

## A Study of Coherence in the Writings of EFL Advanced Iraqi Learners

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### Abstract

*Coherence has proved to be an essential component that makes a written text both effective and readable. However, it is found that incoherence is a remarkable feature in the writings of EFL Learners. In order to achieve a more thorough understanding of this concept, its importance in writing, and the reasons behind neglecting it by EFL learners, coherence, in terms of Pilus ( 1996) and Lee (2002) criteria, is to be examined in (20) descriptive texts written by EFL Iraqi learners. The implications of the findings are to be thoroughly discussed and suggestions are provided so as to improve teaching writing skill in foreign language classroom.*

### 1. Introduction

Writing is among the most complex of human activities; it involves the development of a designed idea, and the capture of mental representations of knowledge, and of experience of subjects. Hence, writing proves to be a difficult skill to master for a lot of people even for expert writers in L1, let alone novice writers in L2. A number of mechanisms have to be controlled in order to make the piece of writing produced communicative and effective. These mechanisms are grammar, vocabulary, content, tone,....etc. Unfortunately, EFL learners "make many formal changes at surface level, especially in vocabulary choice" and whether what they write seems grammatical or not (Lee, 2002: 1). The result would be a series of unrelated sentences or paragraphs. They forget the fact that what they have produced would be in a form of a text whose content should be well – organized in order not to cause any sort of misunderstanding on the part of the reader.

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Coherence is one of the most general and widely discussed concepts in the study of text and discourse. It is said to occupy the central status in the field of discourse analysis. The interest in this field has motivated researchers to call for teaching discourse markers in the foreign language classroom so as to make the learners aware of the significance of concepts like coherence and/or cohesion while writing in the foreign language. The present study aims at the following:

- Presenting a theoretical background of the criteria that make a text coherent.
- Identifying and describing the EFL advanced Iraqi learners' drawbacks as far as coherence is concerned.
- Discussing the implication of the findings and suggesting certain techniques for the purpose of improving teaching writing in EFL classroom.

## 2. What is Coherence?

Etymologically, the word '*coherence*' is derived from the Latin verb '*cohaerere*' (= to hang together )(Redeker,2004:1). Traditional definitions of coherence focus on the idea that the product of the process of writing, namely, a text, should hang together in a way that makes its content have some arrangement of order or sequence. Such an order or sequence is thought to be largely related to the connectedness between sentences or through using cohesive devices at the paragraph level. This view proves to be limited since it cannot explain obviously how to make the written text look coherent as well as it restricts producing a coherent text mainly to the use of cohesive devices .

To clarify the status of coherence in text organization, it is significant to examine Grabe & Kaplan (1996: 81) model of text construction. This model indicates that any text should consist of two essential levels: sentential (comprising syntax and semantics) and textual (including cohesion and coherence) with a major division between the surface structure (syntax and cohesion) and the deep structure (semantics and coherence). This division may be seen as constituting a form – meaning distinction. A fifth component, namely, the lexis is a diffuse one underlying the other four components. Together, these five components comprise the essential elements of text structure – the fundamental building blocks from which all texts are constructed.

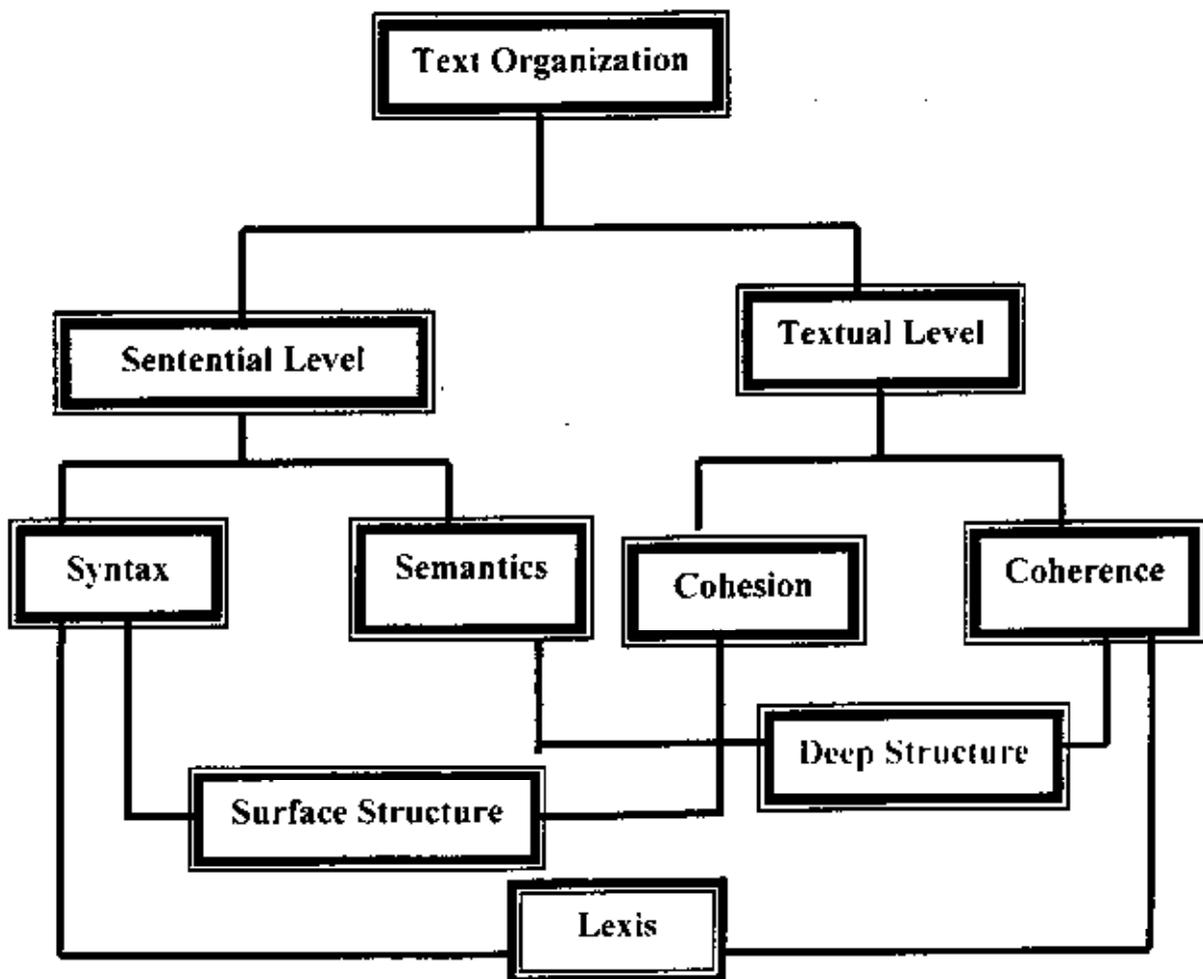


Figure ( 1 ) : Text Organization according to Grabe & Kaplan ( 1996 : 81 )

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The concept of coherence has raised so much discussion in the study of text and discourse. It has many different and incompatible definitions and connotations. For text linguistics and psycholinguistics, coherence is mainly a matter of semantics and domain knowledge since they focus on the representation and processing of information in written texts. Other brands of speech act and dialogue analysis describe coherence in terms of intention and interactional structures (Redeker, 2004: 4). Discourse analysts, on the other hand, such as Van Dijk (in Pilus, 1996), find coherence to be a vague and not a well – defined notion. McCarthy (1991:26) believes that a text is coherent when the readers find it so and understand what it wants to tell them. Consequently, coherence in a text is to be evaluated by the readers.

Law Davies (1993: 1) and Pilus (1996: 44) agree that the definition of coherence is best viewed through two essential criteria: text – based coherence and reader – based coherence. The former refers to the internal structure of the text itself (as far as cohesion and topic flow are concerned), while the latter is connected to the process of writer – reader interaction.

Concerning text – based coherence , Pilus ( 1996 : 45 ) and Lee ( 2002 : 33 ) suggest that it can be fulfilled through a number of components ,which if they are to be found in any written text , it is said to be coherent. These components are the following:

*1. A macrostructure that provides a pattern characteristic and appropriate to its communicative purpose. According to Lee (2002: 38) a macrostructure*

*generally refers to the overall structure of a text. It is an outline of the main categories or functions of the text. It helps readers understand how sentences in a text relate to each other and how they contribute to the overall structure of a text.*

This orientation is concerned with the internal structure of the main points raised in any piece of writing, which should be logically sequenced from the beginning till the end. Naturally, each type of writing (narrative, expository, descriptive, argumentative,...etc.), has a unique logical order for the main ideas or points it raises. For a narrative text, events should follow a chronological order, and hence the text is going to have a beginning, middle, and end. In a descriptive text, on the other hand, there is no single event which will keep the reader in suspense as it is there in a story. So, raising the readers' interest depends entirely on the details included. In the first paragraph the subject should be considered in general and then presented with details in the paragraphs that follow. Consequently, the general outline of a descriptive text should have: introduction, development, and conclusion as is shown in figure (2) which is adopted from Chaplen (1972:5)

<i>Introduction</i>	The opening paragraph should achieve the following: get the reader's attention, identify the focus of the text, and set up the rest of the text.
<i>Development</i>	The developmental paragraphs and body of the text must support the focus of the text. Start a new paragraph whenever there is a change in the text; for example, a change in ideas, a change in time or speaker, or a change in place or setting.
<i>Conclusion</i>	The conclusion of a text should tie all the important ideas together. The closing should give the readers a clear understanding of the written text.

Figure ( 2 ) : The Appropriate Outline of a Descriptive Text

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2. *An information structure that guides the reader in understanding how information is organized and how the topic of the text is developed.* The structure of a written text can be also based on the type of information it presents. Information is said to be of two types: old (*given*) and new. Writing coherently means old information comes first and then the new one.

3. *Connectivity of the underlying content evidenced by relations between propositions, or what Pilus (1996: 45) designates as unity of ideas.*

Lee (2002: 33) maintains that *"a proposition is an assertion. It is through the relationships between propositions that the coherence of a text is established."* Every text should have a controlling idea that delimits what the text is about. That controlling idea has to be presented clearly in a proposition known as the *topic sentence*. Every assertion in the paragraph should not be a mere generalization of the topic sentence, but it has to develop it. The word "development" is strongly linked with "unity" since the former entails that each sentence in the paragraph must add a new and relevant piece of information till the topic sentence is fully explained. The topic sentence in each paragraph should, in turn, be related to the controlling idea, i.e., thesis statement of the whole text as if there is *"an underlying thread weaving all the points of the entire essay"* ( Pilus, 1996:45). Accordingly, Burneikaite & Zabaliute ( 2003 : 3 ) believe that *"although the term 'coherence' means 'sticking together", which implies a static state, coherence, in fact, is a dynamic feature because it has to do with movement : movement of information and ideas, movement of the reader's changing perceptions and knowledge"*. Figure ( 3 ) exposes the way the writer is going

to depend on in developing his controlling idea in a way that makes the body of the text support the main idea . So each paragraph contains a topic sentence and details developing that sentence directly or indirectly. The writer can use one or more of several different ways to achieve her/his purpose. S/He may make the meaning of the topic sentence clearer by restarting it in other forms, by defining its terms, by denying the converse, by giving illustrations or specific instance, by establishing it by proofs or by developing it throughout showing its implications and consequences .

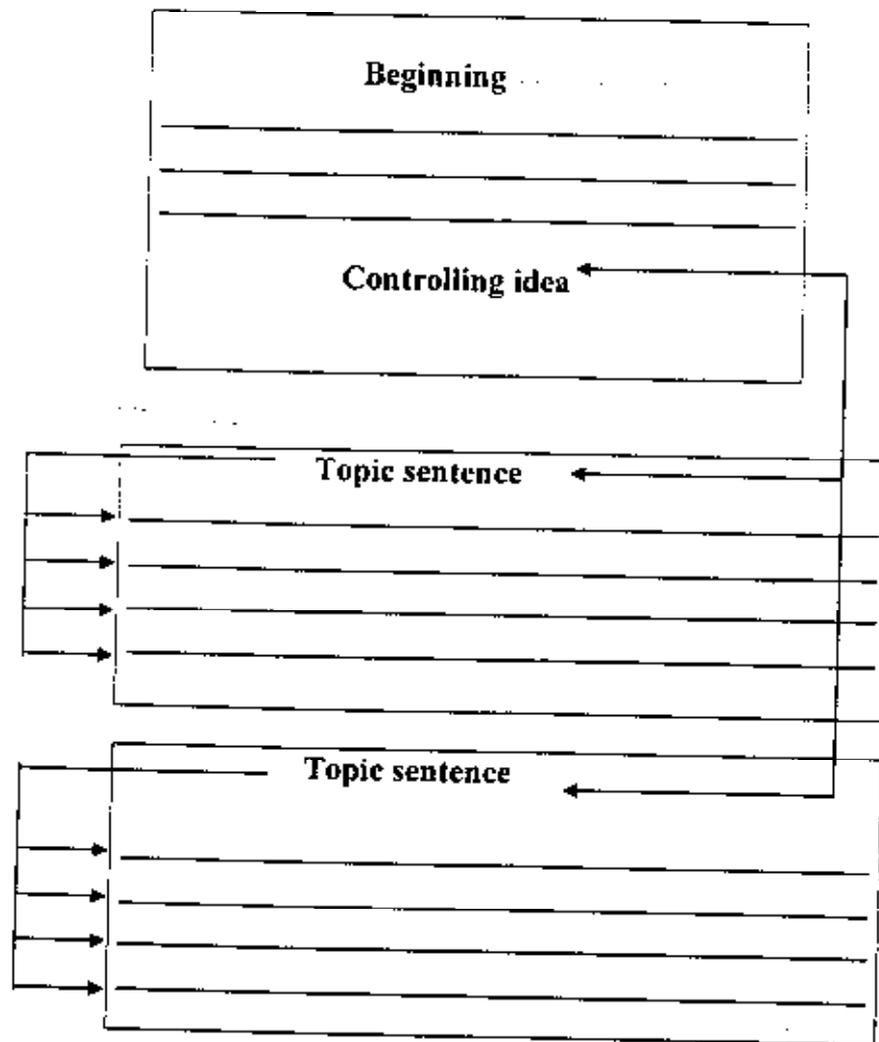


Figure (3) : Connectedness of the Parts of an Essay (Taken from Pilus, 1996 : 45 )

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For instance, we may have the following topic sentence:

*"I admire my friend Alec because he is so talented, intelligent, and kind."*

To develop such a topic sentence, details concerning this friend should be added so as to justify this admiration, hence the arrangement of such a composition would be like the following:

<i>Opening</i>	I admire my friend Alec because he is so talented, intelligent, and kind.
<i>Development</i>	Not only can he play most sports well, he is also a good musician and actor. He has always been the best student in his class, and in the recent pre - university exams, he was placed third in the entire country.
<i>Conclusion</i>	If a person has such wonderful qualities, I think you will agree that it is impossible not to admire him.

(Chaplen, 1972: 3)

#### *4. Connectivity of the surface text evidenced by the presence of cohesive devices.*

In their remarkable work, *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hasan (1976: 4) view cohesion as the concept which states the relations of meaning within the text. These relations are to be made obvious through the linguistic connectors or ties among sentences and points being raised in the text. Crystal (1997: 68) reiterates this when saying that cohesion "*refers to the SYNTACTIC CONNECTIVITY of linguistic FORMS at a SURFACE - STRUCTURE LEVEL of ANALYSIS.*"

The relationship between coherence and cohesion has been controversial. Thus, it is subjected to a lot of discussion. The question being raised is whether using cohesive devices is what produces coherent texts. Two points of view attempt to answer this question. Halliday & Hasan (1976: 1 - 2) report that a text is "*a unit of language in use*". What distinguishes a text from a non - text is its '*texture*'. The texture is achieved throughout using cohesive relations that exist between certain linguistic features which are there in the text and can be identified as



contributing to its total unity. In other words, the texture of a text is formed by the cohesive ties that it contains. Cohesion is mainly of two major types: grammatical, which includes *reference*, *substitution*, and *ellipsis*, and lexical, which involves *reiteration* and *collocation*.

Discourse analysts, on the other hand, seem to refute this idea believing that a text has some sort of internal logic, which the readers can recognize without the aid of cohesive ties. Consequently, the elements of the text seem to be "*connected with or without overt linguistic connections between them*" (Brown & Yule, 1983: 194 – 5 ). Coherence in a text mainly lies in the text macrostructure, clause relations, and the reader's world knowledge, whereas using the linguistic ties between sentences may make the text cohesive, but not necessarily coherent. One would come to the conclusion that cohesion is one of other components that make the text coherent since it alone, is not enough to achieve this ( Carrel, 1982 : 482 – 6 ; Khalil, 1989 : 365 ; Basturkman, 2002 : 52 ).

Yeh ( 2004 : 246 ) attempts to juxtapose the two contrasting points of view when saying that the two sides agree that "*semantic relations do exist in a text and help constitute its coherence* " , but they differ in that Halliday & Hasan see the relation so explicit on the surface level of the text, whereas Carrell and the others advocate that these relations are kept in the deep structure of the text. What can be inferred here is that not only cohesive ties but also underlying semantic relations as well as readers' perceptions of the text should be taken into consideration so as to construct a complete picture of discourse processing.

5. *Appropriate metadiscourse features.* Lee (2002: 39) points out that metadiscourse

*refers to linguistic material in texts that does not add anything to the propositional content, but is intended to help the reader interpret and evaluate the information given. Metadiscourse guides the reader through the text, linking individual propositions so that they form a cohesive and coherent whole.*

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Traditionally, the metadiscourse markers are known as the *transitional words*. They can be in the form of "words or phrases that permit easy passage from one sentence or idea to the next" (Sullivan, 1984: 48). They often appear between sentences or between paragraphs and serve to link them, so that the direction of ideas would become clear and their sequence would flow smoothly. Transitional devices (metadiscourse features or discourse markers) are divided, according to function, into two groups: one group is called sentence linkers and the other, paragraph linkers. The latter group connects a following paragraph to a preceding one. Most of the discourse markers are used as both sentence linkers and paragraph linkers. However, some sentence linkers, such as (*and, but, or then*), do not ordinarily function as paragraph linkers. The following figure shows the traditional labeling and use of transitional words in writing:

<b>Addition</b>	<i>Again, also, and then, besides, equally, important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still, too.</i>
<b>Comparison</b>	<i>Also, in the same way, likewise, similarly</i>
<b>Concession</b>	<i>Granted, naturally, of course</i>
<b>Contrast</b>	<i>Although, and yet, at the same time, but at the same time, despite that, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, instead, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, otherwise, regardless, still, though, yet.</i>
<b>Emphasis</b>	<i>Certainly, indeed, in fact, of course.</i>
<b>Example or Illustration</b>	<i>After all, as an illustration, even, for example, for instance, in conclusion, indeed, in fact, in other words, in short, it is true, of course, namely, specifically, that is, thus, truly.</i>
<b>Summary</b>	<i>All in all, altogether, as has been said, finally, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to put it differently, to summarize.</i>
<b>Time sequence</b>	<i>After a while, afterward, again, also, and then, as long as, at last, at length, at that time, before, besides, earlier, eventually, finally, formerly, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, in the past, last, lately, meanwhile, moreover, next, now, presently, second, shortly, simultaneously, since, so far, soon, still, subsequently, then, thereafter, too, until, now, when.</i>

**Figure ( 4 ): Kinds and Uses of Transitional Words in English  
(Adapted from Sullivan, 1984:45)**

Harold (in Law – Davies, 1993 : 5 ) uses the term "*organizers*" to label such features, which occur in paragraph – initial positions and work to both group and divide the text. Harold distinguishes between two types of organizers:-dividing organizers which indicate the topic change (such as temporal, enumerative, sequential, ....etc. ), and unifying organizers which maintain the existing topic.

In terms of the second criterion, namely, reader – based coherence, the aspect of connectedness is viewed as an interpretive process created by the reader. McCarthy ( 1991 : 26 ) emphasizes this and further remarks that it is the responsibility of the reader to evaluate the coherence of the text when s/he feels that it "*hangs together, that it makes sense, and is not just a jumble of sentences.*"

The ability of a text to be understood by the reader, according to Pilus ( 1996 : 47 ), is identified as the job of the writer to fulfill the reader's "*basic assumptions and expectations*" based on her / his world knowledge before reading a text. Thus, the writer has to conform to the communicative principles by being informative, relevant, and effectively clear ( Van Dijk, in Pilus, 1996 ).Such an aim is achieved when the text has a sense of relatedness and appropriateness in both form and content. Otherwise, the text is perceived as neither consistent nor coherent on the part of the reader.

### 3.The Method:

The findings presented here are based on the results of (20) compositions written by (20) students of 3<sup>rd</sup> stage, College of Education, Department of English, University of Basra. They were asked to write a descriptive composition about "*An Ideal English Teacher*". It should be noted that those subjects have been studying the skill of writing starting from the first, second, and third stages in which they study how to write a paragraph, a composition , and an essay respectively. The mechanisms of the skill of writing such as grammar , vocabulary , content , tone , coherence and cohesion are represented to them each stage are the essential components of any written text.

In this framework, the analysis of coherence in the students' compositions is conducted according to the two criteria set above, namely, text-based coherence and reader- based coherence. It is noteworthy that only the layout of the compositions is to be analyzed, whereas grammatical and spelling mistakes are to be taken into consideration in a later study.

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<b>Opening</b>	<i>It is important to mention here that knowledge is one of the strongest kinds of powers and it is a weapon. Knowledge, education and culture are very important in life to make a human being develops and improves his talent to challenge other people. That knowledge acquired by the teacher. The teacher is not a mere means of knowledge but he is the father that leads the students to future.</i>
<b>Development</b>	<i>We can not easily describe the teacher as he is more than to be described in words. In plain words, he is the spirit of existence, the light of the day and source of happiness in the universe. The teacher teaches the students their subject materials, teaching them how to treat other people making them understand what is the real meaning of education, and giving them the exact explanation of what is right and what is wrong.</i>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<i>To conclude, the teacher is a rose and the rose is generous is giving its scent to whoever want to have a smeel of it.</i>

### 4. The Analysis

#### *A. Text-based coherence:*

*1. The macrostructure:* upon investigating the students' writings, it was found that most of them were not aware of this division as it is shown in the following examples:

**Example (1):**

*Our English teacher was very angry, as I remember, during the lectures. In fact, I could remember well that our English teacher during the period of secondary school was the best one to give and explain the lecture in the most suitable processes for us.*

**Example (2):**

In the above two examples, the learner inserts the information without paying attention to the way the ideas should be presented, i.e. the first paragraph which is an introductory one. The student should start with the controlling idea and then think how to develop it in the rest of paragraphs. It is clear that these two introductory paragraphs have not introduced any coherent background information in relation to the thesis statement which is "*what are the features of an ideal English teacher?*" Although there are ideas which are related to the controlling idea, yet there is no clear connection between them. Moreover, in the second example the learner fails to make this composition have the appropriate proportion, i.e. the length of the introductory paragraph should either be equal to and/or shorter than the length of the concluding one.

2. *Arrangement of ideas:* This concept is concerned with how the learners provide their ideas starting with old (given) information before the new ones. Failing to preserve such a logical order may confuse the readers as it is shown in the following example:-

*Our teacher was a man with bear. He had thick brows, moustache and hair. He paid no attention to his figure and his smart as if there was something happened to him to be in this appearance. He was tall as well as fat. When he was in the classroom, all of us were silent. When his lesson was about to begin, all of us were scared, they did not know why this was so.*

To start with such a paragraph, the student would not give any chance to say something about the general features of an ideal English teacher. S/He begins with a specific example of an English teacher mentioning all her/his personal features forgetting the general features that ought to be found in every good teacher of English. The learner attempts to discuss the topic but s/he does not know where to start from.

Meanwhile, the following example illustrates another problem in organization:

*I admire my English teacher because he is kind and resourceful. Neither me nor my friends go to him asking for a need or facing a problem, he refuses us and helps us in solving this problem. He treats all pupils he know kindly and equally .He is also providing us with information that we might ask for. [An English teacher should be talented, wise and knowing every thing about the language he is teaching.]*

In addition to the grammatical mistakes committed in this paragraph, the sequences of the ideas would have been more appropriate if the sentence in brackets had been placed at the beginning of the paragraph with some modification so as to be like that : (An English teacher should be kind, talented, wise and mastering the language to be an ideal ).

3- *Relations between propositions:* The following example shows the way that those students follow in writing compositions without paying attention to the essential condition of developing the thesis statement of the whole composition and the topic sentence of each paragraph.

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<i>Opening</i>	<p>May be we forget the great difficulty that giving in the interest the progress of us. The truth is the teacher is the first basis in the progress, but we are not realized that. The teacher is the person that burned himself for the sake of lighting the gloom way to us. He was tired in teaching the information to students. He is the forbearing, the able person to pass the obstacles.</p>	<p><i>The first sentence is irrelevant; it doesn't give any hint about the main topic. While the second sentence ought not to be put here. The third sentence could be the controlling idea in this paragraph. The fourth sentence is also irrelevant. The last sentence could be related to the controlling idea.</i></p>
<i>Development</i>	<p>For instance, the teacher of English. He is the teacher that confronted the big difficulties in reaching the information to students. All that is because the effecton of the mother tongue (Arabic) on English and the difficulties in pronunciation or the writing of words. So, the teacher went to teach us all the probability that it can make us continue.</p>	<p><i>The first two sentences are supposed to be the topic sentence of the second paragraph. The third sentence carries the first reason why the teachers' job is a difficult one. The fourth sentence is a concluding one. Thus, only one reason is mentioned in this paragraph so us to develop the topic sentence directly and then developing the controlling idea indirectly.</i></p>
<i>conclusion</i>	<p>After all that, we must not forget the advantage of the teacher in the teaching or in the progress, successfulness. He is the person that can instill the hope and the imbition. So he deserves the respectable, because he as the father, brother, the closer friend.</p>	<p><i>With these three sentences the student ends his/her essay without developing the controlling idea.</i></p>

4- *The cohesive devices:* The concept of cohesion refers to the surface structure features of an utterance or text which link different parts of sentences. Through the use of the appropriate cohesive devices, the writer can connect the sentences together in a way to keep on the unity of the theme. These devices are helpful in holding the reader on the track when the writer is keeping two or more series of events going on at the same time.

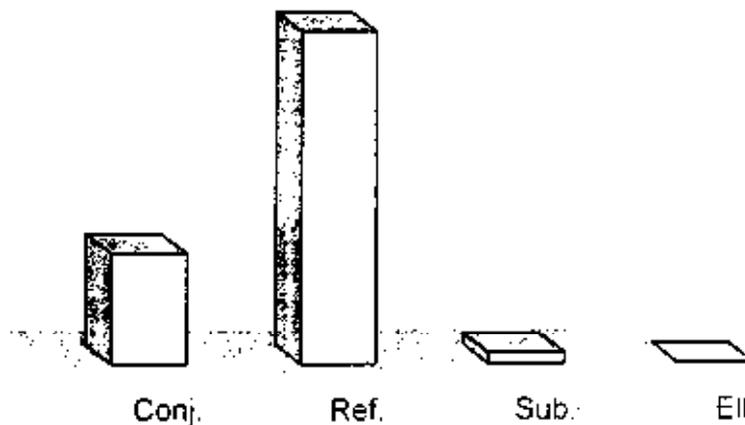
The following five main types of cohesive relations are adopted from Halliday and Hassan's(1976):Grammatical Cohesive Ties which include pronoun reference(he, she ,it, this..ect.), conjunctions (but, also, therefore, etc.), ellipsis, substitution and Lexical Cohesive Ties which are represented in reiteration and collocation.

As regards grammatical cohesion, the compositions have comparatively high percentages of reference ( 36.48 %) and conjunctions (12.006% ). with a smaller percentage of substitution (1.16 % ) and no occurrence of ellipsis.

The low percentage of substitution and the absence of ellipsis may indicate that the students do not know how to use these two grammatical tying relationships.

Table 1.Types of Grammatical Cohesive Ties Used in the Learners' Compositions

Types of Grammatical ties	Frequency of Use	Percentage
Conjunction	155	12.006%
Reference	471	36.48 %
Substitution	15	1.16 %
Ellipsis	0	0
Total	1291	49.65%



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### *Reference:*

*Example: "she has heart- hanted because she is a woman and differs from man in naturally..."* Here, the pronoun 'she' is absent before 'differs' and 'her' is missing before 'naturally' which should be 'nature'.

Here are other examples showing that these learners fail in using the appropriate pronoun " *it is a common language in (this our) time*", and " *he rarely smiles to (us) only on something really funny but this doesn't mean he is stuff with (students), in the contrary is very handsome indeed*"

It is obvious that in the first example, the student used two pronouns at the same time, which is wrong, whereas in the second example the student uses the pronoun (us) and then the word (students). What is supposed to be used is the word (students) firstly and then to refer to them by the pronoun (them).

### *Conjunctions:*

Conjunctions show the connections between ideas. Correct use of the linking devices or conjunctions makes the piece of writing more cohesive and readable enabling the reader to follow the meaning easily. The use of conjunctions will help the writer link ideas (within a sentence, from one sentence to another, and in a paragraph) if he knows their semantic properties. Conjunctions are categorized by Halliday and Hassan (1976) into four groups: additive, adversative, causal and temporal.

Checking the students' writings, it can be noticed that they rarely use causal relationships and they mostly depend on the additive and temporal relations. Example:

*Teachers has learned teaching by practice and experience, however , teaching methods have been developed during the past years, and with recent inventions of many devices that help and boost the teaching methods.*

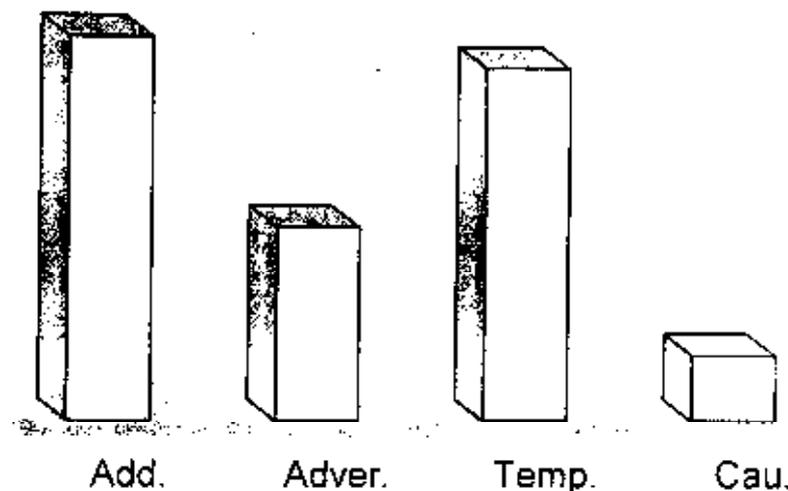


In this example, the student mainly used additive (*and*) and adversative (*however*) conjunctions. Still, the latter has been used incorrectly since there is no need to put such a conjunction there.

Table ( 2) confirms the fact that the students did not care about using different conjunctions to link their ideas, yet they stick to using the common and well-known conjunctions like (*and, then, so, but, when, one day, after that*). None of them tried to use conjunctions like (*furthermore, as a mater of fact, despite this, to this purpose*) which are equally familiar to them.

Table (2): The Conjunctions the EFL Learners Used

Types of Conjunctions	Frequency of Use	Percentage
Additive	60	38.71 %
Adversative	30	19.35 %
Temporal	55	35.48 %
Causal	10	0.04 %
Total	155	93.58 %



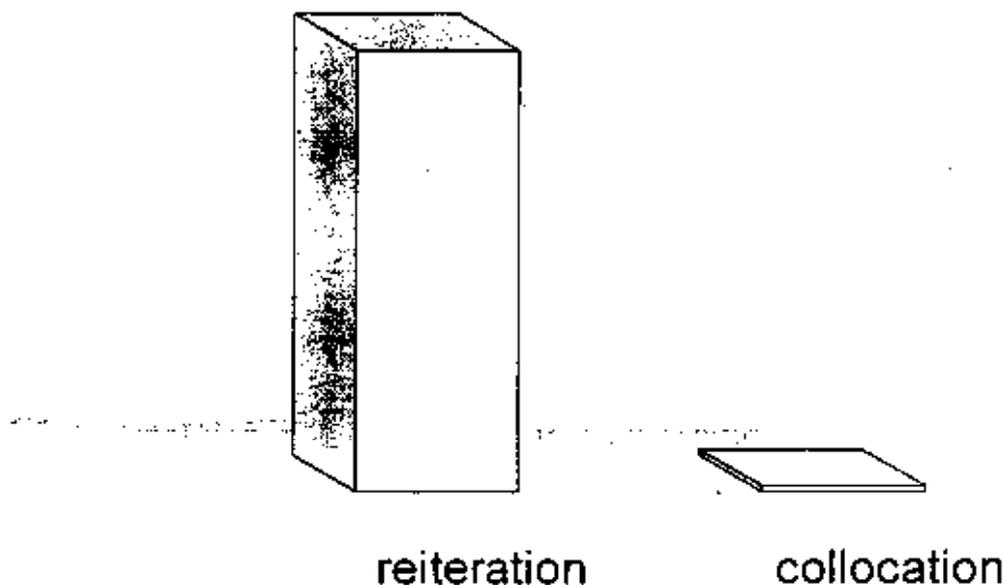
As for lexical cohesion which is manifested in two devices, i.e., reiteration and collocation, Table ( 3) displays the fact that the compositions show a high percentage of lexical reiteration but a small percentage of collocation. It is worth mentioning that almost all the lexical reiterative ties repeat of the same lexical items. This finding is similar to that arrived at by Khalil ( 1989 ) when analyzing the kinds of cohesive ties that EFL Arab

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learners resort to in writing in English. Khalil ( 1989 : 363 ) affirms that this result is " *not surprising since the tendency to repeat words and phrases is a discourse strategy of religious and literary written Arabic.*"

Table ( 3) Lexical Cohesive Ties the EFL Learners used

Types of Lexical Cohesive Ties	Frequency of Use	Percentage
Reiteration	640	49.57%
Collocation	10	0.77 %
Total	650	50.34%



**5- Metadiscourse items:** As it is mentioned above the use of the metadiscourse items is determined by the kind of the logical order followed in presenting the main ideas of the composition. Since the type of text the students are required to write about is to describe the features of the ideal teacher, the appropriate transitional words/organizers are the enumerative ones, namely, firstly, secondly, ....., finally.

Most of the students presented their topic in a narrative framework neglecting that their topic is descriptive and not narrative. They were supposed to write about the features of an ideal English teacher but it is clear that they presented their topic talking about their English teachers in secondary schools and how they felt towards them by telling stories or narrating an event that happened at that time and what was the reaction of their teachers towards it.

*B- Reader-based coherence:-* As far as the second criterion is concerned, it is found that the students thought the matter of being informative, relevant, and clear is to write as much as possible about their main idea in a way that makes them include irrelevant ideas and go "out of topic". For example:

*A good personality of a good teacher, sometimes, affects on the students and makes them aspire to reach this state or to imitate him in the future. A good teacher must use different techniques according to the level of the students in the class to make it clear and easily understood. Also, the students must take an active part in the class: they ask and answer questions and they must obey the orders and if they don't understand something, they ask the teacher to repeat or to give more information about the topic:*

It is clear that in this example the sentence which starts with [Also,...the topic], beside being long and grammatically incorrect, has nothing to do with the subject under discussion; it only distracts the reader's attention from the main idea raised particularly in this paragraph and in the whole composition, in general.

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### **5. Conclusion and Suggestions**

The findings of the study reinforce the fact that incoherence is a recurring problem in EFL learners' writings which leads to hindering their success in the English writing classes. Coherence of a written text is viewed from two aspects: text – based coherence and reader – based coherence.

As far as the first aspect of coherence is concerned, it is found out that EFL advanced Iraqi learners represented in the sample of the current study:

- failed in planning their compositions. They did not arrange their ideas in the appropriate sequence, i.e. opening, development, and conclusion.
  - were not able to use the right opening for their compositions which should match with the topic suggested to write about, and hence they did not know how to develop it or to connect their ideas together.
  - were not aware of arranging the information they presented into old ( given ) and new.
  - rarely used the cohesive devices in their writings. Through the analysis presented above, it can be noticed that they mainly used pronouns, some conjunctions, especially the temporal and additive ones, and reiteration as cohesive devices and neglected other cohesive ties like substitution, ellipsis, and collocation.
- 
- failed in using the suitable metadiscourse features (transitional words/organizers), which are determined according to the logical order followed in writing, so as to connect their ideas between sentences and paragraphs.

Failing in preserving the five essential components of text – based coherence, the reader will not be able to find what s/he expects while reading the text. Unfortunately, EFL advanced Iraqi learners mistakenly think that writing everything comes to their mind even if it has nothing to do with the subject under discussion is what makes their writings informative, unaware of the fact that in such a way they are distracting the reader's mind from the main idea and their writings are to be perceived as out of topic, inconsistent and incoherent.

The learners have to be reminded that writing is a complex skill, and its development involves much more than the accurate use of grammar and a good range of vocabulary. The starting point from which the teacher can initiate helping his/her learners become more effective writers is by making an explicit distinction between language accuracy and writing skills. That is, a learner may be able to write sentences which are satisfactory for his/her level in terms of grammar and vocabulary and still be unable to produce an effective piece of writing.

Each of the two components of good writing, i.e., language skills and writing skills, has to be dealt with in special lessons in which the learners are guided to be aware of all the elements of good writing, supported with information and examples, provided with opportunities for practice, and given focused feedback on their performance.

The technique suggested to improve EFL learners' in writing coherent texts is represented in the Writing Skill Development Cycle. This cycle can be used in teaching all the features of writing, whether related to language skills or writing skills, and it will be modified here so as to be adapted to teach how to write well – formed texts. It is worth mentioning that this technique is proposed by Basturkmen (2002), Gabrielatos (2002), and Lee (2002).

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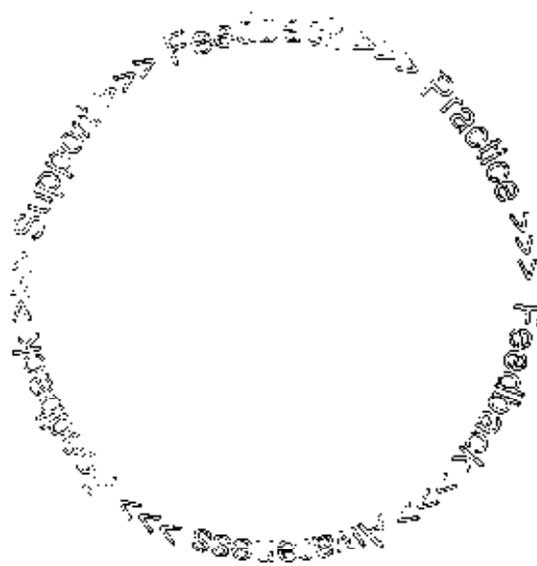


Figure (5): The Writing Skill Development Cycle  
(Adopted from Gabriellatos (2002))

Figure (5) obviously shows that the cycle consists of three stages, each of which has to be followed by feedback. The first stage, labeled '*awareness – raising*', involves activities to guide the learners to identify the five components that contribute to the coherence of any written text. This requires to engage the learners in reading texts and, at the same time, to analyse the text in terms of the elements of coherence. The phase of feedback following this stage is the responsibility of the teacher in providing his/her students with a jumble of sentences and instruct them to re – order these sentences into a well – formed text. Such practice can free valuable classroom time for the second stage, viz. '*support*' and its feedback procedure.

The final stage, called "*practice*", gives the learners the opportunity to write texts taking into consideration the five elements they have observed to make what they write coherent. This stage should also be followed by feedback. Providing comments and correction can either be achieved by the teacher on the students' assignments so as to clarify the merits and shortcomings of their writing performance or through the work of the teacher together with the learners to help the latter understand the reasons of their drawbacks in writing and discuss possible improvement.

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