Coherence Problems in the English Writings of Saudi University Students

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Abstract: This paper aims at investigating the problems of coherence in the English writings of Saudi male and female students at Albaha University. The study adopted a descriptive analytical approach. A corpus of students' writings (30 scripts) was analyzed adapting an analytical coherence scale developed in the light of Bamberg's (1984) holistic coherence scale and approaches and studies that concern with text coherence in English. The findings of the study showed that the overall mean score of the evaluation of coherence in the students' writings is above average, namely 62.07. The results of the analysis of the study corpus revealed that the problems of coherence in the students' writings are ascribed to the following: 1) students' inability to write an idea-focused text substantiated by relevant and supporting details; 2) impact of Arabic rhetorical traditions in marshaling the details in the text; 3) students' ignorance of the systematic organization of information in the concerned text of writing; 4) students' failure to correctly and appropriately use conjunctions, references and lexical items that link sentences of the text; 5) students' low proficiency in writing well-constructed sentences that express clear ideas. The study concluded with some suggestions to the concerned teachers of English writing, hoping that they address the students' problems in text coherence.

Keywords: Coherence, problems, writing skill, university students.

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مشاكل التماسك النصي في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية
لدى طلاب الجامعة السعوديين

د. حميد يحيىٰ أحمد الزبيري

المستخلص: تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلىٰ دراسة مشاكل التماسك النصي في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لدىٰ الطلاب الذكور والإناث السعوديين بجامعة الباحة. اعتمدت الدراسة علىٰ المنهج الوصفي التحليلي ، حيث تم تحليل مجموعة (30 نصًا) من كتابات الطلبة المستهدفين باستخدام مقياس تحليلي لتماسك النص والذي تم تطويره في ضوء المقياس الشمولي لتماسك النص لبامبيرج (1984) وكذلك في ضوء مناهج ودراسات متعلقة بدراسة تماسك النص في اللغة الإنجليزية. هذا وقد بينت نتائج الدراسة أن المتوسط العام لتقييم تماسك النص في كتابة الطلبة باللغة الإنجليزية فوق المتوسط (62.07) ، كما أوضحت نتائج تحليل عينة الدراسة بأن مشاكل تماسك النص في كتابة الطلبة ترجع إلىٰ التالي: 1) عدم قدرة الطلبة علىٰ كتابة نص يرتكز علىٰ فكرة موضحة بتفاصيل متعلقة بها؛ 2) تأثير التقاليد البلاغية العربية في تنظيم التفاصيل في النص؛ 3) نقص معرفة الطلبة بالتنظيم المنهجي للمعلومات في النص المكتوب؛ 4) فشل الطلبة في استخدام أدوات الربط والإحالات التي تربط الجمل في النص بشكل صحيح ومناسب؛ 5) تدني كفاءة الطلبة في كتابة جمل مبنية بشكلٍ جيد، بحيث تُعبر عن أفكار واضحة. واختتمت الدراسة بمقترحات للمدرسين ذوي العلاقة في تدريس الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية علىٰ أمل أن تحد هذه المقترحات من مشاكل تماسك النص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تماسك النص ، مشاكل ، مهارة الكتابة ، الطلاب الجامعيون.

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1. Introduction

Coherence is considered as an essential quality of effective writing in English. Richards (1990, p. 104) points out that it is "the practical element in discussing the quality of a written discourse. Traditionally, coherence is described as the relationships that link the ideas in a text to create meaning for the readers (Lee, 2002, p. 135). The abstract account of the term coherence poses difficulty in teaching and learning it. Connor, (1990) maintains that coherence is regarded as an abstract, elusive and controversial concept that is difficult to teach and learn. English teachers find it difficult to give clear and concrete instructions about their students' problems in producing a coherent text. Most of the teachers' comments on their students' scripts are vague. In fact, comments like: 'your writing lacks unity of ideas', or 'your ideas don't hang together' are not effective in improving students' writing. It is necessary that the teacher show clearly how and where their students go wrong in their writing (ibid). Therefore, exploring students' problems of coherence in their writings is likely to yield insights into the nature of these problems and suggesting effective methods in addressing them.

1.2 Statement of the Study Problem

It goes without saying among English instructors that EFL learners face problems in writing a well-organized and cohesively connected text (Khalil 1989; Hellalet, 2013; Abderraouf, 2016; Faradhibah and Nur, 2017). The learners usually produce texts in the form of jumbled sentences that lack coherence and suffer from a large number of errors in grammar. Such problems may affect their academic achievement and demotivate them to pursue their higher education. A preliminary corpus analysis of level seven Saudi university EFL students' written assignments revealed that the students exhibit grave problems in writing coherent texts. In fact, it has been observed that the students produce texts comprising sentences wrongly constructed and inappropriately connected. They also lack knowledge of writing a clear topic statement and adequately developing it with supporting details. All of this will certainly precipitate to the problems of maintaining coherence in text. Such a situation provides the impetus for conducting

a study that investigates the coherence problems in the English writings of Saudi university students.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

In view of the statement of the study problem described above, the present study aims at:

1. evaluating text coherence in the writings of Saudi students' majoring in English at Albaha University;
2. analysing and describing the problems of coherence in the targeted students' English writings with reference to the five adapted major criteria proposed by Bamberg (1984); and
3. suggesting some recommendations that attempt to address these problems.

1.4 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the findings of the present study will be of significance to all teachers and learners of English in general and in Saudi universities in particular. The conclusions expected will provide important feedback to the concerned teachers at Saudi universities to adopt effective methods and procedures to address the problems of coherence in their students' writings in English.

2. Review of Literature

Generally speaking, a large number of approaches and studies in discourse analysis have attempted to explore the coherence of text in English. Textual structure (i.e. connectivity of the surface text) is one of the approaches that deal with coherence in text. This approach is concerned with how sentences in text are interconnected by the use of overt connecting markers (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). The approach is based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) concept of 'cohesion' which is considered as a crucial index in textual coherence. Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 8) defined cohesion as: "a semantic relation between an element in the text and some other elements that are crucial to the interpretation of it." According to the authors, 'cohesion' refers to the intra-textual relations of the grammatical and lexical items that make

the parts of the text hang together as a whole to convey the complete meaning of it. These grammatical and lexical items (devices) help writers achieve connectivity of the surface structure of the text and guide the reader to establish the coherent interpretation intended by the writer of the text. Halliday & Hasan (1976, p. 13) discussed text connectedness in terms of reference, substitution, ellipses, conjunction and lexical cohesion**.**

Propositional development text coherence (connectivity of the underlying content) is another approach in the study of text coherence (Kintsch and Van Dijk, 1978). This approach seeks to describe coherence in terms of the propositions that make up a text and the ordering of the propositions (microstructures) to form the macrostructure of texts, creating global coherence. Lee, (2002) points out that it is through the relationships between propositions that the coherence of a text is established. For instance, a proposition that is not supported or developed can easily become a mere generalization. In order to develop coherence in writing, it is helpful to justify a proposition or exemplify it with elaboration.

Hoey's (1983) 'Macrostructure Model' looks at the overall text structure, which reflects the major functions and categories of the text. According to Lee (2002) this model provides both the writers and readers clue to realize how sentences in a text are related to each other and accordingly achieve global text coherence. It is the text function that outlines the macrostructure of the text for the writer. The communicative purpose of a story, for example, requires the writer to arrange the events in a chronological pattern; and that of problem-solution function takes a pattern of situation, problem, solution and evaluation.

Information Distribution (Danes, 1974; Firbas, 1975) is another approach that deals with coherence of texts. The approach concerns with the ordering of elements in a text. According to this approach, text is believed to be coherent if the writer follows the given-new

information principle. The given information (or theme) refers to the information that has been introduced; new information (or rheme), on the other hand, refers to the information that is introduced for the first time. Danes (1974) and Fries (1983) connect text coherence with thematic progression of text. They take the point of view that the degree of text coherence is affected by that of the connectivity of themes in different sentences. Lack of such connectivity will lead to the discontinuity in the process of thematic progression, which in turn will result in the discontinuity of cohesive relations; the text as such becomes incoherent.

A number of scholars refer to factors that lead to the appropriate construction and interpretation of text coherence (Kaplan, 1966 & 1988; Brown and Yule 1983). For instance, Kaplan (1966, p. 3) maintains that "different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are likely to have impacts on the organization of students' writing with a different culture. In order to produce an acceptable piece of writing, any non-native writer of English, besides the system of the L2 writing, should learn conventions which operate on discourse and text level which are the result of L2 speaker's culture and thought patterns." On the basis of such a view the scholar's hypothesis of 'contrastive rhetoric' emerged as to investigate the impact of cultural thought pattern of non-native writer on his text coherence. Kaplan (1988) claims that "the main concern of contrastive rhetoric is that speakers of different languages use different devices to present information, to establish relationships among ideas, and to show centrality of one idea as opposed to another to select most effective means of presentation" (p. 278).

In view if the interpretation of text coherence, Brown and Yule (1983) refer to participants' backward knowledge which, according to them, helps a great deal in the interpretation of text coherence stored in memory, taking such forms as frame, schemata, script, scenario and plan. They view that if text interpretation complies with the mentally stored knowledge or backward scenes and can be interpreted as an interrelated unity, the text is thus coherent.

There are a number of studies that discussed the concept of coherence in text (Johns, 1986; Smith and Leinonen, 1992). Johns, for example, explained two types of text coherence: text-based coherence and reader-based coherence. According to her, Text-based coherence is seen as an internal feature of text: how sentences are linked (cohesion) or how propositions in the text are related to each other (sticking to the points). Text-based coherence has to meet the following conditions: 1) unity of ideas (each idea is related to the main idea); 2) organization of points (logical sequence of points); and 3) link and reference (cohesion). Reader-based coherence, on the other hand, does not reflect the internal structure of the text but relates to the meaningful aspect of writer-reader interaction via the text. Smith and Leinonen (1992) discussed the notion of coherence in terms of coherent and incoherent text. They referred to four types of coherence: 1) propositional coherence (the text is incoherent if propositions are not related to the discourse topic or sub-topic); 2) relational coherence (the text lacks coherence if propositions are not related to one another); 3) rhetorical coherence (the text is incoherent if propositions do not develop the topic/sub-topic towards a goal); 4) sequential coherence (the text is incoherent if semantically closely related presuppositions do not follow one another in sequence).

Some previous studies have been conducted with regard to difficulties of coherence in the writings of SL/EFL leaners. For instance, Khalil (1989) studied cohesion and coherence in Arab EFL college students' writing. He analyzed 20 compositions in terms of Halliday and Hasan's Model (1976). Coherence, however, was evaluated with reference to Grice's maxims of relevance, quantity, quality, and manner. The results of the study indicated that the Arab students overused reiteration of the same lexical item as a cohesive device, but underused other lexical and grammatical cohesive devices. The evaluation of coherence, on the other hand, showed that the students failed to support sufficient information about the assigned topic.

Another study was conducted by Hallalet (2013). The researcher investigated the developmental aspect of coherence in the Moroccan EFL learners' writings. The results of the study revealed that the learners' proficiency level had a significant effect on their use of coherence relations (micro-relations). The findings also showed that the learners had problems at the macro level relations: elaboration, evaluation, evidence and sequence. The researcher recommended that the learners need to develop their ability in using the macro relations as, according to her, they are the main contributors to global coherence.

Suwandi (2016) carried out a study that aimed to reveal the coherence of the abstracts of the final project reports of the undergraduate students of PGRI University Semarang, Indonesia. The study focused on the analysis of the micro-level coherence, how each sentence is connected to the other to make logical relations and the macro-level coherence, the right use of cohesive devices. The students' final project abstracts were selected randomly for the analysis. The results showed that the abstracts have not satisfactorily achieved coherence though some cohesive devices were used to link sentences.

Faradhibah and Nur (2017) investigated the difficulties of the English major students (36) in maintaining coherence and cohesion in their writing process. The researchers used written test supported by interview to collect the data of the study. The study's findings showed that the targeted students had difficulties in determining and stating their ideas, fulfilling the supporting details, and using proper signals and spelling as well as punctuation.

A recent study has been conducted by Masadeh (2019). The researcher investigated cohesion and coherence in the writings of Saudi undergraduates majoring in English. He analyzed 16 essays using three rating scales: a holistic rating scale for the effectiveness of each essay, cohesion rating scale and coherence rating scale. The findings of the study indicated that the students' essays were not well developed. Cohesion and coherence were not established in the written essays. The

researcher summarized the main problematic areas in the following: bad use of conjunctions and transition words linking sentences and/or paragraphs, students' over-repetition of the same idea, failure to split paragraphs, and inability to elaborate their ideas.

The present study attempts to contribute to the existing literature on understanding the difficulties of text coherence in the writings of ESL/EFL learners. It aims at investigating the problems of text coherence in the English writings of Saudi university male and female students. The study evaluates the students' writings using a developed analytical scoring scale based on Bamberg's (1984) holistic coherence scale of a describe essay (pp. 317-318). The study also tries to describe how coherence is violated in the students' descriptive writings.

3. Methodology
3.1 Subject
The subject of the present study consists of 30 male and female Saudi students majoring in English at Albaha University. They are enrolled in the course 'Discourse Analysis' in the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019. It is worth mentioning that the subject had already studied three courses in writing skills, viz.: writing 1, writing 2, and essay writing. It is assumed that such courses introduced the students to the different techniques and genres of writing in English.

3.2 Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis
The data collection is based on free-writing assignments not restricted by time or place. At the first meeting of the course, the students were asked to write on three descriptive mode topics: '*My childhood*', '*My first day in the university*', and '*The worst day in my life*'. The students were allowed to consult necessary references for the task. The students' assignments were evaluated with reference to an analytical coherence scoring scale developed in light of Bamberg's (1984) holistic coherence scale and the reviewed approaches and studies concerned with text coherence in English. The rubric of the analytical assessment scale is summarized in the table below:

Table 1: Analytical Coherence Scoring Scale

Assessment Criteria	Scores	Description
1. Topic Statement and Supporting Ideas	14-11	Writer clearly identifies the topic and supports it with reliable evidence/examples.
	10-7	Writer does not explicitly identify the topic; he/she provides enough supporting details so that readers can probably identify the specific topic.
	6-3	Writer does not identify the topic and the reader would be unlikely to infer or guess the topic from the few supporting detailed provided.
	2-0	Topic cannot be identified and supporting evidence is lacking.
2. Unity of Ideas	16-12	Writer does digress from the main idea of the topic.
	11-7	Writer has one main idea but there may be minor digression.
	6-3	Writer digresses frequently from the main idea of the topic.
	2-0	Writer moves from idea to idea by association or digresses frequently.
3. Reader Orientation	14-11	Writer orients the reader by creating a context or situation.
	10-7	Writer provides some reader orientation, either by briefly suggesting the context or by directly announcing the topic.
	6-3	Writer assumes the reader shares his/her context and provides little or no orientation.
	2-0	Writer assumes the reader shares his/her context and provides no orientation.
4. Organization	16-12	Writer organizes details according to a discernable plan (e.g., logical order, time order, addition order, order of importance, order of cause and effect, order of comparison-contrast) that is well-designed with a smooth and logical progression of thoughts; therefore, the ideas relate to one another.
	11-7	Writer organizes details according to a plan, but may not be well-designed with a smooth and logical progression of thoughts; therefore, the ideas may not relate to one another.
	6-3	Writer has no organizational plan in most of the text and frequently relies on listing.
	2-0	Writer has no organizational plan and either lists or follows an associative order.
5. Use of Cohesive ties	14-11	Writer skillfully uses cohesive ties such as lexical cohesion, conjunction, references, etc.
	10-7	Writer correctly uses some cohesive ties such as lexical, conjunction, reference, etc., to link sentences and/or paragraphs together.
	6-3	Writer correctly uses few cohesive ties such as lexical cohesion, conjunction, reference, etc., to link sentences and/or paragraphs together.
	2-0	Writer does not use cohesive ties and sentences do not seem connected or linked together.

Assessment Criteria	Scores	Description
6. Clarity (grammar & mechanics)	**14-11**	Text flows smoothly – few or no grammatical and/or mechanical errors interrupt the reading process.
	10-7	Text generally flows smoothly although occasional grammatical and/or mechanical errors may interrupt the reading process.
	6-3	Text flow is irregular or rough because mechanical and/or grammatical errors frequently interrupt the reading process.
	2-0	Text flow is very rough or irregular because writer omits structure words, inflectional endings and/or makes numerous grammatical and mechanical errors that continuously interrupt the reading process.
7. Conclusion	**12-9**	Writer often concludes with a statement that gives the reader a definite sense of closure.
	8-5	Writer does not usually conclude with a statement that creates a sense of closure.
	4-0	Writer creates no sense of closure.

Adapted from (Bamberg, 1984, pp. 317-318)

Two independent specialized raters volunteered in evaluating the students' assignments in terms of seven criteria describing features that create both global and local coherence (table 1). It is pertinent to note that the raters were trained on the evaluation process. Three out of corpus assignment samples were evaluated for consolidation. The final evaluation scores were checked for reliability. An average score of the two raters was taken for each assignment. Two cases of rating variation have been found among the evaluated assignments. The two assignments were given to a third rater for further evaluation and an average score of the three was considered. A statistical analysis was used to obtain the total mean score of the seven items of text coherence evaluation. The analysis also shows the mean score of each item separately.

4. Results and Discussion

As the main purpose of the present study is to investigate the problems of coherence in the writings of EFL learners, the subject's writings were evaluated with reference to seven items: 'topic statement and supporting ideas', 'unity of ideas', 'reader orientation', 'organization', 'use of cohesive ties', 'clarity (grammar & mechanics)',

and 'conclusion'. Each item was given a score range of 12-16. In view of the importance of 'organization' and 'unity of ideas' in text coherence, these items are highly valued in the analytical scoring scale (Harris, 1977; Freedman, 1979). A score of 16 was allocated for each of these items. A score of 14 was allocated to the items: 'topic statement and supporting ideas', 'reader orientation', 'use of cohesive ties', and 'clarity (grammar & mechanics)'. The 'conclusion' item was given a score of 12. The following table summarizes the evaluation results of the subject's coherence problems in their English writings. It presents the results in terms of the mean score and order of difficulty of each item.

Table 2: Mean Analytical Coherence Scores of Students' Writings

No.	Items & Scoring Scale	Mean	St. Dev.	Order of Difficulty
1	Topic Statement and Supporting Ideas (14)	8.60	0.67	2
2	Unity of Ideas (16)	8.70	0.84	3
3	Reader Orientation (14)	9.53	1.01	7
4	Organization (16)	8.50	0.90	1
5	Use of Cohesive Ties (14)	8.77	1.85	4
6	Clarity (Grammar& Mechanics) (14)	8.93	1.28	5
7	Conclusion (12)	9.03	0.61	6
	Overall Mean Score	**62.07**	**4.68**	-

The table above demonstrates that the overall mean score of the subject's coherence problems in their writings is 62.07. This indicates that the level of the targeted students in producing a coherent text is approximately above average. The table also shows that the items: 'organization' and 'topic statement and supporting ideas' come first in order of difficulty, i.e., 8.50 and 8. 60. These are followed by 'unity of ideas' (8.70) and 'use of cohesive ties' (8.77). 'Clarity (grammar & mechanics)' comes fifth in order, with a mean score of 8. 93. The items, 'conclusion' and 'reader orientation', receive the mean scores of

9.03 and 9.53 respectively.

Keeping in view the analysis and the description of the students' coherence problems in their writing, the researcher discusses these problems with reference to five major criteria of text coherence: 1) topic statement and supporting ideas; 2) unity of ideas; 3) organization; 4) use of cohesive devices; and 5) clarity (grammar & mechanics). For the convenience of presentation and space limitation of the study, some selected scripts of the students' writings will be used as illustrative examples.

'Topic statement and supporting ideas' criteria are concerned with how the student clearly identifies the topic sentence and supports it with reliable evidences/examples. The analysis of students' scripts reveals that the students exhibit problems in writing a clear topic statement backed up with examples/pieces of evidence. The following is an illustrative extract taken from one of the students' writing assignments:

"(1) Allah says: "Every soul will taste death".(2) We believe in this verse and that the fate of every human being is death.(3) I know that it is difficult to lose a person especially a dear person to you, but we must believe in Allah's judgment and destiny. (4) My grandfather had a car accident before 30 years ago when he was traveling to Jeddah city for work as a teacher."

The extract above is an opening paragraph introducing the reader to the main topic - '*the worst day in my life*'. In fact, the topic statement is not stated clearly; however, it can be retrieved from the details in the sentences used. The paragraph begins with a quoted verse from the Holy Quran (i.e., sentence 1) that introduces the main topic. Sentence (2) explains the quoted verse. Sentence (3) interestingly comes as an abrupt conclusion for the main topic. Sentence (4) opens paragraph two and introduces the reader to the main topic which is the death of the writer's grandfather. The transfer of traditions of Arabic rhetoric is likely to account for the occurrence of such a problem. In fact, Arab Muslim writers and speakers are rhetorically influenced by Islamic

culture in their discourse. They usually initiate their discourse with a quoted verse from the Holy Quran or a statement from the Prophet's authentic sayings. They assume that such a strategy consolidates their presentation of the main topic to be stated later.

Another example of the problems of topic statement and supporting ideas can be observed in the following extract:

"(1) My first day at university was very interesting. (2) When I graduated from high school I was super excited for university, (3) I was finally feeling like an adult who is responsible for herself, (4) it was like a new world to me. (5) First day of university was kind of weird, (6) I felt happy and sad at the same time.

It is obvious that the above- quoted lines are written about the topic: '*my first day at the university*'. The paragraph starts with a well-stated topic sentence. However, this statement lacks supporting details as the following sentences (2-4) express the writer's feelings about her new experience. Sentence (5) strikingly contradicts with the main idea of the topic sentence as it describes that day as being weird. Sentence (6) explains why that day is weird for the writer.

Stating the topic statement supported with details is one of the problems that the subjects experienced in producing a text that lacks coherence. The findings of the study indicate that our targeted students failed to clearly identify the topic sentence in their writing; and this is likely to pose difficulty on the part of the prospective reader to understand the communicative purpose of the text. The targeted students also demonstrated problems in developing stated topic sentence. Indeed, it has been observed that the students state an idea and fall short to elaborate on the same idea; rather, they state another idea and rephrase it using synonymous words or different sentence structures. In this regard, Lee (2002) maintains that "in order to develop coherence in writing, the writer should justify a proposition or exemplify it with elaboration" (p. 140). The findings of this study seem to be consistent with the findings of studies conducted by Faradhibah

and Nur, (2017) and Masadeh, (2019). In addition, the findings of the present study show that negative transfer of Arabic rhetoric accounts for the students' problems in writing a clear topic sentence statement backed up with developmental details.

With regard to maintaining unity of ideas in the students' writing, the analysis of the study shows that our subjects often digress from the main idea of the topic in their writing. They sometimes include ideas that have no relevance to the main topic. Consider the following illustrative example:

"(1) My childhood was the best stage in my life. (2) In my childhood, parents cared about the sound education that was based on Islamic religion.(3) I spent my childhood in a big house with three sisters and three brothers, (4) each of whom has a personality independent of the other.(5) My mother worked as a school manager, (6) She was great mother (7) she did not make the job relinquish family responsibilities."

A close examination of the above-quoted paragraph reveals that it consists of six sentences. Sentence (1) states the main idea of the topic, i. e. 'the [writer's] childhood was the best stage in his life'. The proposition entailed in sentence (2) has no significance to the main idea of the topic. Sentence (3) clearly digresses from the main thesis stated in the opening sentence. It also has no relevance to the preceding statement. Sentence (4) connects with the statement in sentence (3) by the use of the cohesive tie '*each of whom' [each one of them]. Sentence (5) surprisingly introduces a new idea which has no link to the main thesis of the topic or to the preceding statements. Sentence (6) is connected to sentence (5) by the use of the anaphoric reference 'she'. However, there is no logical relation between the two sentences. Sentence (7) supports both sentences: (5and 6). It connects with the proposition expressed in sentence (5) through antithesis relationship and with the proposition expressed in sentence (6) through synthesis relationship. In fact, it can be stated that the main problem perceived in the above paragraph lies in including jumbled sentences and irrelevant

information that interrupt the continuity of text coherence.

The main problems in maintaining unity of ideas were manifested in the students' failure in including propositions that connect with the main thesis of the topic. The findings of the study showed that the targeted students digressed frequently from the main thesis of the topic sentence. They failed to include relevant details that bear significant and logical connection to the text.

Maintaining order of details in a paragraph is another recurring problem that the subjects have in their writings. The analysis of the written scripts of the students shows that they experience difficulty in organizing details that conform to the nature of the information required in a piece of text. Below is an example illustrating the problem:

"(1) My city is the beautiful city. (2) It is a small city. (3) It considered countryside. (4) It located in south-west of Saudi Arabia. (5) My city located between al Taif and Abha. (6) It is called Albaha.

In the above example, the writer opens the paragraph with an opinion statement describing his city. Sentence (2) describes the city in size. The same description is superfluously repeated in sentence (3). Sentence (4) describes the location of the city. Likewise, sentence (5) expresses the same idea more specifically. Sentence (6), interestingly, states the main thesis of the topic as it introduces the reader to the name of the city- AlBaha. The poor organization of the ideas in the paragraph above can be ascribed to the students' ignorance in maintaining the systematic order of ideas in a descriptive mode of discourse (i.e., from general to specific, from concrete to abstract, and from close to far distance). The superfluous repetition of ideas in the paragraph can be traced to the influence of Arabic rhetoric in the development of paragraph. According to Kaplan (1972), the Arabic writer keeps recycling the same idea in different ways by using different vocabulary and synonyms. On the basis of the systematic order of ideas, the sentences in the extract above can be reordered with some modification in their structures. The possible order,

therefore, can be as such: (6), (2), (4), (5), and (1).

Students' ignorance of maintaining the systematic order of information structure is one of the problems related to the organization of details in text coherence. It has been observed that the targeted subjects confuse the order of the sentences in their writing in such a way that affects the comprehensibility of the text. They include pieces of information that do not conform to the systematic organization of the genre of writing of the text concerned (Derewianka, 1990). The transfer of Arabic rhetoric is another factor accounting for the students' failure in organizing the information that guides the reader to understand how the topic is developed. The findings of the study revealed that the targeted Arab students used to repeat themselves in their writing through rephrasing sentences or using synonymous words. In this regard, Koch (1983, p. 50) points out that "the Arab writer may start a paragraph with a more general idea and then paraphrase it or express it through the use of synonyms. Such a strategy of discourse, in Arabic, is known as 'repetition'."

With respect to the use of cohesive ties in the subjects' writing, the analysis of the study shows that the students experience difficulty in producing a well-connected piece of writing. It has been observed that the students have problems in using correct conjunctions, good references, and appropriate lexical items to link the sentences. The following chunks of students' writings provide a clear picture of the problems:

a- *"(1) At [On] that day I woke up early with all my activity, because this is my first day of college (2) I went out quickly without eating my breakfast but on my way to university I took a cup of coffee. (3) Then I entered the university and started looking for my friend."*

b- *"(1) Human life is full of experiences. (2) He learns from his experiences and take lessons from it [them]. (3) Although I had a lot of good experiences but one of the bad experience which i [I] always remembered throughout my life is discussed below."*

Apart from the fact that extract (a) demonstrates problems in

grammar and mechanics, it suffers from problems in the use of cohesive ties. It is worthy to note that this extract is an opening paragraph about the topic: '*the first day at the university*'. Strikingly, the student wrongly began the paragraph with a connective in the form of prepositional phrase of time that is assumed to refer to an event that had been mentioned. In fact, such a beginning makes the paragraph sound like a transition. As for the problems of cohesion in extract (b), the paragraph opens with a general statement that begins with the phrase 'Human life' which occupies the theme position in the sentence. Sentence (2) starts with a vague pronoun reference 'He' as it has no antecedent in the preceding sentence. It seems that the student wants to refer to the word 'human' which functions as a premodifier to the noun head 'life'. Sentence (3) shows an abrupt shifting between pronouns: 'he' and 'I'. In fact, the paragraph should begin with sentence (3). Another problem in the sentence lies in the wrong use of the contrastive conjunction 'although' which is redundant here as the two clauses are connected with the appropriate conjunction 'but'.

The findings of the problems related to the use of cohesive ties seem to match with the findings of Khalil, (1989) and Masadeh, (2019). Wrong use of references, inappropriate and inaccurate conjunctions and overuse of reiteration of the same lexical items would be the main problems of the cohesive devices that link sentences/paragraphs in the targeted students' writings.

In view of the problems the targeted students have in terms of clarity of construction (grammar & mechanics), the analysis of the study shows that the students face difficulty in expressing themselves in good and readable English. This is due to the reason that they do not have adequate command over grammar and mechanics of writing. Below are some extracts illustrating the point:

a- "(1) Al-Baha city is the place where I live, (2) it is the place where varied weather, landscapes can be found. (3) Fog is the best thing can be told about Al-Baha. (4) Moreover, mountain ranges that surround it."

b- "(1) Childhood is the greatest time in our live. (2) I have some memory from my childhood. (3) some of this memory is happy, but there is sad one to [too].(4) When I was child all what I want is being a teacher or a doctor.

c- "(1) First day of university was kind of weird, (2) I felt happy and sad at the same time,(3) I was sad the university was not exactly how I expected it to be,(4) the building was small and old, but I was happy because I finally made it to university.

Extract (a) suffers from a number of language problems related to grammar, mechanics and style. The extract consists of four sentences; the first two sentences (1 and 2) are not punctuated correctly. Sentence (3) is not well written. It can be rephrased as follows: 'Fog is one of the typical characteristics that distinguish Al-Baha'. Sentence (4) is wrongly constructed as its main verb is missing. The sentence would be read as such: 'Moreover, Al-Baha is surrounded by mountain ranges'. Similarly, extract (b) exhibits some problems of English grammar. These problems are realized in terms of noun-modifiers concord like: '*some memory' [some memories], '*some of this memory is happy' [some of these memories]; subject – verb agreement like '*some of this memory is happy' [some of these memories are *happy]; and 'the failure to use the infinitive as a subject complement for the wh-nominal clause': '*all what I want is being a teacher or a doctor'[…is to be a teacher….]. Another problem is observed in the misuse of the adjectives 'happy' and 'sad' in a predicative position (i.e., the adjective comes after the linking verb). In fact in the context of the noun - 'memories', the two adjectives 'happy' and 'sad' are used in an attributive position (i.e., the adjective comes before the noun like: happy/sad memories). Extract (3) is in the form of run-on sentences. The student did not punctuate the sentences correctly. Another problem is noticed in the redundant use of the pronoun 'it' after the verb 'expected'. Student's literal translation from Arabic may have led to the occurrence of such an error.

Considering the findings of the problems pertaining to clarity in

grammar and mechanics, they are summarized in the following: run-on sentences; dropping of main verb; tense shifting; redundancy in the use of subject and/or object pronouns; subject-verb agreement; subject – premodifiers concord; proper use of adjectives; spelling; and punctuation.

5. Conclusion

The study aimed at investigating the problems of coherence in the English writings of Saudi university students. The findings of the study showed that the targeted students experience problems in writing coherent text. The overall mean score of the analytical coherence of students' writings is above average, namely 62.07. 'Organization of ideas' and 'topic statement supported with details' received the first order of difficulty, followed by 'unity of ideas' and 'use of cohesive devices'. 'Clarity of grammar and mechanics', 'conclusion', and 'reader orientation' came next in order of difficulty. The problems our students seem to have in producing coherent text are attributed to the following: 1) students' inability to write an idea-focused text substantiated by relevant and supporting details; 2) impact of Arabic rhetoric in marshaling the details in the text; 3) students' ignorance of the systematic organization of information in the concerned text of writing; 4) students' failure to correctly and appropriately use conjunctions, references and lexical items that link sentences of the text; 5) students' low proficiency in writing well-constructed sentences that express clear ideas. In order to address the students' problems in text coherence, the concerned teachers of writing can consider the following suggestions:

- introducing students to the discourse skills as well as paragraph building exercises with a focused- topic sentence backed up by relevant supporting details;

- drawing students' attention to the systematic order of information structure in different modes of writing by introducing them to different models of writing, i.e., descriptive, narrative, argumentative etc., so that they understand how propositions are ordered in English text;

- exposing students to the target language by getting them involved in activities that show how sentences are linked to form coherent and well-constructed paragraphs;

- Having students to do exercises on the use of cohesive devices so that they learn how sentences are logically linked;

- involving students in activities that help them to avoid using Arabic rhetorical structure and drive home the fact that English paragraph development is subordinated-based structure and not coordinated-based;

- getting students to do more exercises on: word substitution, word function-labelling exercises, scrambled words, transforming, combining, and rearranging sentences, gap-filling, spelling, and punctuation; and

- giving students effective and clear feedback by sharing them the metalanguage of coherence, replacing vague comments like 'the essay lacks unity' or 'the ideas do not fit together' with specific comments like 'unclear reference,' 'inappropriate conjunction,' or 'under-use of metadiscourse'.

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