Enhancing High School Students' Academic Writing

Banani Roy Chowdhury

School of Education, GlobalNXT University, 50450 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

For high school students in the Middle East, academic writing plays an increasingly important role, particularly for those planning to pursue higher education in English-medium universities where assessments such as IELTS and TOEFL reflect international academic expectations. Against this background, the present qualitative study examined students' use of cohesive devices and explored the challenges they face in producing clear and coherent academic writing. The study consisted of ten high school students who participated in a pilot project and completed a researcher-designed diagnostic writing task under real-time classroom conditions. Observations, open-ended questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews were used to compile data, allowing a comprehensive study of students' writing practices, experiences, and obstacles. Manual analysis of the writings revealed common cohesion (e.g., references, substitutions, conjunctions, and collocations) and coherence (e.g., logical organisation and usage of linkers) flaws. Results exposed regular problems with grammatical and lexical coherence as well as inadequate arrangement to present concepts. In order to raise students' awareness of coherent and logical writing styles, boosting their academic and professional success, teachers have to focus on targeted instruction and feedback strategies.

Keywords: Academic writing, assessment, cohesion, coherence, proficiency

INTRODUCTION

English is considered the most common language of international communication and plays a vital role in professional development and academic achievement. In Middle Eastern countries especially in the UAE. Where English has become the primary language of instruction, mastering academic writing is essential for high school students, particularly those planning to pursue higher education in the West.

Students are required to demonstrate their writing in a way that meets international standards, as required by exams like IELTS

and TOEFL, in order to enhance their overall language development. However, many students need help generating and organising ideas logically in their essays.

Researchers like Fareed et al. (2016) have highlighted the importance of writing in enhancing language performance. They also referred that developing students' discourse and pragmatic abilities often needs to be noticed.

Addressing these challenges requires a focused approach to teaching the importance of cohesion and coherence in academic writing. It also involves in providing targeted feedback to learners to help them improve their academic writing skills.

RELATED LITERATURE

Zohrabi and Khalili (2023) argue that different forms of written corrective feedback (WCF) can play an important role in improving students' academic writing. Their study shows that explicit feedback strategies such as direct correction, metalinguistic explanation, electronic feedback, and reformulation are particularly effective in supporting ESP learners' writing development in both the short and long term. These forms of feedback help students notice and correct ungrammatical language, which in turn supports the internalisation of appropriate linguistic forms and a clearer understanding of academic conventions. Zohrabi and Khalili (2023) also point out that when students receive feedback from more than one source, such as teachers, model texts drawn from corpora, and their peers, they tend to engage more actively with their writing and take greater responsibility for revising it. They therefore argue that using a mix of feedback strategies, adjusted to students' needs, is likely to support meaningful improvement in academic writing.

Research also shows that high school students hoping for higher education in English-speaking nations (Brown & Bailey, 1984, as cited in Dobakhti et al., 2023) must first develop logical and convincing writing skills. Producing clear and logical academic papers depends much on mastery of cohesive devices such as references, substitutions, conjunctions, and collocations (Goodson, 2012, as cited in Dobakhti et al., 2023). Many students, however, struggle with grammar and lexical coherence as well as with arranging their ideas successfully (Dobakhti et al., 2023). Along with helpful criticism, targeted instruction in these areas has been shown to raise students' confidence and writing ability (Afrilyasanti et al., 2016, as cited in Dobakhti et al., 2023). For students getting ready for tests like IELTS and TOEFL, which measure their capacity to generate cohesive academic writing under test conditions, such approaches are very important. Therefore, improving students' academic writing skills and future performance depends on explicit instruction of coherence and consistency.

According to researcher Lismay (2020), cohesion and coherence are crucial in academic essays. He also emphasised that these two aspects (cohesion and coherence) are important in producing clear and practical work. Cohesion calculatively uses vocabulary

and grammatical structures to connect ideas, and coherence strategically involves the arrangement of sentences and paragraphs to convey meaning and logical progress of ideas (Crossley & McNamara, 2010).

According to Suwandi (2016) no matter how vital cohesion and coherence are, students need to get familiar with the concepts, to understand and then apply it in their writing. The reasons behind this are a need for more motivation, limited lecture duration, and inadequate prior knowledge of English (Lismay, 2020). Furthermore, interference from students' native language, such as Arabic, can also confuse their writing ability cohesively and coherently, as mentioned by Mourtaga (2004) and Ahmed (2010) in their research.

To address these issues, teachers should guide students to improve their understanding and application of these concepts. As Lismay (2020) mentioned teaching cohesive devices, sentence structure, and organisation can significantly enhance students' writing skills.

Rahman and Latief (2021) further reinstated that cohesion helps to link sentences and phrases in order to create a coherent text. This can happen only through grammatical and lexical ties, contributing to the text's overall meaning and interpretation (Bahaziq, 2016). Simultaneously, coherence involves in arranging ideas in a logical way, which is effective in academic communication (Crossley & McNamara, 2010; Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

According to Yang S (2022), writing is a concrete expression and a vital output skill in English language. It is essential for high school students to master this skill, especially if they are thinking of pursuing higher education or gaining professional success. Good academic writing employs cohesive devices and creates coherent paragraphs. Hence the research questions for my project are as follows:

1. How proficient are students in using cohesive devices in academic writing to express thoughts and ideas and produce coherent paragraphs?
2. What grammatical and lexical elements and linking strategies are used to enhance cohesion and coherence in academic writing?

METHODS

A pilot study was executed to test whether the research procedures would work as planned. The method used was largely qualitative and partly quantitative. The qualitative method helps researchers to interpret and describe data (Amperawaty & Warsono, 2019). Whereas tools such as written texts and survey responses were used to support the analysis and also to gain a detailed understanding of students' academic writing, and the challenges they face in maintaining cohesion and coherence.

The pilot study had ten students who wrote their essays in a 'real time writing condition.' The researcher identified their weaknesses to find solutions. Each essay was manually corrected, and errors were listed to determine the pattern and frequency.

This study analysed high school students' writing samples, focusing on the grammatical and lexical elements that enhance cohesion in essays. There was firsthand data gathered where students were observed as they engaged in real-time writing activities, collaborated with peers, and worked on tasks. The observational method served as a tool for studying student behaviour and interaction in class.

Surveys were used to collect data through questionnaires with open-ended questions about students' writing experiences and the frequency of cohesion and coherence errors. Interviews provided authentic insights by capturing direct participant quotations regarding the study's objectives.

The combination of essays, surveys, and interviews helped assess students' weaknesses in understanding and applying coherence and cohesion in academic writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the method, it was found that the highest number of errors were related to references, substitutions, conjunctions, and collocations as cohesive devices. Under coherence, appropriate content words and linkers were lacking.

RESULTS

Combining data from observations, open-ended questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with the students' diagnostic essays indicated some repeating trends in using cohesive devices and coherence in academic writing.

1. Use of Cohesive Devices: A manual study of the essays revealed that although students tried to apply coherent devices, their application was usually inconsistent. Figure 1 presents a sample student essay with coded instances of cohesive devices and coherence issues, illustrating the patterns identified in the manual analysis.
   - Common mistakes were references, especially with pronouns like 'this' and 'it,' often used ambiguously without clear antecedents.
   - Most students depended mainly on repetition rather than more sophisticated cohesive methods; the students hardly used substitution and ellipsis.
   - Academic connectors (e.g., 'nevertheless,' moreover') were misused. Conjunctions like 'and,' 'but,' and 'because' were overused.
   - Lexical cohesiveness through collocations was poor; students frequently battled word choice, resulting in awkward or imprecise language.\
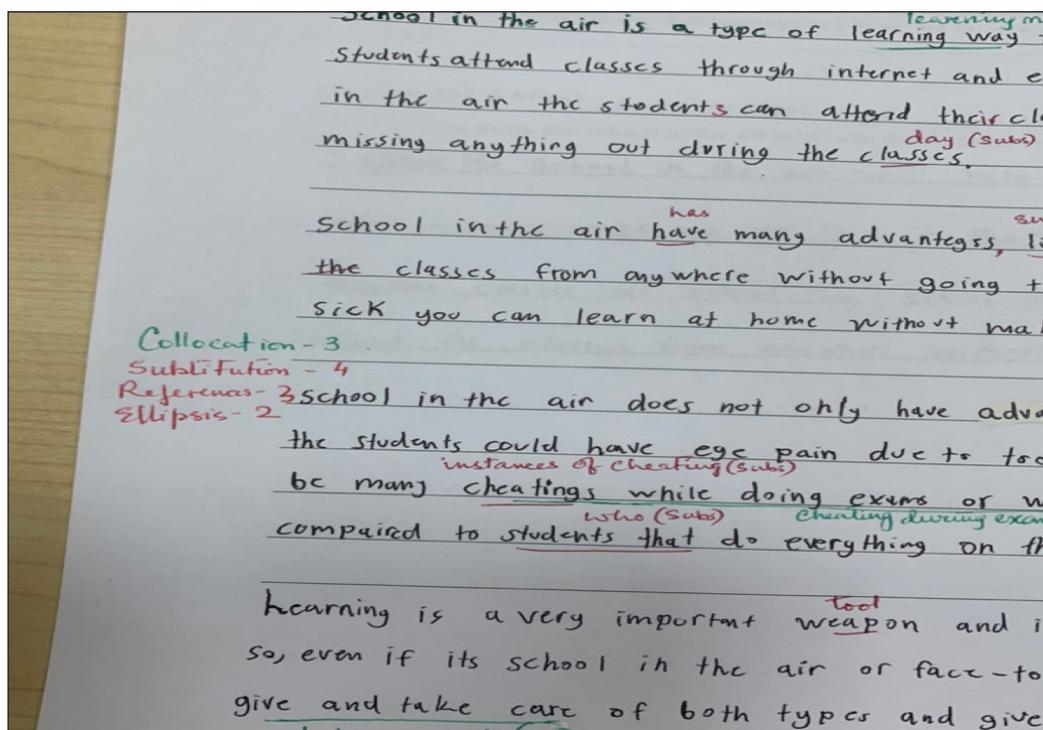
Figure 1. Sample essay of a student

2. Coherence and Organisation: Most of the pieces revealed clear problems with general coherence and logical organisation:
   - Many times, ideas were presented in a jumbled way with poor topic sentences and inadequate paragraph development.
   - Some students included several unconnected concepts inside a single paragraph, making it difficult for readers to follow their arguments.
   - Some students either omitted logical development or relied just on fundamental conjunctions.
3. Students' consistent grammatical and lexical errors caused by which further damaged coherence and coherence:
   - Out of ten essays, eight had regular grammatical mistakes, especially in verb tense and subject-verb agreement.
   - Limited academic vocabulary caused pupils to develop their arguments using more general phrases instead of more exact language. They repeated simple words.
4. Learnings from questionnaires and interviews' answers from the tests and interviews provide further understanding of students' viewpoints and experiences.

Figure 2 illustrates a sample of students' survey responses, highlighting their perceptions of writing difficulties, particularly in relation to the use of linking words and logical organisation:

- Many students admitted to "thinking in Arabic first" and then straight translating into English, which added strange language and logical gaps.
- Many admitted they lacked formal education in paragraph construction and logical linkage; therefore, they were unsure how to connect concepts.
- Seven out of ten students said that their main trouble with their writing is using 'appropriate linking words.'
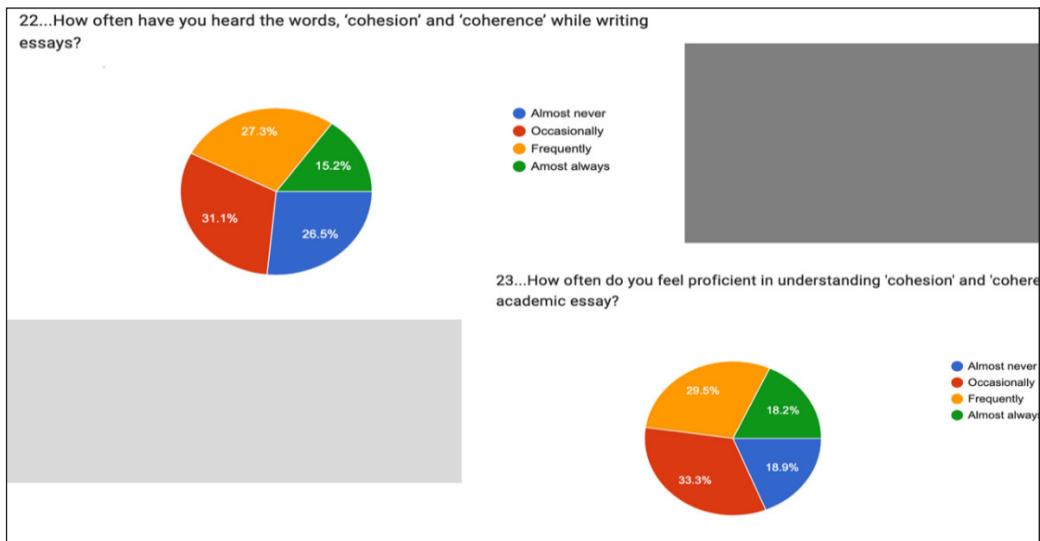

Figure 2. Sample survey by students

Table 1 summarises the frequency of cohesion- and coherence-related errors identified across the ten student essays, indicating that grammatical errors, paragraph-level organisation issues, and misuse of cohesive devices were consistently observed.

Table 1
Common errors committed by students

Error Type	Description	Examples from Students' Essays	Frequency
Pronoun Reference	Using ambiguous pronouns like, 'this,' 'it' without distinct antecedents.	'The government needs to support education, because this is good and it helps somehow.'	6 out of 10 essays
Conjunctions	Little variance in the overuse of basic conjunctions like 'and,' 'but,' and 'because,'...	'I went to the store and I bought food and I met my friend.'	7 out of 10 essays

Table 1 (*continued*)

Error Type	Description	Examples from Students' Essays	Frequency
Linkers	Incorrect usage of linkers.	'The results were poor. However, it was good.' (incorrect placement)	5 out of 10 essays
Grammatical errors	Irregularities in subject-verb agreement and verb tenses.	'She don't likes the idea.'	8 out of 10 essays
Paragraph structure	Paragraphs lack well-defined topic sentences, poor organisation of thoughts.	'The book was interesting. It had many characters. The plot was good. Reading is fun.'	9 out of 10 essays

DISCUSSION

Authors like Gunas et al. (2020) claim that students' writing assignments in descriptive and narrative text genres show elements of coherence and cohesiveness that are lacking in others. Three hundred ninety pupils from thirteen senior high schools were instructed to create both narrative and descriptive texts on recognised subjects. The data were examined using a descriptive quantitative model of percentages and counted scores. According to the study, the pupils' writing lacked good application of coherence and cohesiveness elements. While most of the texts were completely disorganised and unintelligible, just a tiny portion were slightly cohesive and coherent. The lower-level classification of the elements of cohesion and coherence identified in the students' writings was relatively weak.

This study offers an understanding of the difficulties high school students experience in applying cohesive strategies and attaining coherence in their writing. By comparing the results with this study, it highlights whether such problems arise among Middle Eastern students and guide focused teaching plans.

Conversely, Feliks et al. (2024) found that their study looked at the association between the usage of coherent devices and the quality of student writing. Examining 100 thesis abstracts from undergraduate linguistics majors, the researchers conducted Pearson's correlation analysis to ascertain the degree of the association between the frequency of coherent devices used and the writing quality ratings awarded by professional raters. Higher writing quality ratings were shown to be significantly and positively correlated with the employment of varied and appropriate coherent devices, especially references and substitutes. The study underlines the need to teach students the appropriate use of cohesive devices to improve the clarity and coherence of their academic writing (Feliks et al., 2024). Though their study mostly addresses university students, its results on the benefits of consistent gadget use on writing quality can be compared with the existing observations at the high school level. This research will ascertain whether early interventions teaching coherent devices might produce better writing results in higher education.

The following points have been identified while comparing and contrasting the two articles with the existing study.

Participant Statistics

The existing research focused on Middle Eastern high school students preparing for standardised tests like TOEFL and IELTS. The article by Gunas et al. (2020) examined the descriptive and narrative genres of writing performance of senior high school pupils. At the same time, the article by Feliks et al. (2024) examined thesis abstracts from undergraduate linguistics majors.

Research Concentration

Regarding research concentration, the existing study evaluated academic writing students' coherence and command of cohesive devices. In the first research mentioned above by Gunas et al. (2020), the authors examined students' descriptive and narrative papers for elements of cohesion and coherence. On the other hand, the second article by Feliks et al. (2024) investigated how the general quality of academic writing correlated with the usage of coherent devices.

Methodology

The present research used qualitative techniques like questionnaires, observations, diagnostic essays, and interviews. Gunas et al. (2020) used a descriptive quantitative model to examine scores and percentages. Feliks et al. (2024) examined writing samples quantitatively, applying Pearson's correlation.

Findings

The results showed that many students struggled with cohesion and coherence, particularly in organising ideas and maintaining grammatical and lexical accuracy. Essays with limited coherence were frequently rated at lower proficiency levels, whereas texts that employed cohesive devices more effectively tended to receive higher writing quality scores.

CONCLUSION

The implications were as follows: The Key Performance Indicators should have more reference to cohesion and coherence. Teachers have to refer to cohesion and coherence in every writing class so that the students get familiar with the terminologies. There should be specific writing classes allotted referring to cohesion and coherence on a regular basis. Finally, students should be cautious about translating ideas from Arabic to English

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