

# Analysis of Cohesion and Coherence Errors in English Discourse Writing of Non English Major College Students

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the discourse errors in English writing by non-English major college students. By analyzing the types of discourse errors in their writing, it explores the reasons behind the lag in their writing proficiency and discusses effective methods to enhance their English writing skills. The aim is to draw educators' attention to the importance of discourse teaching, thereby improving English writing proficiency of non-English major college students.

**Keywords:** Discourse errors, Cohesive devices, Semantic coherence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a form of verbal communication aimed at conveying information clearly and effectively, which involves language elements such as vocabulary and grammar, as well as expressive and logical thinking skills, reflecting a student's ability to organize ideas and construct coherent arguments in a discourse. However, due to differences between English and Chinese cultures, thought patterns, language structures, and modes of expression, many students' English writing suffers from negative transfer from factors like their native language etc. As a result, their compositions often lack logical coherence and continuity. Common issues include: Lack of transitional devices between paragraphs, absence of logical connections between sentences and vague semantic relationships, all lead to disjointed discourse. Some students' writings may adhere to grammatical and lexical norms yet remain ambiguous in logic, unclear in viewpoint, or even incomprehensible to native English-speakers despite being understandable to Chinese instructors. Additionally, incomplete structure, imprecise meaning, and loose organization significantly diminish the overall quality of the discourse.

This paper focuses on analyzing the most frequent errors in cohesion and coherence in

discourse writings of college Non English majors, exploring the causes of the phenomena, and proposing corresponding solutions. By applying these methods, English learners can enhance their awareness of discourse coherence, better grasp the logical relationships inherent in English texts, and ultimately improve their overall English writing proficiency.

## 2. COHESION AND COHERENCE ERRORS IN DISCOURSE WRITING

Coherence in discourse is an crucial indicator of college students' English writing proficiency. Cohesion serves as a primary means to achieve coherence, which is built upon shared contextual knowledge between the writer and the reader and realized through various cohesive devices between sentences. A well-structured discourse demonstrates logical connections and semantic continuity, representing a unity of content and form. Only when a discourse is both semantically coherent and cohesively structured can it convey information accurately and effectively. Error analysis in discourse primarily examines linguistic phenomena beyond the sentence level, including: sentence structure, inter-sentential cohesion and coherence, textual organization, directionality, and informativeness.

The following section analyzes the most common errors in cohesion and coherence in university Non

English major students' discourse writing.

## 2.1 *Errors in Cohesive Devices*

Cohesion refers to the semantic connections between linguistic elements within a discourse, serving as one of its essential features. The use of cohesive devices tightly links components within and between sentences, thereby creating a clear, fluent, and logically coherent expression. The proper application of these devices significantly influences discourse coherence.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) classified cohesive devices in English discourse into two major categories: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion (at the sentence-structure level) includes: reference (e.g., pronouns, demonstratives), substitution (replacing a word/phrase to avoid repetition), ellipsis (omitting recoverable elements), conjunction (logical connectors like "however," "therefore"). Lexical Cohesion achieves coherence through vocabulary selection, such as: synonyms, near-synonyms, hyponyms/hypernyms (to minimize redundancy). Mastering these cohesive devices is crucial for avoiding errors, improving sentence-linking techniques, and enhancing overall coherence in Ss' discourse writing. However, students frequently make mistakes precisely in these areas.

### 2.1.1 *Grammatical Cohesion Errors*

#### 2.1.1.1 *Reference Errors*

Reference refers to the use of pronouns or other grammatical devices to establish semantic relationships in discourse, where an appropriate pronoun or other element should substitute a previously mentioned noun or concept upon its subsequent occurrence. When employing referential cohesion, it is crucial to maintain agreement between pronouns and their antecedents in gender, number, and person. Additionally, care must be taken to avoid ambiguous pronoun references where a subsequent pronoun could potentially refer to either of two preceding nouns, as this may result in unclear connections between sentences.

Example 1:

"Many young people choose to work in one city but live in a nearby city since he can commute by CRH train every day."

In this sample sentence, the pronoun "he" is used to refer back to "many young people" from the previous clause. Since the antecedent is plural, the correct pronoun should be "they," making the proper construction: "since they can commute by CRH train every day."

#### 2.1.1.2 *Improper Use of Ellipsis and Substitution in Discourse Cohesion*

Ellipsis refers to the omission of certain elements in linguistic structures. In English, ellipsis primarily occurs at the grammatical level, where the omitted components can typically be recovered from the context of the discourse. Substitution involves replacing a preceding element with an alternative form. From both grammatical and rhetorical perspectives, these two cohesive devices serve to: avoid unnecessary repetition, achieve concise expression, maintain structural compactness and ensure clarity of communication. Improper use of these devices may result in redundant phrasing, loose sentence structure and improper cohesion.

Example 2:

"Many young people choose to work in one city but live in a nearby city since he can commute by CRH train every day."

In the same sentence, "city" refers to the previously mentioned entity "one city," whereas "one" properly indicates a singular instance from the same category. Therefore, replacing "city" with "one" would eliminate unnecessary repetition.

Example 3:

Original version: "Lucy is good at learning English. Lily is good at English too."

Revised version: "Lucy is good at learning English. So is Lily."

To avoid repetition in the above context, restructuring the second sentence using "so" as a substitute ("So is Lily") would make the expression more concise and compact.

#### 2.1.1.3 *Misuse of Conjunctive Devices*

Conjunctive devices serve to establish logical relationships between sentences or paragraphs.

Proper use of these connectors enhances discourse fluency and ensures clear, emphatic presentation of ideas. Conversely, their misuse may compromise both cohesion and semantic coherence.

Notably, English employs conjunctive devices with significantly greater frequency than Chinese. Due to L1 interference from Chinese, many ESL/EFL students tend to either overuse, misuse, or entirely omit these crucial linking elements in their English writing.

Example 4:

Original version:

Tai Chi is a kind of martial arts and a fitness exercise as well. Tai Chi has a long history in China. It has slow and gentle movements. It is suitable of people of all kinds to practice. It can be used to provide self-defense as well as build the body. It is very popular among Chinese people.

Revised version:

Tai Chi is a kind of martial arts and a fitness exercise as well **and** has a long history in China. **With** slow and gentle movements, it is suitable of people of all kinds to practice. It can be used to provide self-defense as well as build the body. **Therefore**, it is very popular among Chinese people.

In original version, the sentences lacked logical-semantic and interdependent relationships. By adding conjunctions such as "and," "with," and "therefore" in the revised version, the discourse becomes more dynamic and fluent with improved coherence.

English sentence structure is characterized as an overt hypotaxis language, whereas Chinese is a covert parataxis language. Due to negative transfer from their native language, Chinese students frequently make the mistake of omitting connective words in English writing. Therefore, grasping the use of cohesive devices in English discourse writing is crucial for improving students' writing proficiency.

### 2.1.2 Lexical Cohesion Errors

Discourse cohesion can also be achieved through lexical cohesion. This is primarily realized through the use of synonyms, near-synonyms and hyponymy-hypernymy relationships, as well as strategic repetition of key words to establish close semantic connections between sentences and ensure

discourse coherence. While Chinese students are not good at this type of cohesive devices.

Example 5:

Economic and population trends in California show that Hispanics, blacks, and Asians will have increasing economic influence as their numbers continue to grow. Research says that California's population will grow by 500,000 people a year, two-thirds of this growth will be Hispanics and Asians, and the Hispanic 18-to-24-olds will increase by 40 percent.

In the discourse, the verb "grow" and its nominal form "growth" are repeated twice, demonstrating insufficient lexical variation and resulting in monotonous readability. By replacing the second "grow" with "expand" and the third "growth" with "increase," the discourse would gain enhanced vividness and fluency.

Example 6:

Flu has arrived with the cold and wet conditions. The flu was spread through exhaled droplets or secretions.

To enhance textual coherence, replacing the second instance of "flu" with its hypernym "illness" would avoid redundant phrasing ("the flu—this disease") while effectively connecting the two sentences.

In conclusion, students' errors in lexical cohesion primarily stem from "limited vocabulary knowledge" and "insufficient lexical variation", resulting in discourses that lack dynamism, appear monotonous, and fail to engage readers effectively.

## 2.2 Semantic Coherence Errors

Coherence refers to the logical organization and expression of information within a discourse, ensuring its internal consistency. Beyond cohesive devices, discourse coherence requires meaningful semantic connections between sentences. A discourse is not a haphazard accumulation of sentences, but rather a structured composition centered around a unified theme and governed by specific organizational principles. A discourse can only convey information accurately and effectively when it achieves both semantic coherence (unified meaning) and cohesive fluency (smooth expression). According to Yang & Jiang, merely employing cohesive devices does not necessarily enhance textual coherence—what matters more is realizing intrinsic logical-semantic continuity (Yang Hu &

Jiang Lingxiang, 2014). Many students focus excessively on vocabulary and grammar in English writing while neglecting or failing to manage sentence sequencing in their discourse, leading to coherence breakdowns. This primarily occurs because disorganized sentence arrangements violate logical progression.

Example 7: I was tired. I left.

Example 8: It rained heavily. The picnic was canceled.

In Example 7, the two sentences lack an explicit logical connection, requiring readers to infer the relationship based on context. Adding the causal conjunction "Because" at the beginning of the first sentence would make the semantic relationship complete. In Example 8, the two sentences should form a cause-effect relationship. Inserting the conjunction "so" before the second clause would ensure proper semantic coherence.

In English communication, Examples 7 and 8 both represent leapfrogging expressions that disrupt logical continuity in discourse—yet from a Chinese cognitive perspective, such expressions remain acceptable and comprehensible. According to Wang, the two languages employ markedly distinct approaches to achieving textual coherence: English exhibits connectivity and linearity, while Chinese demonstrates chunking and discreteness (Wang Wenbin, 2019).

### 3. IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

#### 3.1 *On the Macro-Level: (Discourse Structure) Adopting a Linear Thinking Model to Construct English Discourses, Emphasizing Internal Logical Progression in Discourse Development*

English writing is a complex cognitive process influenced by cultural thought patterns. Differences in thinking styles significantly impact word choice, sentence structure, meaning, and overall discourse organization. The divergence between Chinese and Western thinking modes is a key factor contributing to students' writing challenges.

The Chinese mindset follows a "spiral thinking model", characterized by indirect expression. When presenting viewpoints, Chinese speakers often employ: delayed focus ("beating around the bush" or "hinting at the point") and circular structure (either "criticism before praise" or "praise before criticism"). This cognitive style leads to two key

challenges in Chinese students' English writing: Unclear emphasis – core arguments get buried in discourse details and weak coherence – ideas lack logical sequencing between paragraphs

In contrast, Anglo-American cultures employ a linear thinking model that favors direct and straightforward expression. This cognitive approach shapes English writing with distinct characteristics. A well organized discourse usually has front-loaded theme, explicitly stating the theme of the article and central idea of each paragraphs with a topic sentence. The main point is then developed through systematic layering of supporting arguments, gradually deepening the structural integrity of the discourse.

To mitigate the effects of Chinese native language interference, educators should consciously raise students' awareness of the Chinese-English cognitive differences by incorporating contrastive analysis of thought patterns and linguistic expressions into classroom instruction. By systematically analyzing the "cognitive patterns" and "linguistic expressions" in Chinese learners' English writings and native English writing samples, students can transform their "unconscious application" of Chinese rhetorical habits into "conscious recognition" of English discourse conventions., thereby minimizing the negative influence of Chinese thinking patterns on English language production, and effectively preventing "Chinglish" expressions and thought processes in writing.

#### 3.2 *On the Micro Level (Sentence Level) - Combining Sentences into Coherent Discourses during the Process of English Writing, Emphasizing the Application of Hypotaxis*

Due to differences in cultural traditions and modes of thought, the organizational patterns of languages vary significantly. English and Chinese each have their own rules and distinctive features in multiple aspects, including pronunciation, word formation, syntax, rhetorical devices, and textual organization, demonstrating marked contrasts between the two languages. In his book <Chinese Grammatical Theory>, Mr. Wang Li introduced the concepts of "hypotaxis" and "parataxis", arguing that both are fundamental means of linguistic organization. In linguistics, English prioritizes grammatical consistency (e.g., uniform tense/voice) and overt linking words to connect sentences,

classifying it as a hypotaxis language. Chinese, by contrast, achieves discourse cohesion through contextual meaning rather than grammatical markers, making it a parataxis language. Chinese character "he" refers to combination—the manifestation of a process that transforms scattered elements into an integrated whole through linguistic signs. English emphasizes formal cohesion in sentence structure, while Chinese prioritizes contextual coherence in discourse flow. The paratactic nature of Chinese leads students to apply L1 coherence strategies when writing in English. This results in discourses that violate English readers' expectations of explicit connectivity, creating perceptions of abrupt transitions, logical gaps, and overall disjointedness - ultimately hindering comprehension. Therefore, in classroom, teachers should systematically educate students about the distinct hypotaxis-parataxis characteristics of both languages. When composing in English, students must consciously employ explicit cohesive devices to ensure proper inter-sentential and inter-paragraph transitions. This includes mastering transitional words/phrases to achieve natural progression between sentences and coherent flow across paragraphs. Only when a discourse demonstrates clear hierarchy and logical organization—with coherent connections between contexts, words, and sentences that echo and reinforce one another—can it achieve rigorous structure, clear reasoning, and systematic flow.

### ***3.3 Applying Discourse Coherence Theory to Writing Instruction by Systematically Teaching Coherence Principles, Thereby Enhancing Students' Awareness of Textual Connectivity***

A discourse is a coherent unit of communication formed by connecting meaningfully related sentences through specific linguistic devices. Its semantic and pragmatic coherence manifests in two dimensions: external contextual relevance, and internal connections between sentence propositions and communicative intentions across its components (Zhao Pu, 1998). In writing instruction, theoretical knowledge input is equally essential alongside practical training. When students grasp the intrinsic characteristics of English discourse and understand the cultural differences between Chinese and Western thinking patterns, their writing proficiency will significantly benefit. Through systematic study of discourse coherence

theory—including cohesive devices, textual organization, rhetorical techniques, discourse markers, and clausal relationships—students develop enhanced awareness and competence in structural composition. This progressive application of coherence knowledge to the writing process leads to measurable improvements in Ss' overall writing proficiency.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

In summary, enhancing Ss' writing proficiency is not an overnight achievement. English educators should adopt a discourse coherence-based approach, tailoring instruction to learners' capabilities through progressive steps. The teaching process must emphasize knowledge of cohesion and coherence, guiding students to effectively organize language, logically plan discourse layout and apply cohesive devices to achieve a composition featuring hierarchical clarity, structural rationality and logical flow. This ensures Ss' English discourses are coherent, thematically focused, and ultimately elevates their writing competence.

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