



**AN INVESTIGATION INTO ORGANIZATION ERRORS  
IN EFL LEARNERS' PARAGRAPH WRITING: A CASE IN A  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER IN CAN THO CITY, VIETNAM<sup>i</sup>**

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**Abstract:**

Committing errors is an inevitable phenomenon that happens to learners in the process of learning a foreign language, especially in writing skill. For many years, diagnosing what types of errors learners commonly made and why they are prone to committing such errors has become a great concern to language educators and researchers. The present study investigated organization errors in English compositions produced by 60 Vietnamese pre-intermediate learners on one task. The author collected data by writing tests and participant questionnaires. Analyses of the errors and survey data yielded the following main findings: (1) Among the five categories of organization errors, incoherence accounted for the largest percentage, followed by the poor topic sentence, disunity, poor conclusion and no conclusion; (2) There is a significant difference between the two genders in terms of the category of incoherence. Nevertheless, the difference in the other organization error categories between the two groups of participants was insignificant; (3) Several reasons were identified for the errors such as the lack of writing practice and the influence of Vietnamese.

**Keywords:** paragraph writing, organization errors, EFL learners, Can Tho City

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the study

The purpose of language learning and teaching is to help learners arrive at a communicative competence which facilitates them to communicate satisfactorily and effectively in the target language. Besides linguistic knowledge, communicative competence requires learners to have not only receptive skills (i.e., listening and reading) but also productive ones (i.e., speaking and writing). Between the two kinds of skills, the latter is often considered a basis for measuring learners' language reception through their ability to produce the language. In comparison with speaking as a productive skill, writing is not easy, and in some ways, more difficult than speaking (Norrish, 1983, p.63). In other words, writing is more complex because it requires higher accuracy and therefore, *"accuracy in writing is frequently more important than accuracy in speaking"* (Weigle, 2002, p.17). In fact, in spoken conversations, interlocutors can negotiate the meaning of their utterances back and forth whereas, in written texts, this back-and-forth negotiation of meaning cannot take place (AbiSamra, 2003). The distance between the writer and the reader in both time and space can partly impede their communicative process while the speaker and the listener can face to face negotiate what they say at the same time. For this reason, the inevitable problems of misunderstanding in written documents are exacerbated (Penman, 1998). Moreover, among the four skills, writing is the most influential skill that learners need to master in order to be able to communicate successfully in written form. It can be seen as *"the most difficult of the language abilities to acquire"* (Allen & Corder, 1974, p. 177). In general, writing is complicated not just because it is a productive skill but rather because it is an advanced stage of language learning and fundamental to communicative competence.

Because of such an intricate nature of writing, even native speakers who use English as their mother tongue are not free from making mistakes and/ or committing errors when they write in their own native language. Errors, among all other English problems, have become the biggest headache to all sides that are involved: learners, teachers, raters, or any other readers. Learners simply hate errors, believing that their writing would be better without any errors. Teachers are not happy to see the errors made by their students either. But still, they want to know why students have made the errors and how they can help them to improve the situation. Just like symptoms which are often used by doctors to diagnose a disease, the errors can also be developed by teachers, researchers or even learners themselves to assess learners' writing in English. Instead of hating the errors, teachers and/ or researchers usually choose to examine them to find out where the problem is.

Consequently, studies on writing errors have so far been carried out by many researchers. For example, some studies on coherence have been done by Cherry & Cooper (1980) and Carrell (1982). Cherry & Cooper (1980) conducted a study to investigate the cohesive devices of average and superior writers in grades four, eight, twelve and college. They found that as writers mature, they seemed to rely more on lexis and less on reference

and conjunction. It was also found that the substitution and ellipsis were rare. Carrell (1982) criticizes the concept of cohesion as a measure of textual coherence in the light of schema-theoretical views of text processing (e.g., reading) as an interactive process between the text and readers. Wikborg (1985) identifies different coherence breaks, such as irrelevance, unspecified topic, drift of topic, misleading paragraph division, uncertain inference ties and misleading sentence connection. He considers cohesion part of coherence, a point which so many researchers and text linguists do not approve. Enkvist (1985) suggests that total coherence required cohesion not only on the textual surface but on the semantic level as well. Abdel H. A. (2010) examines some problems in the cohesion and coherence of Egyptian student teachers of English in essay writing. The results show that the student teachers have difficulty writing the thesis statement, the topic sentences, the transition of ideas, and the sequence of ideas.

From the results of above-mentioned studies, it is true that writing has now been seen in terms of cohesion and coherence. Khali (1989) says "*New concepts such as cohesion and coherence have been identified as two major standards of textuality*". It has been noticed that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writings appear to be poor in coherence and in cohesion. Such writings may lack persuasiveness, satisfactory and logical connection of ideas. This problem can be attributed to the fact that learners know the grammar and lexical items of the language, but they are unaware of the mechanics of coherence and cohesion.

Many studies have been carried out to examine coherence and cohesion problems in EFL writing in various educational settings. Nevertheless, very little has been done in the Vietnamese educational context. For this reason, it would be necessary and interesting to conduct more research which investigates organization errors in writing in Vietnamese learning environment.

### **1.2 Aims of the study**

The study aims to investigate the frequency of organization errors in EFL learners' paragraph writing. It would also be to find out the general sources for the errors.

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

It is hoped that this study will contribute to the field of applied linguistics especially writing in particular. This research is a practical one since it makes a shift from detecting Vietnamese EFL learners' problems at the sentential level toward diagnosing problems at the intersentential level. The significance of this study can be stated that it will provide readers as teachers or curriculum developers with a better understanding of how frequently Vietnamese EFL learners make organization errors in paragraph writing. This would help them develop a more effective curriculum as well as teaching methodology with an emphasis on the organization in writing.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Definition of writing

Writing is defined as *"a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge"* (Charaverty and Gautum, 2000). Then writers need suitable language to structure these ideas in the form of a coherent discourse. Lately writing is seen as *"a complex activity, a social act which reflects the writer's communication skills which is difficult to develop and learn, especially in an EFL context"* (Shokrpour, N. & Fallahzadeh, M., 2007).

### 2.2 Importance of EFL/ ESL writing

Writing helps our students learn because it reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that we have been teaching them. When our students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say and to take risks. Moreover, when they write, they necessarily become very involved with the new language; the effort to express ideas and the constant use of eye, hand, and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning. As writers struggle with what to put down next or how to put it down on paper, they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their ideas. They discover a real need for finding the right word and the right sentence. The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course.

EFL/ ESL writing has always been considered an important skill in teaching and learning. As commented by Rao (2007), EFL writing is useful in two respects: First, it motivates students' thinking, organizing ideas, and developing their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize. Second, it strengthens students' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language.

### 2.3 Paragraph writing

#### 2.3.1 Definition of paragraph

Dwight Garner (1970, p.310) states that a paragraph is a series of sentences that are built around a topic sentence. Paragraph length depends on the kind of writing. The general rules are that formal writing usually involves longer paragraphs than informal. Having the same point of view, Gary Forlini et al. (1987, p.399) affirm that a paragraph is a group of sentences placed together to form a single unit of thought. Paragraphs are easy to recognize because the first word will generally be indented. One sentence will usually express the main idea of the whole paragraph. All of the other sentences will present information that explains the main idea.

According to Angela Acott-Smith et al. (1999, p.2), paragraphs are a form of written communication which contains a minimum of five sentences. Each sentence in a paragraph *"talks about"* or develops one single main idea. If your paragraph does it, it is said to have unity. In addition, each sentence in a paragraph must be tied to the one

before and after it, like links in a chain, by using special words called transitions. If your paragraph contains these links, it is said to have coherence. Approving Gary Forlini's viewpoint, Le Huy Lam (2004) develops a simpler definition of a paragraph by calling a paragraph a group of related sentences about a single topic. Moreover, Maureen Lindner (2005, p.242) considers a paragraph as a group of sentences that expounds one main idea. Usually, five to twelve sentences in length, a paragraph occurs mostly with other paragraphs in a longer piece of writing such as an essay, an article or a letter. The paragraph is an important component in writing. Each paragraph must be concise; only information that belongs should be included. It must be structured in a way that makes sense to the reader. It must also serve a purpose within the larger piece of writing.

### **2.3.2 Organization of a paragraph**

The organization of a paragraph involves the topic sentence and the sentences that support and develop the topic sentence (Dwight Garner, 1970). Many other researchers (Gary Forlini et al., 1987; Maureen Lindner, 2005; Zemach D.E. & Rumisek L.A., 2010) share the same view by stating that every good paragraph has to have unity and coherence, but it must also have organization. If you write a paragraph that contains three sections: an introduction (an interesting beginning), the body (a middle with specific details) and the conclusion (a satisfying ending, you have written a paragraph with good organization. In general, a paragraph has three basic parts:

- 1) The topic sentence (introduction): this is the main idea of the paragraph. It is usually the first sentence of the paragraph and the most general sentence. The topic sentence must also catch the reader's attention so that he/ she will want to finish reading the whole thing.
- 2) The supporting sentences (body): These are sentences that talk about or explain the topic sentence. They are more detailed ideas that follow the topic sentence.
- 3) The concluding sentence (conclusion): this may be found as the last sentence of a paragraph. It can finish a paragraph by repeating the main idea or just giving a final comment about the topic. Readers need to know that they are coming to the end of what they are reading, and they need to feel satisfied that they have heard the whole story. In other words, in the conclusion, the writer tells the reader what he/she has just been told.

### **2.3.3 The essentials of good paragraph construction**

#### **a. Unity**

The first and most important principle to be observed in constructing a paragraph is that of unity. Because each sentence deals with one thought, each paragraph must deal with one topic or idea and with no more than one. Every sentence in the paragraph must be closely connected with the main topic of the paragraph. The paragraph and every part of it must be the expression of one theme or topic.

Gary Forlini et al. (1987) state that a paragraph will be unified if all of the supporting information works together to develop the main idea.

In 1992, it was Maxine Hairston who elaborates his own view by adding that the essential quality of a paragraph should be unity. A paragraph is supposed to have a central idea, and everything in the paragraph relates to and develops that idea. The reader finds no surprises, and every sentence fits with the other. Moreover, the sentences follow each other in logical order so that one could not move the sentences around at random: each one needs to be in its particular place to advance the internal development of the paragraph.

Having the same point of view, Mark Connelly (2009) states that one of the most important characteristics of good paragraph writing is unity. All the ideas in a paragraph should relate to a clear point for readers to understand easily.

*"Do not confuse unity and coherence"*. Coherence involves the clear movement of thought from sentence to sentence or paragraph to the paragraph where as unity means staying on the topic by staying within the focus (L. Brandon and K. Brandon, 2012).

## **b. Coherence**

Coherence refers to the functioning of the text as a unified whole. Moreover, coherence refers to the relationships between ideas and the ability of those ideas to function together for the purpose of conveying meaning. (McLinn 1988, p. 15)

In fact, any piece of writing has coherence if it represents its argument in a clear, plausible, convincing and comprehensible order. This piece of writing should have no logical gaps in its line of reasoning and it avoids unnecessary digression.

Any piece of writing is considered coherent if it is understandable, follows a clear line in presenting facts, arguments and avoids statements which are incomprehensible for the reader. There is a strong connection between the text and the reader concerning coherence. Hence, the writer should cut what is irrelevant or unintelligible for the reader. Kies (1995) suggests that any piece of writing can be coherent if the writer:

- 1) Know the subject well;
- 2) Have an eye on their audience and tailor their writing to what their readers probably know beforehand and are able to understand.

Moreover, Oshima and Hogue (2006) indicate that there are four ways to achieve coherence:

- 1) Repeat key nouns: repeat key nouns or use synonyms or expressions with the same meaning.
- 2) Use consistent pronouns: make sure that you use the same person and number throughout the paragraph.
- 3) Use transition signals to link ideas: they are like traffic signs; they tell you when to go forward, turn around, slow down and stop.
- 4) Arrange your ideas in logical order: arrange your ideas in some kind of order that is logical to a reader accustomed to the English way of writing.

It has been wrongly believed that we understand the meaning of any text depending on the words and structures of the sentence only. Brown and Yule (1983) point out that one of the pervasive illusions which persist in the analysis of language is that we understand the meaning of a linguistic message solely in the basic of the words and structures of the sentence to convey that message.

It is not only enough for the writer to write perfect grammatical sentences to be understood but also, he/ she should supply suitable information, well-formedness and empty of fragmentation. Brown and Yule (1983) say *"When a writer has produced a perfectly grammatical sentence from which we can derive a literal interpretation, we would not claim to have understood, simply because we need more information"*.

Grice (1975) provides the most comprehensive framework for discussing discourse coherence. He was interested in the semantics of language and more specifically in how implicit meaning is conveyed. Campbell (1995: 15) says *"Grice's cooperative principle recognizes the cooperative foundation of communication by stating that discourse participants expect all contributions to be made as required based on the purpose of their interaction"*. Therefore, Grice's work classifies the expectations of discourse participants since expectations have been seen as central to the phenomenon of coherence. Grice suggests four maxims of his cooperative principle which characterize the effective use of language. These principles are:

- 1) Quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required.
- 2) Quality: do not say what you believe to be false.
- 3) Relation: be relevant.
- 4) Manner: be brief, clear and orderly.

## **2.4. Error Analysis**

### **2.4.1 Definition of Error Analysis**

Error Analysis (EA) is a type of linguistic study that focuses on the errors learners make; or it may be defined as simply as the name suggested, that is 'the study of learners' errors' (Krashen, 1981; Ellis, 1997; Gass & Larry, 2001). This definition was developed from positive views of linguists and language educators who recognized the active role of errors in the process of language learning during which learners naturally make errors and these errors can be observed, analyzed and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learners (Brown, 1980, p.223)

### **2.4.2 History and significance of Error Analysis**

Corder (1967) is regarded as the father of Error Analysis (EA) since he himself, together with his colleagues, pioneered the field of EA in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). With his article entitled *"The Significance of Learner Errors"* (1967), Corder brought to EA a new look at learner errors which had been previously seen as "flaws" that needed to be eradicated. Corder put forward a completely different view by affirming that those errors are *"important in and off themselves"*. In 1981, Corder's point of view reveals the very significance of learner errors in three different ways. Firstly, by means of undertaking a

systematic analysis of learner errors, teachers know learners' present weaknesses as well as strengths and thus adapt teaching methods or materials for the sake of learners. Secondly, for researchers, learner errors can serve as an evident reflection of the strategies that learners use to acquire a second language. This argument was highly approved by Richards (1974), Dulay and Burt (1974), and Taylor (1975). Thirdly, errors can serve as a device to help learners improve their learning and thus, they are 'indispensable' to the learners themselves. In other words, errors are viewed as 'red flags' that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the second language (Gass & Selinker, 2001). For those reasons, errors no doubt play a positive role in second language acquisition and they have remarkably contributed to the success of EA.

Error analysis research emphasizes an important difference between contrastive analysis and error analysis. Contrastive analysis refers to the process in which the learner's native language and the target language are compared; whereas in error analysis, the learner's utterance, which is also known as *interlanguage*, is compared to the target language (Kim, 2008). It is through EA that the errors made in the Target Language (TL) and that TL itself can be compared thoroughly. EA consists of two objects, namely theoretical object and applied object in which the former is to "*elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language*" and the latter is to enable the learner "*to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes*" (Corder, 1974, cited in AbiSamra, 2003, p.7).

Error Analysis can simultaneously serve two purposes: diagnostic and prognostic. According to Corder (1967), it is diagnostic since it can point out the learner's grasp of the language at a given point during the learning process, and in contrast, prognostic because it can tell teachers and educators to adapt language learning materials depending on the learners' real degree of language understanding.

In general, EA can be seen as an effective tool to deal with the errors that learners make; it has its own limitations, though. According to Brown (1994) and Ellis (1996), EA provides only a partial picture of learner language. In fact, EA does not take into account avoidance strategy in SLA but it only investigates what learners do. When learners avoid some sentence structures which they do not feel sure of due to the differences between their mother tongue and the target language, they may be seen to have no problems with their language learning. What learners keep in their minds without speaking out or writing down on their papers proves to be out of control.

Apart from some unavoidable limitations, however, today EA is viewed to be particularly relevant for focus on form teaching methodology. For this reason, the researcher would like to employ EA as a tool to detect common types and sources of student errors in terms of the organization of their English writing.

### **2.4.3 Models for Error Analysis**

One of the most important theoretical bases to conduct an error analysis is to build up a model in which errors will be systematically analyzed. Corder (1967 & 1974) develops a model for error analysis which covers three steps as follows.



- 1) Data collection: Recognition of idiosyncrasy;
- 2) Description: Accounting for idiosyncratic dialect;
- 3) Explanation (the ultimate or error analysis).

This model was gradually complemented by Brown (1994) and Ellis (1995). Then, it is Ellis (1997) and Hubbard et al. (1996) who further develop Corder's model by giving practical advice as well as providing examples of how to identify and analyze learners' errors. Therefore, the initial model is adapted and modified as follows:

- 1) Selection of a corpus of language;
- 2) Identification of errors;
- 3) Classification of errors;
- 4) Explanation of errors.

As far as the models for error analysis have been concerned, the researcher decided to adopt Corder's model (1974) which includes four steps, namely Collection of a sample of learner language, Identification of errors, Description of errors and Explanation of errors. The reason for this selection is that the model consists of the most fundamental steps to conduct an errors analysis, and allows a comprehensive data analysis.

## 2.5 Previous studies

As addressed in previous sections, Error Analysis, regarded as a major field of linguistic study related to learners' errors in SLA, has attracted the attention of numerous researchers and language educators. Thus, many empirical studies, especially on student written errors have been conducted worldwide. A number of those studies are discussed in this section.

Anchalee S. and Pongrat R. (2008) carried out research in English written by first-year medical students from the four medical schools at Mahidol university. The objective of this study was to identify the types of errors in paragraph writing in English. One hundred and thirty-four medical students from four medical schools at Mahidol University were assigned to write an opinion paragraph in English on medical ethics based on a reading passage chosen from the internet. A standard format for paragraph writing consisting of 10 criteria was used for evaluating the types of errors. The frequency of errors was calculated as a percentage. A Chi-square test was used to compare the errors committed by Siriraj Medical students to those from the other three medical schools: Ramathibodi, Praboromchanok and Bangkok Metropolitan. A P-value of  $< 0.05$  was considered statistically significant. It was shown that most students had errors in a standard format of paragraph writing. A high percentage of errors was found in eight out of 10 criteria. Praboromchanok Medical students had the highest percentage of errors.

In a study entitled "Qualitative Characteristics of Coherence, Substitution, and Reference by Non-English Major Chinese Students", Ying Shen (2010) identified the interrelation among coherence, substitution, and reference. The author collected data through student questionnaires. Participants included 30 non-English major Chinese undergraduate students. The findings of this study suggested that the similarities and differences were confirmed either in all participants or in the two gender groups. For

example, in terms of similarities, either all participants or the two gender groups tend to commit more mistakes in regard to coherence than substitution or reference. On the other hand, some significant differences were found, for instance, males scored relatively higher in the mean substitution and reference than did females, whereas females performed better in the mean coherence compared to males in the same field.

In addition, Abdel Hamid Ahmed (2010) also conducted a study on coherence and cohesion problems in EFL essay writing made by Egyptian student teachers of English. In relation to coherence problems in their English writing, some problems were revealed such as difficulty writing the introduction, the thesis statement, the topic sentence, writing concluding sentences and writing the conclusion. In reference to student teachers' problems in cohesion, some were reported such as difficulty in using cataphoric and anaphoric references, ellipsis, substitution, and genre-related cohesive ties. The researcher also discovered challenges including lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, and writing anxiety; teaching workload limited lecture duration, scarcity of teachers' professional development, and the essay writing course are the main causes of the students' problems.

Meihua Liu and Gehui Wang (2011) conducted a study to investigate the paragraph-level errors in 90 English compositions produced by 30 Chinese undergraduate non-English majors on three tasks over eight weeks. Analyses of these errors and the survey data yielded the following main findings: (1) Among the four categories of paragraph-level errors, errors in paragraph development accounted for the largest percentage, followed by errors in paragraph coherence, errors in paragraph unity and inconsistency in point of view. This pattern was generally observed for the distribution of the errors in each individual task; (2) the errors generally tended to increase across tasks. Errors in paragraph development in particular increased statistically significantly in the last two tasks; (3) the errors of all categories were generally inversely correlated with the students' writing performance, among which errors in paragraph development were significantly inversely related to the latter, and (4) several reasons were identified for the errors such as the lack of writing practice and the influence of Chinese. Thus, it can be concluded that paragraph-level errors are often persistent in students' English writing and are closely related to the quality of the writing.

Recently, finding about errors in English writing were also found in Do's (2014) study. This study mainly aimed to investigate the weaknesses found in English essays written by Vietnamese students of English as a foreign language from Dong Thap University, South of Vietnam. These essays were their in-class time exam papers. The researcher indicated that though students were all third and fourth-year majors, their writing skills were not as good as expected, especially in language use and essay content. It is, hence, recommended that teachers should take into consideration problems to help the students improve their writing skills.

All of the empirical studies reviewed above investigating common errors in English writing have been carried out in other countries rather than in Vietnam. The present research, as a result, aimed to investigate errors in Vietnamese EFL learners'

writings. It was recommended that the replications of the current study were conducted mainly to investigate learners' organization errors in paragraph writing and to examine whether the findings of the study in Vietnam would be similar or different from those in the other EFL contexts.

## **2.6 Justification of the study**

The key points discussed so far are an overview of writing, the importance of EFL/ ESL writing, organization of paragraphs and essentials of paragraph construction, followed by a definition of error analysis, history, the significance of EA as well as models for EA. Studies on common errors in English writing were also included. However, there appears to have been a lack of research on English paragraph-level errors in the context of Vietnam. The current study was; therefore, conducted in order to explore organization errors in EFL learners' paragraph writing.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research questions**

The main purpose of this research was to investigate organization errors in paragraph writing of EFL learners and the causes of those errors. This study; therefore, aimed to answer the questions:

- 1) What are the frequencies of organization errors committed in paragraph writing by EFL learners?
- 2) Are there any significant differences in the frequencies of organization errors due to gender?
- 3) What are the general sources for the errors?

### **3.2 Research design**

Descriptive research with quantitative methods (writing test and questionnaire) was used to collect the data about participants' frequencies of organization errors in English paragraph writing, significant differences in the frequencies of organization errors due to gender and the general sources for the errors.

### **3.3 Participants**

Sixty EFL learners (36 females and 24 males) from two classes in a foreign language center in Can Tho City, south of Vietnam, were involved in the study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 25. Their English knowledge was assumed to be pre-intermediate level. These participants had at least seven years of English learning experience in secondary schools. Most of them did not have good writing skills because writing was not the focus of the school curriculum.

An experienced English teacher assisted the researchers in setting criteria for grading and grading the learners' writing papers during the study. This teacher has been

teaching English writing at a foreign language centre for about ten years. She also participated in validating the writing test.

### **3.4 Instruments**

To answer the three research questions, the present study collected writing tests and a questionnaire on the participants' perceptions of the difficulties and organization errors in their English paragraph writing. These research instruments were described in detail in the sections below.

#### **3.4.1 Writing test**

The writing test that was designed consisted of three main parts: the oriented setting, the theme and the guidelines. An obvious setting about the topic that participants were going to write about was clearly established. A direct request focused on the topic such as "describe one of your classmates" was used. Then, the test introduced the expectations that the paragraph should be "well-organized" and with an approximate length. The writing test also provided guidelines for participants, in which participants could follow: "your friend's physical appearance, the type of clothing he/she wears, his/her characteristics, abilities, and hobbies".

##### **3.4.1.1 Scoring criteria**

The English as a Second Language (ESL) Composition Profile adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981) was used to measure the participants' writing competence in the present research. According to Bacha (2001), this scoring system that underlies the ESL Composition Profile is similar to holistic rating: the rater holistically assigns a rough score for each of five aspects: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

The researchers and a teacher participating in the study as a second grader, read and marked the participants' papers independently based on the adapted ESL Composition Profile. The total score for each paper was the mean of the two raters' scores.

#### **3.4.2 The questionnaire**

The second instrument of this study was the adapted questionnaire by Meihua Liu and Gehui Wang (2011). Fifteen items were administered in order to gain the learners' perceptions of the errors in their writing. The items of the questionnaire were grouped into 2 categories: (1) general perspective on the difficulty of paragraph writing in English (items 1-8), and (2) perceptions on the possible causes for organization errors in their English writing (items 9-15). The questionnaire was designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' with values 1-5 assigned to the descriptor respectively.

### **3.5 Piloting the questionnaire and the writing test**

#### **3.5.1 Piloting the questionnaire**

First, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and then read by several teachers of English who had experience in doing research in order to assure its original validity and ease of use. Some minor adjustments such as the wording and the use of the Vietnamese equivalents in the translation were made.

Then, the questionnaire was piloted with 30 EFL learners and calculated for proper reliability value by Cronbach alpha coefficient. The reliability of the questionnaire was .71, which showed that the questionnaire was reliable.

#### **3.5.2 Piloting the writing test**

Before being used in the main study, the writing test was checked for topic, requirements (time length for test completion and paragraph length), as well as instruction consistency by two experienced writing teachers, one of whom was involved in the study as the marker. Then it was piloted with the 30 learners who were also involved in piloting the questionnaire to assure its reliability and validity. The result of the pilot showed that the internal consistency Cronbach was .82. The writing test, therefore, was considered reliable and valid.

### **3.6 Data collection procedure**

#### **3.6.1. Administering the writing test**

The test on English writing competence was given to the participants after they had been instructed on how to write a well-organized descriptive paragraph. After informing the purpose of the test, participants were asked to read the topic and the instructions of the test carefully. They had thirty minutes to plan, write, and revise the writing test. The papers were then collected for analysis.

#### **3.6.2 Administering the questionnaire**

The questionnaire was delivered to the participants after they finished the English writing test. First, the researchers explained the aims of the research. Then, they guided them to complete the questionnaire and was available to explain if they were unsure of any statements. The participants had about seven minutes to answer all the questions in the questionnaire.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

To answer the first question of the study "What are the frequencies of organization errors committed in paragraph writing by EFL learners?" the researchers used a statistical program (SPSS) using frequencies and percentage. For the purpose of this investigation, only organization errors included the poor topic sentence, disunity, incoherence and poor concluding sentence and no conclusion are described.

Independence Samples *t-test* was also used to answer the second question “Are there any significant differences in the frequencies of organization errors due to gender?”. In addition, sources of errors were identified and studied through the analysis of the questionnaire results.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Participants’ frequencies of organization errors

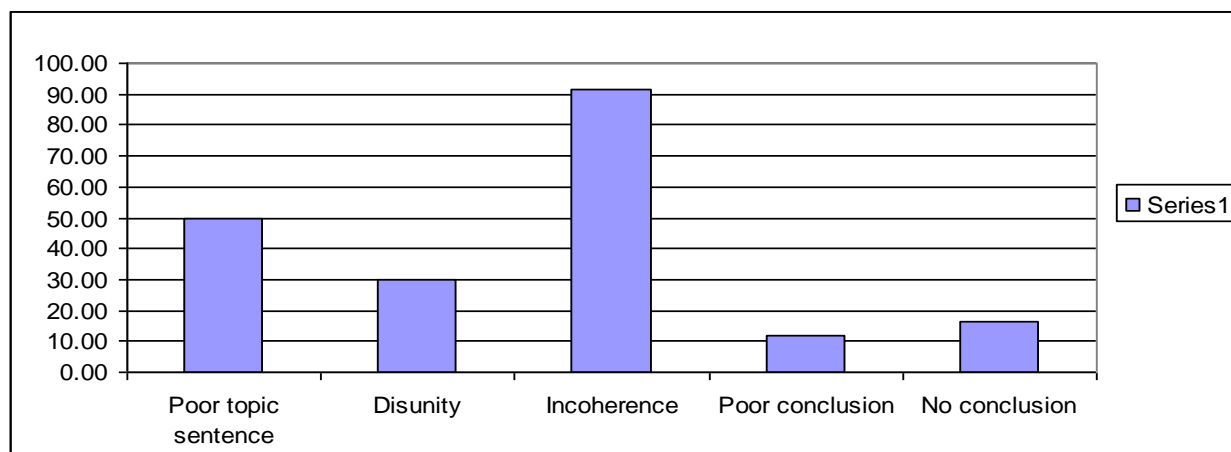
O’Donnell and Paiva (1993: pp.2-4) provided more details about the essential parts for paragraph writing which include a topic sentence, supporting sentences, details, logical order, logical connectors, a concluding sentence, unity and coherence.

As stated in the method of the study, the first question “What are the frequencies of organization errors committed in paragraph writing by EFL learners?” was answered by the interpretation of the qualitative data gained from analyzing 60 samples of participants’ written work. After collecting and analyzing the data, the errors are classified based on the given framework that consists of five error types. In addition, the errors revealed by examining the paragraphs are stated below in a hierarchy of random order along with the error count, percentage and mean. Here the result of the writing test comprises the analysis of data that deals with the situation of error gravity which concerns the establishment of a hierarchy of errors.

**Table 4.1:** Result of error analysis yielding different percentages and ranks in errors

Organization errors	Frequency	Hierarchy	Percentage (%)	Mean N=60
Poor topic sentence	30	II	50	.50
Disunity	18	III	30	.30
Incoherence	55	I	91.67	.92
Poor conclusion	7	IV	11.67	.12
No conclusion	10	V	16.67	.17

The percentage of each error category is illustrated in Figure 4.1 below.



**Figure 4.1:** Percentage of error categories

In total, one hundred and twenty (120) organization errors of various kinds were found as classified in Table 1. Based on the analysis and calculation made on data, it was revealed that the greatest number of all error types was incoherence. 91.67 % of error in paragraph coherence was committed by the respondents. Poor topic sentence error accounted for the second percentage (50%), followed by errors in paragraph unity (30%), and the lowest percentage fell into poor conclusion (11.67%) and no conclusion (16.67%).

#### 4.1.1 Poor topic sentence

A well-organized paragraph supports or develops a single controlling idea, which is expressed in a sentence called the topic sentence. A good topic sentence has the following functions and characteristics (Lawrence J. Z & Margaret K. S. 2007, p.7):

- (1) It tells the reader the main idea of the paragraph.
- (2) Every sentence in the paragraph relates to it.
- (3) It should be too general or too specific.
- (4) It should not use phrases such as *I am going to write about...* or *This paragraph is about...*

As reflected in Table 1, descriptive statistics reveal that the second percentage of organization errors is given to poor topic sentence (50%). The first problem concerning the topic sentence is that many learners failed to meet characteristic three. The following two examples are excerpted from the students' writing.

(1) *She is Minh. She is the first-year student of Ton Duc Thang University at the present. She is a beautiful girl...*

(2) *I have best friend. She is Lan. I and Lan are classmate in class English at Can Tho University. Her family has five people.....*

The topic sentences, the first ones in the two examples are too general.

In addition, some students seem to forget characteristic four and they produce poor topic sentences. Their paragraphs look like awkward topic sentence presentations. As a sequence, such topic sentences as in examples (3) and (4) should be improved.

(3) *I would like to introduce a friend who is a new English classmate. He is Phu. He is twenty-one years old. He is tall about 1.76 meters. He comes from Cantho city. He is studying at Can Tho University. His major is fishing economic...*

*[Suggested topic sentence: Phu, my new friend in English class, is a student of fishing economic class at Can Tho University. He is twenty-one years old.....]*

(4) *Now, I'm talking Miss Suong. Suong is twenty years old. She is very beautiful and gentle girl. She has good sense of humour. Suong is tall. She has got long black hair. Suong is an accountant student of Can Tho University...*

[Suggested topic sentence: *Suong is one of many new accountant students at Can Tho University. She is twenty years old....*]

#### 4.1.2 Disunity

The unity of a paragraph is derived from a controlling idea around which the paragraph is organized, a paragraph that lacks unity jumps from idea to idea, topic to topic, with no clear sense of purpose (Kramer et al., 1995). In the present study, errors in paragraph unity were defined as failing to show a controlling idea or having more than one controlling idea. Altogether, 18 (30%) errors of this kind were coded in the study.

(5) *"I have a new friend in my English class. He is Tung. He comes from Dong Thap. He is eighteen years old. Both I and he study in Can Tho University. He is funny and friendly. He has got a nice smile, so he always smile. He is also helpful. For example, he often help me to do my homework. He likes playing football, listening to music and going swimming pool in his free time. Sometimes, I and he go to school together. I and he went to Vung Tau in last weekend. We talk everything such as studying, girls, etc....I very like him. I hope we always good friends."*

The paragraph not only has poor topic sentences but also breaks the rules of unity because it contains two sentences that are off the topic. The twelfth and thirteen sentences in the paragraph (*"I and he went to Vung Tau in last weekend. We talk everything such as studying, girls, etc...."*) are the odd ones out. The information about last weekend is not directly relevant to the main idea or any other sentences in the paragraph. To restore the unity of example (5), delete those sentences.

Thus, the EFL learners seemed to have difficulty maintaining the unity of paragraph in English writing. They may start the paragraph quite well with a good topic sentence at the beginning. However, as they continue to write, the topic sentence seems to lose control gradually, more less related ideas crept in, finally diverting from the controlling idea. It seemed that once the topic sentence was out of sight (beyond certain number of sentences), the controlling idea was out of the writer's mind too (the topic sentence was totally forgotten). Another problem about paragraph unity common in the participants, in English writing was that the ideas were indeed related somehow, but due to the lack of a controlling topic sentence, the ideas scattered around loosely, thus damaging the unity of the paragraph.

These problems in paragraph unity were probably generated by the lack of a proper writing outline before the writing started due to limited time or laziness. A proper outline of a paragraph provides focus and direction for the actual writing, therefore ensuring an overall view of the paragraph in advance and limiting the possibility of drifting off the focus during the process of actual writing. This hypothesis was actually supported by the learners' self-reports in the survey. 63.3% of the respondents (strongly) agreed that their paragraphs lacked unity or focus because they just followed their instinctive thoughts during the actual writing (item 10). Namely, their pens went



wherever their thoughts went, without a proper outline in mind or in a paper in advance. The survey data also revealed that 78.4% of the respondents (strongly) disagreed with item 12 (When writing in English, I don't think it is necessary to have a topic sentence for a paragraph.), showing that most participants did realize the importance of a topic sentence in a paragraph and had probably done so in their writing. Nevertheless, the repeated occurrence of new ideas unrelated to the controlling idea in a paragraph suggested that some EFL learners had difficulty in achieving paragraph unity.

#### 4.1.3 Incoherence

Paragraph coherence requires that the thoughts within a paragraph be linked together (Kramer et al., 1995). In this sense, coherence involves both positioning the ideas or sentences in a paragraph so that they can relate logically to one another, and using certain connective devices to clarify the relationship between ideas (Kramer et al., 1995). Consequently, an error in paragraph coherence was defined as an ineffective or illogical organization of the thoughts in a paragraph, or a failure to provide necessary or proper connecting devices between ideas in the present study. Altogether, 55 (91.67%) errors of this kind were coded in the present study, indicating that the participants had much difficulty in achieving paragraph coherence. This was supported by the students' self-reports on the survey. As shown in Appendix 3, 51.6% of the respondents reported that a proper organization of ideas in an English paragraph was a difficulty for them (item 3); 75% thought they had trouble in making a paragraph coherent and logical (item 4); 48.4% admitted that they often made errors concerning paragraph organization (item 6); and 40 (66.7%) participants agreed that their writing often lacked necessary transitional markers (item 9). Namely, most students were not able to achieve coherence in paragraphs to varying degrees in their English writing.

Paragraph incoherence identified in the present study was mainly of ineffective organization of ideas, the lack of transitional markers and the misuse of cohesive devices, as illustrated by the following examples.

(6) *"Started the first English lesson. You did make me impressed the friendly and enthusiastic. Her name's Cam Phi. She comes from Ca Mau. Her 20 years old. She usually likes to watch a movies, listen to music, read books and go shopping with friends. Present, she is studying a tourism guide. Her family of four people. She has long hair and good laugh. She's pretty good at school and also to help friends in learning. My favourite thing to do in that she. She's very cute and very enthusiastic to help friends. She always knows how to treat friends. I hope my friendship and you'd be better. Because, I appreciate her friendship."*

(7) *"His name's Dien, he's a student in Can Tho University. His major is law. He's 20 years old. He's from Vinh Long. There are 4 people in his family: he, his parents and his younger brother. Although he studies very hard, he also likes sports very much. The best kind of sport he like is soccer. Besides, he also likes volleyball and badminton. In his*

*freetime, he usually listens to music, he likes listening jazz and dance music. He likes playing chess because he thinks it's very helpful for brain. In addition to, he is very friendly and helpful. He's willing to help me when I have problem in lessons. Specially, he is very funny. And the reason why he wants to learn English is he like it and he thinks English is very useful for his job."*

The writer didn't do a good job in example (6) regarding paragraph unity and coherence in that both a poor topic sentence and ineffective organization of the ideas. It would look better with such a topic sentence at the beginning like "*Cam Phi is one of my new friends in the English class. She comes from Ca Mau...*". In addition, the supporting details in this kind of descriptive paragraph should be ordered from facts to opinion (Cheryl P. & Margaret K. P. 2007, p.12). Another marked problem is the writer tended to repeat the same idea at different times. The following is a revised version of the example which demonstrates much higher coherence by rearranging the information in the correct order.

*"Cam Phi is one of my new friends in the English class. She comes from Ca Mau province. She is 20 years old, and studying tourism at present. Her family has four people. She has long hair and a nice smile. She is very cute and enthusiastic. She studies quite well at school and often helps her friends in learning. In addition, she has good behavior and that impresses me a lot. She likes watching films, listening to music, reading books and going shopping with friends. I respect her friendship and I hope we are always best friends."*

Although the paragraph in example (7) had the same problems like the one in example (6), some cohesive devices were employed to link ideas together. However, most of them (although, in addition to, and) are misused.

[Suggested paragraph → *Dien, a new member in English class, is a law student at Can Tho University. He is twenty years old and from Vinh Long. There are four people in his family: his parents, his younger brother and he. He looks tall and handsome. He is very friendly and helpful. In fact, he is willing to help me when I have difficulty in studying. Dien studies very hard and he wants to learn English because he thinks it is useful for his future job. Among many kinds of sports, he likes soccer best. Besides, he also plays volleyball, badminton and chess. In his free time, he usually listens to music, but he prefers jazz and dance music. I hope that Dien and I will become good friends.]*

Many factors could have contributed to some students' inability to achieve paragraph coherence in their English writing. As shown in Appendix 3, around more than 80% of the respondents perceived a lack of English writing practice (item 11) and insufficient knowledge about coherence in paragraph writing (item 13) as the main contributors to the loose organization and lack or misuse of transitional markers in their English writing. Compared with the concept of unity, coherence is often considered to be

more abstract. Some students even did not know the word coherence, let alone understand how coherence works or is achieved. As a result, even good writers might not do so well in maintaining paragraph coherence. The lack of writing practice might have also disabled some students to achieve paragraph coherence in their English writing.

Moreover, paragraph incoherence might be the result of writing as a writer-orientated process instead of a reader-orientated process. Ideas that are connected in the writer's mind may not seem obviously connected to the reader. Consequently, it is important for the writer to clearly mark the relationships between sentences and ideas. To do this, the writer has to organize his or her thoughts logically and provide clear transitional markers to indicate any change in the flow of ideas in a paragraph. The pity is that many learners were too preoccupied with expressing their own ideas to consider whether the reader could follow them.

#### **4.1.4 Poor concluding sentence and no concluding sentence**

A good concluding sentence signals the end of the paragraph and summarizes the important points briefly or restates the topic sentence in different words (Alice Oshima & Ann Hogue 2006, p.16). Why is it important in a paragraph? It is needed to show that the writer has completed what he wants to say and to leave in the reader's mind a final statement of the paragraph's main idea.

In the present study, poor concluding paragraphs only occurred in 7 cases (11.67%) out of 120 organization errors. Although the percentage of this category is not high compared with that of the others, it shows that a few participants still had difficulty producing good concluding sentences. Some of them even ended the paragraph without any conclusion (16.67%). The problem of having a poor concluding sentence or lacking of conclusion more or less exists in the following examples.

*(8) "She is Minh. She is the first-year student of Ton Duc Thang university at the present. She is a beautiful girl and a comfortable person. She has got long black hair with a bright smile. She is tall and charming. She is taller than I about 10cm. I think she usually does exercise in the morning. She like chatting till dawn with friends. She usually chat till midnight with me. She often cry when it's the largest rains. I don't understand the reason. Besides, she like more winter than spring so she usually travels in Dalat on vacation. She like cold air at Dalat. In conclusion, she is a beautiful girl and she is a comfortable person. I am very happy when I have her."*

*(9)" Her name's My, she is a student in Can Tho university. Her major finance and banking. She is 20 years old. She is my classmate in English class. She is from Bac Lieu, there are four people in her's family. Her's father is a manager, and her's mother is an officer. She is very like learning English. She thinks English is very important for her job. Beside of learning, she like sport very much. Specially, she is like taekwondo. So she is powerful. However, she is very like rose flower and she has romantic love. Her boyfriend is*

*very kind and funny. On the weekend, she usually go to the supermarket and bookstore. She often listen to music, read book in my free time."*

The two paragraphs are not well-organized. They are not only disunity but also incoherence. For example, the word "like" is repeated many times within the same paragraph. The writers insert irrelevant ideas into their writing ("However, she is very like a rose flower and she has romantic love. Her boyfriend is very kind and funny" in example 9). Furthermore, the topic and concluding sentences need to be improved.

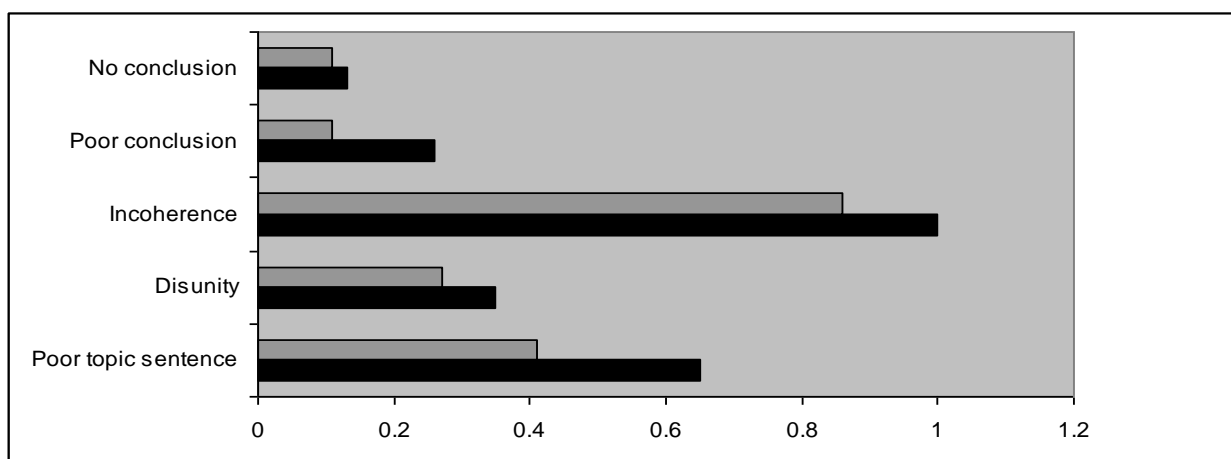
*Suggested versions:*

*(8) "Minh, a freshman at Ton Duc Thang University, is a beautiful and easy-going girl. She has got long black hair and a bright smile. She is tall and charming. Minh always gives help to her friends when they are in difficulty. She likes chatting till dawn with friends, and she usually chats till midnight with me. She often cries when it rains heavily. Besides, she prefers winter than spring, so she usually travels to Dalat on vacation. She enjoys cold air in Dalat. In conclusion, she is a pretty and friendly girl. I am very happy when I make friend with her."*

*(9) "My, my new friend in English class, is a finance and banking student at Can Tho university. She is 20 years old. She is from Bac Lieu. There are four people in her family. Her father is a manager, and her mother is an officer. She has an oval face with round eyes. My is very friendly and helpful. She likes learning English because she thinks it is very important for her job. Besides learning, she also loves sport, and she prefers taekwondo. On the weekend, she usually goes to the supermarket and bookstore. She often listens to music and reads book in her free time. I hope that we will become good friends."*

#### 4.2 Differences between male and female groups in terms of the frequency of organization error categories

Figure 4.2 presents the mean scores of the frequency of organization errors of the two genders.



**Figure 4.2:** Frequency of organization errors of the two genders

As shown in Figure 4.2, all organization error categories were made more frequently by the male gender. The Independent Sample t-Test was then conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference between male and female participants in terms of their frequent commitment to organization errors. The results were presented in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2:** Means equality of frequency of organization errors between male and female genders

T-test for equality of Means					
Organization errors	Genders	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	MD
Poor topic sentence	Male	1.88	58	.07	.25
	Female	1.89	47.59	.07	.25
Disunity	Male	.63	58	.53	.08
	Female	.62	44	.54	.08
Incoherence	Male	1.86	58	.07	.135
	Female	2.37	36	.02	.135
Poor conclusion	Male	1.55	58	.13	.153
	Female	1.43	35.48	.16	.153
No conclusion	Male	.26	58	.80	.022
	Female	.25	43.60	.80	.022

Note. \*\*  $p < .05$

Table 4.2 shows that there is a significant difference between the two groups of participants in terms of the category of incoherence ( $t = 2.37$ ,  $df = 36$ ,  $p = .02$ ). The difference in the other organization error categories between the two genders was, however, insignificant.

## 5. Conclusion, discussions and implications

### 5.1 Summary of main research findings

The researchers have detected 120 organization errors in descriptive paragraphs written by 60 pre-intermediate students. These errors were tabulated according to the times of frequency and percentage. The types of organization errors that were analyzed for this study were limited to five types. There were 30 (50%) poor topic sentence paragraphs, 18 (30%) errors in paragraph unity, 55 (91.67%) errors in paragraph coherence and 17 poor conclusion and no conclusion paragraphs. The results of the study showed that the errors committed by the students were due to a lack of writing practice. In addition, we should take into consideration that there are other factors that should not be ignored such as ignorance of the conventions of coherence, lack of training in using cohesive devices and inadequate learning, especially the use of linking devices.

Moreover, with respect to the results of Independent Sample *t-test* for all of the subjects in this study, an obvious mean difference in the frequency of errors in paragraph coherence between males and females appeared ( $t = 2.37$ ,  $p = .02$ ), whereas no mean difference in other error categories between the two genders was observed.

## 5.2 Discussions

In evaluating EFL learners' descriptive paragraph writing, the researcher found that most learners did not present a reasonable connection or relation, between ideas in their paragraphs which causes "*coherence break*" (Wikborg, 1990). They did not use transitional words to link the ideas together or misused the connectors. One thought is not connected to the previous one. In addition, the sentences in the paragraphs did not directly relate to the main idea. That upsets the unity of the paragraphs. Furthermore, it seemed that most participants did not have organizational skills and paid little attention to topic sentences and conclusions. These are the areas that should be explained to students so that they keep them in mind when writing a paragraph in English.

## 5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study had several limitations which might have affected the findings. First, the number of participants in the study was small and only pre-intermediate learners were involved. The results, therefore, cannot be generalized to other populations. Second, the number of samples was also small. Only 60 papers of written work were collected for data analysis. Third, the writing test was not of various genres and topics. Each of the participants was asked to write a descriptive paragraph about a classmate.

Therefore, in future research, it is hoped that studies on organization errors in paragraph writing with various genres and topics should take into consideration.

## 5.4 Pedagogical implications

Considering the finding above, the following ideas should be taken into account concerning organizational skills:

- 1) Teachers are advised to expose their students to models of organized writing in which transitional markers are properly used.
- 2) Teachers should not be disappointed if their students have problems in producing coherent texts. On the contrary, they should help them to improve their abilities in coherence by presenting them with copies of their paragraphs that contain sentences which violate coherence.
- 3) Teachers should shift their attention from teaching sentences in isolation to a manner in which they are connected.
- 4) Teachers should view language as a unified whole in which every part supports the others. They should not pay attention to grammar only but they should view language in terms of the meaning it tends to convey.
- 5) Teachers are urged to emphasize the importance of organized compositions, divide them into paragraphs and follow logical and coherent expressions of ideas.
- 6) Teachers should shift from teaching connectors out of context to teaching them communicatively. The teacher can ask students to read a text that contains different types of connectors. Then, the teacher works with the students to underline and classify the connectors into groups according to their types and number of occurrences. Finally, the teacher motivates the students to infer the

meaning, the uses of connectors and to what extent these connectors help the text more cohesive.

- 7) Teachers should teach the students to be aware of cohesive text using context lexical ties. Liu (2000) in his paper entitled "Writing Cohesion: Using Content Lexical Ties in ESOL" designed exercises for understanding and using content lexical ties. These exercises can increase the students' vocabulary and help them to understand better the vocabulary being studied. This is because the exercises enable students to learn the words in context or in relation to one another as synonyms, antonyms, superordinate, or hyponyms. Also, a better understanding of these words allows students to use them to improve cohesion in their writing, hence enhancing their writing skills.
- 8) Teachers should provide students with materials that increase their awareness of the role of coherence in writing. Lee Icy (2008) in her paper entitled "Helping Students Develop Coherence in Writing" designed materials that can be employed to teach coherence in writing in steps like the following:
  - Introductory activities: Lee, Icy (2008) introduce students to the topic and stimulate their interest in the role of coherence in writing. In the introduction to macrostructure, for instance, students can take turns retelling a fairy tale that is familiar to them all. Or they can describe an embarrassing event. Major aspects of the story structure, such as situation, problem, solution and evaluation, are then discussed. In presenting information structure, it is helpful to teach students how to become more aware of the distribution of information in texts. Lee uses pairs of sentences like those below and asks students to identify the "old" information given in the first sentence and then the new one in the second sentence.
    - 1a. Near a large forest lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and two children.
    - b. The boy's name was John and the girl's name was Mary.
  - 1. a. My mother has written a new book.
  - b. It's about gardening.
- Explicit teaching: Lee, Icy (2008) provides students with explicit explanations, preferably using authentic texts and simple text-analysis tasks. For instance, in teaching macrostructure, students can analyze texts that contain the problem-solution structure. Statements 1 and 2 are the situations, statement 3 is the evaluation, and statement 4 is the problem (marked by "However"). Through explicit teaching, students can be shown that when they include the major elements of the macrostructure and order them logically, they are likely to achieve coherence in their writing  
Instruction: Re-order the sentences so that they make sense.
  - 1) I am writing to inquire if it would be possible for you to include this information as a simple correction in the next issue.

- 2) I was glad to see my article called "Advertising Management Service", which appear in the September issue of your newsletter.
- 3) This would give my company credit for encouraging the use of techniques described in the article and for allow me to publish them.
- 4) However, my affiliation with this company as their advertising manager was omitted.

### 5.5 Conclusion

It is hoped that in light of this study results, the teachers will pay more attention to the terms coherence and unity in the writing course. Furthermore, it is hoped that there will be a shift in focus among teachers on teaching writing depending on the discourse level rather than the sentence level.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

Both authors strongly agreed on the publication of this paper and there was no contention or rivalry during finishing the work. In other words, the authors declare no conflicts of interest in this article. Both authors are fully and equally responsible for the benefits and harms after this article is published. The authors, moreover, declare that the material presented by us in this paper is our original work, and does not contain any materials taken from other copyrighted sources. Wherever such materials have been included, they have been clearly indented or/and identified by quotation marks and due and proper acknowledgements given by citing the source at appropriate places.

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