaluation. Hynninen (2018), on the other hand, delineated the point of view that these problems prevent students from developing their interaction in the classroom as well and that these problems obstruct them from having active learning in writing. He also asserted that students’ issues should be encountered by offering them more training classes to assist them in the process of learning writing.

Moreover, the ability to critically examine learned content allows EFL learners to have various representations of their knowledge and conclude this knowledge to diverse disciplines and contexts (Kellogg, 2008). Consistently, writing issues in EFL students are often detected and addressed through the feedback of teachers. In light of this consumption, Cavdar and Doe (2012) claimed that many EFL students struggle to improve their writing based on the received feedback from instructors in order to enhance the outcomes of future studies. Likewise, other researchers reported that sustainable writing challenges may arise partly because of the failure
to integrate a pedagogical process in the curriculum that supports EFL learners’ development. Thus, students’ limited productivity and ability to write coherently should be addressed by both the educational system and the learners themselves.

Many undergraduate students in Jordan are unable to write meaningfully (Al Shamalat & Abdul Ghani, 2020). They mainly have difficulties with lexical cohesion and coherence (Al Shamalat & Abdul Ghani, 2020; Alsariera & Yunus, 2021). Moreover, this may affect delivering thriving communication between the students and their readers. This may also impact their academic achievements in obtaining notable results in their academic courses due to their weaknesses and meaningless writing.

Despite this, most of the contemporary studies conducted on EFL writing in Jordan provided continuous efforts to help students write coherently, such as those conducted by Rababah and Melhem (2015) and Al Shamalat and Abdul Ghani (2020). Therefore, it is the aim of the present study to fill the gap by investigating issues behind the present phenomenon and the potential strategies to overcome it. The paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the frequent challenges that the EFL Jordanian students face in writing coherent academic essays?
2. What are the possible strategies to overcome the EFL Jordanian students’ difficulties with coherent writing?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This case study employed a qualitative approach to gather data. A qualitative approach is considered a better approach to investigate a specific case involving a group of students.

3.2 Setting and Participants

Eight male writing lecturers from two universities in Jordan participated in the study. They were selected using a purposive sampling method, in which the main criteria are that they must be proficient English writing instructors, and have been teaching writing for more than five years. Besides, 20 samples of students’ essays selected from 20 4th year male undergraduate EFL students from two Jordanian universities were used in the study for the purpose of gaining the instructors’ insights into the issues and challenges in the use of coherence in the essays. These students were all majoring in English language and literature.
3.3 Data Collection
A semi-structured interview method was opted as a suitable method to gain in-depth insights of the current phenomenon. This method is regarded as a face-to-face interaction between the researchers and the respondents with the aim of gaining in-depth perceptions about the phenomenon. In fact, the researchers depended on the use of the semi-structured interview method since it provides the researchers with the freedom and flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informants. It also offers the researchers the freedom to provide more explanations about the predetermined questions. Later, the responses from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed through an inductive thematic approach.

3.4 Data Analysis
The analytical approaches are needed to specify the steps in analyzing the various forms of data. It is seen essential for better application of the employed techniques. In the present study, data gathered from the interviews were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) description of thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis is an essential tool in qualitative research that helps in identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within data. It allowed researchers to explore the depth of the participants’ experiences and understand their views, beliefs, and attitudes. The importance of thematic analysis lies in its ability to extract meaningful insights from large amounts of complex data, ensuring that researchers can understand the overarching themes present. Therefore, it plays a crucial role in generating rigorous evidence-based insights that hold value for researchers. Figure 1 shows Braun and Clarke’s (2006) analytical framework.

![Figure 1: Braun and Clarke’s (2006) analytical framework](image)

In the first phase, the researchers immersed themselves in the data to have a thorough understanding of and familiarization with the data. This was done by transcribing the audio material of the semi-structured interviews. In the next phase, the researchers moved to initiate
codes from the gathered data, segments, and elements. According to Braun and Clarke (2012),
codes are the building blocks of analysis in qualitative research as they help in identifying the
features of the data. The third phase is an essential phase in the thematic analysis of qualitative
data since it explores the relationship between the potential themes. Later, after generating the
initial codes, they were combined and organized into broader themes and the extracted codes
were then associated with the emerged themes. Then, the themes were refined and rematched
with the existing extracts. The researchers then considered the importance of having no
contractions within the candidate themes by re-exploring and reading the entire data set. After
that, the emerged themes were defined in order to “...identify the ‘essence’ of what each theme
is about” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 92) via considering whether the extracted data are
coherent or not and whether they relate to each other. The final phase involves producing a
report as thesis findings. Producing the report is considered of high importance, which can be
done by connecting the themes logically and meaningfully (Braun & Clark, 2012).

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Major Challenges

Based on the interviews, all participants agreed that the educational system and instructional
practices are the significant causes of the students’ lack of coherence awareness. This was
attributed mainly to lack of knowledge about the new standards of teaching writing concerning
coherence as they always tend to use the conventional approaches. Therefore, most of the used
textbooks were not eligible for the students as they were not encouraging or helpful. In this
regard, one of the participants pointed out: “the current syllabi are not effective as they do not
meet the real needs of our students. I can see the gap. Yes! There is a gap between us and our
learners.” (INS 8).

The learning syllabi are essential components in the learning process because syllabi
play a significant role in raising students’ ability to write coherently, expediting instruction, and
monitoring the quality of the offered learning course. However, it was found that the syllabi do
not provide explicit awareness and understanding of how to construct a coherent written text,
as reported by most of the participants of the current study who related students and instructors’
unawareness of lexical cohesion to the present writing syllabi since teaching the lexical items
is not effectively involved in. This agrees with the findings of some contemporary studies like
those conducted by AlSariera and Yunus (2022). They contended that the failure of the course
syllabi significantly influences the students’ lack of writing meaningfully. They also asserted
that the gap between the students' actual level and the course expectations expands the students’
ineptitude to write effectively.

Another contributing factor was enforcing impractical curricula. In this regard, the
participants of the interviews did not admire the presently enforced unskilled curricula as they
do have a blue impact on the acquisition of notable writing commands among EFL students.
One of the instructors mentioned, “our textbooks have negatively influenced students’
prospects to enrich their writing, that they do not fulfill the students’ expectations to attain
competitive training in writing.” They also do not offer authentic, appealing activities to
enhance students’ mastery or functional evaluation as stated by most of the interviewees. They
also do not allocate adequate time for students to gain the limited lexical items they have been
given. Thus, this concedes with Alsariera (2022), who conducted a study exploring the
coherence among the EFL Jordanian students and the difficulties encountered at a Jordanian
university. The researcher reported that one of the main contributors to this area is the current
curricula, mainly concerned with the sentential level. The researcher also reported that the lack
of activities, training, and evaluation truly affected students’ writing skills.

When it comes to the instructional aspects, the respondents were asked to talk about
their awareness of the students’ genuine capacity to write meaningfully, they stated that the
instructors at the university generally lack the necessitous awareness in this field. In particular,
they remarked that EFL instructors did not pay special focus to teaching lexical items to
students in their EFL writing classes. This was due to the instructors' diverse interests in
teaching and the lack of modern teaching methods in their classes. In this regard, a respondent
stated, "in fact, this is the core of their studies and teaching experience; many of them are aware
of this. Most of them are conscious of this. But the issue arises when they do not implement
teaching those devices effectively in their classes. Teachers also tend to follow the old-school
and traditional methods of teaching. In addition, some of those teachers refuse to employ
modern techniques" (INS 7). Accordingly, the participants of the interviews indicated that the
unsatisfactory performances by EFL writing instructors led to the students’ inability to master
sound coherence skills in their writing.

In this regard, other negative points were conveyed by the instructors. Firstly, one of
the respondents revealed that the EFL instructors in Jordan "do not express that (lexical
cohesion) directly in their teaching; it is hidden in their style of teaching" (INS 8). This was
because "some [of the instructors] do not expand and update their knowledge with the
contemporary studies. They do not keep an eye on them [learning strategies and recent
researches in writing]" (INS 6). One of the instructors also referred to the deficiency of
implementing modern techniques and practices in teaching. He said that "they lack the modern techniques and skills in teaching. This is due to their specialization and interest" (INS 2).

Secondly, since delivering constructive feedback to the learners was an indispensable aspect of teaching EFL writing at the university level, the EFL instructors agreed that feedback was valuable in their writing course. However, it was found that the style of the feedback given to EFL students was misappropriating. One of the respondents commented: "surprisingly, some instructors do not provide feedback on the students' use of lexical repetition because some of them are not aware of its value" (INS 5).

Moreover, it was also evident that most of the EFL instructors focus on grammatical aspects and the organization of the written compositions rather than responding effectively to their students' problems, as perceived in the following extract: "I also take care of the organization of their compositions. I usually teach them how to take care of grammatical aspects as well as how to solve some problematic issues, especially when they do not find suitable words for their compositions." (INS 3) Indeed, the responses of the above extracts pointed out that there was a lack of the instructor's feedback and that they did not pay much attention to lexical issues in their feedback. This finding was also supported by the response of the third respondent, who stated that: "there is no need to stop and bother them (students). I try to inspire them by having them discover the accurate and the inaccurate uses of the different lexical items in their writing" (INS 4).

In this sense, Al-Awabdeh and Abdo (2017) conclusions are compatible with the present findings, which found that the EFL writing instructors are not fully qualified to train students. Like this, most of the instructors agreed that they lack a perspicuous awareness of the significance of teaching coherence, which strongly impacts students' command to deliver admiringly readable written pieces. Similarly, the findings of Hassan (2017) pointed out that the role of writing instructors and the style of their feedback are exceptionally responsible for students’ ineptitude to write coherently. For example, Hassan (2017) indicated that writing instructors fail to train students to deliver coherent writing pieces. Likewise, Abdallah et al. (2017) also found that students are not equipped with regular and practical feedback. Thus, the limited feedback can lessen students’ command because the EFL instructors cannot offer students the proper feedback to write coherently.

Apart from the instructional issues, the students’ inability to use their lexical knowledge was regarded as one of the main contributing issues. This was referred to by most of the respondents including the instructors. In the details, one of the respondents stated that most of the students lack sufficient lexical items to express their thoughts. The respondent added that
their students are not capable of delivering unified and coherent because they lack the necessary knowledge to write well-developed written texts. Likewise, the instructors pointed out that their students do not have efficacious reading practices, making them incapable of increasing their lexical repertoire. The instructors specified that students do not read regularly and are motivated to develop this crucial skill. In addition, the instructors referred to the students’ insufficient training, which was very weak.

In the same vein, the findings of the study are in harmony with Mohseni and Samadian (2019), who claimed that reading is the essential tie that enables students’ coherence skills. The absence of this link is likely to limit the effectiveness of the production of consistent texts. Nevertheless, the researcher contended that the students have limited reading experience. Similarly, this claim can be supported by Mohseni and Samadian (2019), who conducted a study exploring the EFL students' problematic issues in cohesion and coherence. They argued that reading enhances students’ lexical knowledge and enables them to deploy their knowledge when writing. The researchers found that students' limited reading experience affected their proficiency and ability to master lexical proficiency. Thus, it is evident that students' lack of reading practice is integral to their incompetence in lexical cohesiveness.

### 4.2 Recommended Strategies

In this regard, the instructors recommended several strategies to cope with the challenges. These strategies include enhancing syllabi, textbooks, teaching aids, instructors’ pedagogical practices, and students’ learning habits. First, the educational intervention should be improved by modifying the concurrent syllabi at the university level and the learning materials. Indeed, the current syllabi and materials should be more instructive, instructional, experiential, and exploratory. Additionally, the researchers commented that the practitioners should reform them to meet their students’ needs to ensure the expansion of the students’ capability to write coherently. In this regard, stressed the essence of empowering the educational system by fixing writing syllabi and curricula. They should also match the students’ needs to empower them to create coherent and expressive written compositions. Second, writing instructors should concede the essence of training students to produce consistent texts and adopt effective skills in their writing courses. In this essence, some of the respondents stated that students should be provided with extra remedial classes by which they are exposed to learn and practice the lexical devices. However, this is compatible with Ahmad’s (2019) results, which indicated delivering explicit instruction on the cohesive devices rather than grammatical, spelling, and format aspects so students could learn about text-forming. Similarly, Masadeh (2019) stressed the
importance of training EFL writing instructors so that they are fully competent and competent to teach students how to build consistent compositions.

In connection with the instructors' attention to the current phenomenon, feedback can benefit the students' awareness and use of lexical cohesion. Consequently, many researchers like Mohseni and Samadian (2019) stressed the importance of providing the students with regular and practical feedback so they can enhance their students' use of lexical devices in their written compositions. Additionally, this concurs with Pourmousavi and Mohamadi Zenouzagh (2020) findings. They yielded that feedback should be considered where precise and constructive feedback plays a significant role in enhancing students' awareness of learning and writing.

Thenceforth, the educational intervention can be improved by implementing technological tools to improve students' writing quality, as prescribed by many of the respondents. One of the instructors proposed sharing videos and online assignments with her students so they could learn better even in their free time. In this vein, many researchers recommended utilizing different electronic tools and online platforms to improve the students' abilities (Alsariera, 2022). These tools include electronic dictionaries, paraphrasing tools, and a wide variety of specialized and authentic learning webpages such as My English Lab, Oxford Online Practice, and many others.

Finally, the respondents recommended that improving reading habits and writing practices can be beneficial. In this essence, one of the respondents suggested that: "the instructors should start with reading. Reading is very essential. It improves the learners' lexical knowledge and enhances their creativity" (INS 7). Another respondent stated that "writing students should be inspired to do more readings. This would achieve a deeper experience of the use of cohesive devices in different academic settings." (INS 2). Thus, this is similar to the findings of Ahmad (2019), who demonstrated that students' limited command and mastery of writing is due to their narrow lexical repertoire. The researcher recommended enhancing students' reading and writing abilities to manipulate coherent written compositions.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Undeniably, writing demands a quite high level of coherence as the writer is required to create meaningful and organized written texts. However, the present study found that the upmost challenge that encounter the EFL Jordanian students is their inability to write coherently due to certain notable causes such as the limited awareness of the importance of coherence among the educational practitioners in Jordan. However, the educational planners and designers can
develop strategic plans to address their students’ problems with coherence. Moreover, the role of the educational system is to guarantee that the educational syllabi and curricula are in the right for recognizing and responding to students’ needs in writing and discrepancies in learning how to write effectively. On the other hand, the study found that the appropriateness of EFL writing instructors’ practices affects students’ progress. Thus, it can be concluded that unqualified instructors disrupt the learning process. Therefore, the instructors are encouraged to provide adequate learning sources, and applicable practices and techniques in their classes. In other words, teaching and learning of coherent writing is very necessary at all higher learning institutions. The findings of the study have implications on all the stakeholders as a means of enriching the instructional practices widely.

REFERENCES


