

DISCOURSE-LEVEL WRITING COMPETENCE IN EFL: UNITY AND COHERENCE IN RECOUNT TEXTS

Helisa Fadilah^{1*}, Titi Rokhayati², Juita Triana³
^{1,2,3} Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo, Purworejo, Indonesia

helisafadhillah08@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Writing proficiency remains a major challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in managing macro-level organizational aspects such as unity and coherence. Although previous studies have generally treated these constructs as complementary components of writing quality, limited research has examined them as distinct yet interconnected competencies. This study aims to investigate how Grade X vocational students at SMK TKM Teknik Purworejo realize unity and coherence in recount writing and to identify their proficiency profiles. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design involving 34 student recount texts analyzed using a validated analytical checklist focusing on thematic consistency, logical sequencing, tense consistency, and cohesive device use. The findings reveal an imbalance between unity and coherence. Most students were able to maintain thematic focus and sustain a central idea throughout their texts. However, many experienced difficulties in constructing coherent discourse, particularly in connecting ideas logically, maintaining smooth progression, and using cohesive devices effectively. Common problems included overreliance on simple temporal conjunctions, limited lexical cohesion, and fragmented narrative flow. The findings suggest that coherence requires more complex linguistic and cognitive skills than unity. This study contributes to EFL writing research by providing insight into discourse-level writing competence in a vocational context and highlighting the importance of teaching coherence explicitly in writing instruction.

Keywords: Coherence, Cohesion, EFL Writing, Recount Text, Unity

INTRODUCTION

Writing proficiency is widely recognized as a central component of English language competence. However, producing well-structured, meaningful, and reader-oriented texts remains a persistent challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Writing is not merely a linguistic activity but also a complex cognitive and rhetorical process that requires the integration of grammatical knowledge, lexical resources, organization, and critical thinking (Altun, 2023). Hyland (2019) argues that effective writing involves not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to organize ideas logically and communicate meaning appropriately to readers. Similarly, Graham (2018) emphasizes that writing development involves recursive processes such as planning, organizing, revising, and evaluating ideas.

These perspectives indicate that successful writing depends not only on sentence-level accuracy but also on discourse-level competence.

Despite the importance of discourse-level writing competence, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in producing coherent and unified texts. Research across different EFL contexts consistently shows that students often struggle to maintain logical flow, connect ideas effectively, and sustain thematic focus in their writing. Studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Jordan, and Indonesia reveal recurring problems related to fragmented organization, weak paragraph unity, and ineffective use of cohesive devices (Ahmed, 2019; Alsariera & Yunus, 2023; Anindita, 2024; Soomro et al., 2025). Similarly, Mohseni and Samadian (2019) found that many Iranian EFL learners relied heavily on simple conjunctions without successfully creating meaningful coherence between sentences. These findings suggest that many learners possess limited understanding of how ideas should be logically developed and connected within a text.

From a theoretical perspective, unity and coherence represent two essential yet distinct dimensions of effective writing. Unity refers to the consistency of a central idea throughout a text, while coherence concerns the logical relationship and meaningful progression between ideas (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Although these concepts are closely related, recent studies indicate that they should not be treated as identical constructs. Dwijayanti and Purnama (2020), for example, found that students were generally able to maintain topic relevance but still experienced difficulty in creating smooth transitions and logical progression. Similarly, Dasril et al. (2019) reported that students' research background writing demonstrated acceptable unity but weak coherence due to poor idea development and limited rhetorical connection. These findings indicate that students may succeed in maintaining thematic focus while still failing to construct coherent discourse.

Several recent studies further demonstrate that coherence remains one of the most problematic aspects of EFL writing. Alqasham (2021) found that Saudi EFL learners frequently produced essays with weak semantic connections despite using cohesive markers. Likewise, Leli (2020) reported that students often relied on repetitive connectors and mechanical transitions, resulting in superficial coherence rather than meaningful discourse integration. Widhiyanto et al. (2023) also observed that EFL undergraduate students struggled to achieve coherence in abstract writing due to inconsistent thematic progression and limited control of idea organization. These findings support Crossley et al. (2016), who argue that the mere presence of cohesive devices does not automatically produce coherent writing. Instead, coherence emerges through effective rhetorical organization and meaningful relationships between ideas.

In addition to linguistic difficulties, instructional practices also contribute to students' writing problems. Writing instruction in many EFL classrooms still tends to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and sentence-level accuracy rather than discourse organization and meaning construction (Kuni Hikmah Hidayati, 2018; Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). As a result, students may develop acceptable grammatical competence while still struggling to organize ideas coherently. Ahmed et al. (2024) emphasize that many EFL learners encounter difficulty maintaining unity because classroom instruction often focuses more on formal correctness

than on discourse development. Similarly, Wakerkwa and Astuti (2025) found that students' essays frequently lacked logical progression even when sentence structures were grammatically acceptable. These findings suggest that writing difficulties are not only linguistic but also pedagogical in nature.

Within genre-based pedagogy, recount text is commonly used to develop students' writing ability because it provides a relatively clear organizational structure consisting of orientation, events, and reorientation (Anderson & Anderson, 1997; Derewianka & Jones, 2016). However, several studies indicate that structural familiarity alone does not guarantee effective writing. Students often produce recount texts that are chronologically organized but lack elaboration, causal connection, and coherent progression between events (Lestari et al., 2022; Siska et al., 2025). Agustini et al. (2025) similarly found that EFL students frequently demonstrated acceptable cohesion at the sentence level but failed to achieve coherence across paragraphs. This suggests that students may follow generic structures mechanically without fully understanding how ideas should be connected meaningfully.

Recent pedagogical studies have proposed several approaches to improve coherence and unity in EFL writing. Fitria et al. (2021) highlight the importance of explicit instruction in cohesion and coherence strategies, while Kim Nhung and Huu Hiep (2023) demonstrate that thematic progression instruction can significantly improve coherence in students' writing. Other studies emphasize the role of visual planning and digital support. Bukhari (2016) found that mind mapping techniques helped students organize ideas more systematically, whereas Harunasari (2023) and Baskara (2023) report that AI-assisted writing tools such as ChatGPT may support idea development and organizational awareness in EFL writing. These studies indicate that discourse-level competence can be improved through more strategic and integrative instructional approaches.

Despite the growing body of research on coherence and unity, several important gaps remain. First, many previous studies focus primarily on university students, while vocational high school students remain underrepresented, particularly in Indonesian EFL contexts. Second, a considerable number of studies rely mainly on quantitative scoring or surface-level error identification, offering limited explanation of how unity and coherence interact in authentic student writing. Third, many studies examine cohesion and coherence together without critically distinguishing their different functions in discourse construction. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how vocational EFL learners manage thematic focus and logical progression simultaneously in recount writing.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how vocational high school students construct unity and coherence in recount texts, particularly in relation to thematic consistency, logical sequencing, and the use of cohesive devices. By adopting a qualitative descriptive approach and focusing on authentic student writing, this study seeks to provide a more detailed understanding of discourse-level writing competence in vocational EFL contexts. The findings are expected to contribute not only to EFL writing research but also to pedagogical practices by providing insights into how unity and coherence can be more effectively developed in classroom instruction.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate how unity and coherence are realized in students' recount texts. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on examining textual features and discourse organization as they naturally occur in students' writing rather than testing causal relationships or measuring the effectiveness of an intervention. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain that qualitative research enables researchers to explore complex phenomena in natural settings and interpret meaning based on participants' authentic experiences or outputs. In this study, the students' written texts served as the primary source of data for understanding how macro-level writing competencies were constructed in recount writing.

The participants consisted of 34 Grade X students from Class A of the Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ) program at SMK TKM Teknik Purworejo. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had previously received instruction on recount texts and were therefore considered relevant to the objectives of the study. The vocational school context was specifically chosen because vocational students are expected to develop practical communicative writing skills related to reporting, documenting experiences, and organizing information systematically. According to Miles et al. (2014), purposive sampling in qualitative inquiry is appropriate when participants possess characteristics closely related to the phenomenon being investigated.

Data were collected through a classroom-based writing task and document analysis. Students were instructed to write a recount text based on their personal experiences during a 60-minute classroom session conducted under normal learning conditions. This procedure was intended to obtain authentic writing data and minimize external intervention so that the texts reflected students' actual writing competence. The collected texts were treated as documentary data and became the sole source of analysis. The study focused specifically on the final written products because the main objective was to analyze how unity and coherence were realized in completed student texts.

In qualitative research, the researcher functions as the primary instrument for collecting and interpreting data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To support systematic analysis, the researcher employed an analytical checklist adapted from Togatorop and Saragih (2024). Several adjustments were made to align the instrument with the characteristics of recount texts and the vocational EFL context. The checklist evaluated two major aspects: unity and coherence. Unity was analyzed based on thematic consistency, relevance of supporting ideas, and maintenance of paragraph focus. Meanwhile, coherence was analyzed through logical sequencing of ideas, consistency of tense usage, and the use of cohesive devices to connect events and information.

To facilitate interpretation, students' performance was classified into four proficiency categories: Very Good (80–100), Good (60–79), Poor (30–59), and Very Poor (0–29). The categorization was adapted from common qualitative scoring interpretations in EFL writing assessment and was used to describe the overall quality of students' unity and coherence performance. Texts categorized as "Very Good" demonstrated consistent thematic focus, logical progression, and effective use of cohesive devices with minimal disruption to

meaning. “Good” texts generally maintained topic relevance and basic coherence but still contained minor weaknesses in idea development or transitions. “Poor” texts showed noticeable problems in maintaining focus, sequencing ideas, or establishing meaningful connections between sentences. Meanwhile, the “Very Poor” category referred to texts with serious organizational problems that significantly disrupted comprehensibility.

Prior to implementation, the analytical checklist underwent expert validation to ensure content validity and theoretical alignment. The instrument was reviewed by two experts in EFL writing and discourse analysis who evaluated the clarity, relevance, and adequacy of each indicator in representing the constructs of unity and coherence. Based on their feedback, several revisions were made, particularly in refining the indicators related to logical sequencing and paragraph focus to improve clarity and consistency of analysis. This validation process helped strengthen the credibility and appropriateness of the instrument for analyzing vocational students’ recount writing.

The data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis began with repeated reading of all student texts to develop familiarity with the content and organizational patterns. During the data condensation stage, relevant segments related to unity and coherence were identified and coded based on the analytical indicators. The coded data were then organized into analytical categories and displayed in tables to facilitate comparison and pattern identification across texts. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting recurring patterns and relating them to the objectives of the study, particularly students’ proficiency profiles and common difficulties in constructing coherent and unified discourse.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through expert validation of the analytical instrument and careful alignment between theoretical concepts and analytical procedures. Dependability was maintained by applying consistent coding procedures and conducting repeated reviews of the data during analysis. In addition, transparency was ensured through systematic documentation of the analytical process, enabling the findings to be traced back to the original student texts. These procedures strengthened the reliability and validity of the study within the context of vocational EFL writing research.

RESULTS

Distribution of Students’ Proficiency in Unity and Coherence

This study analyzed 34 recount texts produced by Grade X TKJ A students at SMK TKM Teknik Purworejo to examine how unity and coherence are realized in their writing. The classification of students’ performance in both aspects is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of students' unity and coherence performance (N = 34)

No	Student	Unity	Coherence
1	AP	Good	Good
2	AWS	Very Good	Very Good
3	AYA	Good	Good
4	ANA	Good	Good
5	AF	Very Good	Very Good
6	AHF	Good	Good
7	AIA	Poor	Poor
8	ARR	Good	Good
9	ALP	Very Good	Very Good
10	AT	Very Good	Good
11	ARSF	Good	Poor
12	AAR	Good	Good
13	AMF	Good	Good
14	CR	Very Good	Good
15	DAK	Good	Good
16	DRP	Very Good	Very Good
17	DAN	Very Good	Very Good
18	DTK	Good	Good
19	DRS	Poor	Poor
20	DHP	Good	Good
21	EM	Very Good	Good
22	EAP	Very Good	Good
23	EDA	Very Good	Good
24	EDK	Good	Good
25	EH	Good	Poor
26	ES	Good	Poor
27	FHW	Good	Poor
28	FAP	Very Good	Good
29	FDP	Very Good	Good
30	JM	Very Good	Very Good
31	JAFW	Very Good	Good
32	KHA	Good	Good
33	KYP	Good	Good
34	LA	Poor	Poor

As shown in Table 1, students' performance is not uniformly distributed across the two aspects. A general pattern can be observed in which a large proportion of students achieved "Good" and "Very Good" levels in unity, while their coherence performance tends to be more

varied. Specifically, several students who obtained “Very Good” scores in unity (e.g., AT, CR, EM, EAP, EDA, FAP, FDP, and JAFW) were only categorized as “Good” in coherence. This indicates that strong thematic control does not consistently coincide with equally strong discourse flow.

Another noticeable pattern is the relatively small number of students who achieved “Very Good” in both aspects simultaneously. Only a limited group (e.g., AWS, AF, ALP, DRP, DAN, and JM) demonstrated balanced high-level performance, suggesting that the simultaneous mastery of unity and coherence is less common than partial mastery of one aspect. In contrast, a small subset of students (AIA, DRS, and LA) showed “Poor” performance in both unity and coherence, indicating more fundamental difficulties in organizing and connecting ideas.

In addition, several students display asymmetrical profiles. For example, students such as ARSF, EH, ES, and FHW achieved “Good” in unity but “Poor” in coherence. This pattern suggests that while these students are able to maintain topic relevance and avoid major digressions, they encounter difficulties in sequencing ideas logically and establishing clear relationships between events. No cases were found where coherence exceeded unity (e.g., “Good” coherence with “Poor” unity), which further highlights that maintaining coherence appears to be contingent upon at least a basic level of unity.

Overall, the distribution presented in Table 1 indicates a tendency toward stronger performance in maintaining thematic focus than in constructing logically connected discourse. The data also reveal that students’ writing proficiency is not homogeneous; instead, it reflects varying degrees of balance and imbalance between unity and coherence. This variation provides an initial descriptive profile of students’ macro-level writing competence, which is further elaborated in the subsequent sections.

Proficiency Distribution in Unity

Table 2. Frequency distribution of unity scores (N = 34)

Category	Score	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Good	80–100	14	41.2
Good	60–79	17	50.0
Poor	30–59	3	8.8
Very Poor	0–29	0	0.0
Total		34	100.0

As presented in Table 2, students’ performance in unity is predominantly concentrated in the upper categories. A total of 31 out of 34 students (91.2%) achieved “Good” or “Very Good” levels, indicating that most students were able to maintain a central idea and ensure that their sentences contributed to the overall topic. Only three students (8.8%) were categorized as “Poor,” and no students fell into the “Very Poor” category, suggesting that a basic awareness of thematic consistency has been generally established across the cohort.

A closer examination of the distribution reveals that the largest proportion of students (50.0%) falls within the “Good” category. This suggests that while students are generally able

to sustain topic relevance, their control over unity is not yet fully consistent. Texts in this category typically demonstrate a clear main idea; however, minor deviations are still observable, such as the inclusion of loosely related details or insufficiently developed supporting sentences. These instances do not significantly disrupt the overall focus but indicate that students' ability to manage idea selection and prioritization remains developing.

In contrast, the 41.2% of students categorized as "Very Good" demonstrate a higher level of control over unity. Their texts consistently maintain a single controlling idea throughout the narrative, with all sentences functioning to support the main experience being recounted. These texts show minimal or no digression, and supporting details are not only relevant but also appropriately aligned with the narrative focus. The progression of ideas within paragraphs appears purposeful, reflecting a more stable control of thematic boundaries.

Meanwhile, the small group of students classified as "Poor" exhibits more noticeable inconsistencies in maintaining unity. In these texts, some sentences or events do not clearly relate to the main topic, leading to partial loss of focus. In several cases, the narrative includes irrelevant or weakly connected details that interrupt the coherence of the central idea. Although the overall structure of recount text is still recognizable, the lack of consistent thematic alignment reduces the effectiveness of the narrative.

Overall, the distribution of unity scores indicates that most students have developed an adequate ability to maintain thematic focus in recount writing. However, the variation between "Good" and "Very Good" categories suggests differing levels of precision in controlling idea relevance and paragraph focus. This pattern highlights that while foundational unity has been achieved, refinement in idea selection and development remains necessary for a significant proportion of students.

Proficiency Distribution in Coherence

Table 3. Frequency distribution of coherence scores (N = 34)

Category	Score	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Good	80–100	6	17.6
Good	60–79	21	61.8
Poor	30–59	7	20.6
Very Poor	0–29	0	0.0
Total		34	100.0

As shown in Table 3, students' performance in coherence is more dispersed compared to unity. A total of 27 students (79.4%) achieved "Good" or "Very Good" levels, while 7 students (20.6%) were categorized as "Poor." Unlike the unity distribution, the proportion of students in the highest category ("Very Good") is relatively small (17.6%), indicating that fewer students were able to demonstrate fully developed coherence in their texts.

The majority of students (61.8%) fall into the "Good" category, suggesting that they are generally able to organize ideas in a logical sequence and maintain basic narrative flow.

However, their texts tend to show limitations in consistency and variation, particularly in the use of cohesive devices. In many cases, transitions between sentences or events are present but rely on a narrow range of temporal connectors, resulting in a linear rather than fully integrated flow of ideas.

Students in the “Very Good” category demonstrate a more complete realization of coherence. Their texts typically include a clear orientation, well-developed sequences of events, and an appropriate reorientation. The progression of ideas is smooth and logically connected, supported by consistent tense usage and varied cohesive devices. These features contribute to a more fluent and comprehensible narrative structure.

In contrast, students categorized as “Poor” exhibit noticeable disruptions in coherence. Their texts often contain inconsistencies in tense usage, incomplete or weakly developed event sequences, and limited use of cohesive devices. As a result, the logical relationships between ideas are not always explicit, and readers may need to infer connections between events. These texts remain structurally recognizable as recounts, but their narrative flow is less stable and more difficult to follow.

Overall, the distribution of coherence scores indicates that coherence presents a greater challenge than unity. While most students are able to construct basic logical sequences, fewer demonstrate consistent control over linguistic and structural elements required for smooth and fully connected discourse.

Combined Proficiency Categories

Table 4. Combined unity and coherence profiles (N = 34)

Category	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Highly Proficient	Very Good in both aspects	6	17.6
Unity-Strong	Very Good Unity + Good Coherence	8	23.5
Balanced Competent	Good in both aspects	13	38.2
Coherence-Challenged	Good Unity + Poor Coherence	4	11.8
Needs Intervention	Poor in both aspects	3	8.8
Total		34	100.0

The combined analysis presented in Table 4 provides a more detailed profile of students’ writing performance by examining the relationship between unity and coherence. The largest group (38.2%) is classified as “Balanced Competent,” indicating that these students demonstrate consistent, moderate-level performance in both aspects. Their texts generally maintain thematic focus and basic logical flow, although they may lack refinement in idea development and cohesive variation.

The “Unity-Strong” group (23.5%) represents students who achieved high performance in unity but slightly lower performance in coherence. These students are able to maintain clear thematic focus and avoid irrelevant content; however, their texts show limitations in establishing smooth and varied connections between ideas. This group reflects a pattern where control of topic relevance is stronger than control of discourse flow.

The “Highly Proficient” group (17.6%) consists of students who achieved “Very Good” in both unity and coherence. Their texts demonstrate consistent thematic focus, well-structured event sequences, and effective use of cohesive devices. This group represents the most balanced and advanced level of writing performance within the dataset.

In contrast, the “Coherence-Challenged” group (11.8%) shows a different pattern. Although these students maintain adequate unity, their coherence performance is weaker. Their texts generally stay on topic but display difficulties in organizing ideas logically and connecting events smoothly. This imbalance suggests that maintaining relevance does not automatically ensure effective progression of ideas.

Finally, the “Needs Intervention” group (8.8%) includes students who demonstrate difficulties in both unity and coherence. Their texts often show inconsistent topic focus, limited development of ideas, and weak or absent cohesive links, resulting in less effective narratives overall.

Taken together, the combined categories reveal that students’ writing proficiency is distributed across multiple performance profiles rather than concentrated in a single level. The data indicate varying degrees of balance between unity and coherence, with a tendency for unity to be more consistently achieved than coherence.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that students’ macro-level writing competence is unevenly developed, particularly in the relationship between unity and coherence in recount writing. Most students were able to maintain thematic focus and sustain a central topic throughout their texts. However, many still experienced difficulty in constructing coherent discourse, especially in connecting ideas logically, developing smooth transitions, and maintaining consistent progression between events. This pattern suggests that unity and coherence should not be viewed as identical dimensions of writing competence, even though they are closely related.

The relatively stronger performance in unity may be influenced by the nature of genre-based writing instruction commonly implemented in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Recount texts provide students with a relatively clear schematic structure consisting of orientation, sequence of events, and reorientation. This organizational framework helps learners maintain topical focus more easily because the genre already provides a predictable structure for arranging information. Swales (1990) explains that genres function as rhetorical frameworks that guide writers in organizing communicative purposes systematically. In the present study, students generally succeeded in maintaining a single topic and avoiding major digressions, indicating that they had developed basic awareness of thematic organization.

However, the findings also indicate that maintaining unity does not automatically result in coherent writing. Although students were able to keep their texts focused on a central experience, many struggled to establish meaningful connections between ideas and events. This finding supports Dwijayanti and Purnama (2020), who found that EFL learners were often able to maintain topic relevance while still producing weak logical progression between sentences. Similarly, Dasril et al. (2019) reported that students’ academic writing

demonstrated acceptable unity but insufficient coherence due to limited elaboration and poor inter-sentence connection. These findings suggest that coherence requires more complex cognitive and rhetorical processes than simply maintaining thematic consistency.

One possible explanation for why coherence is more difficult than unity lies in the cognitive demands involved in discourse construction. Unity mainly requires writers to maintain a single controlling idea, whereas coherence requires writers to organize relationships between ideas in ways that are meaningful and interpretable for readers. According to Graham (2018), effective writing involves recursive cognitive processes such as planning, organizing, monitoring, and revising ideas simultaneously. In the present study, students appeared capable of generating relevant ideas, but many struggled to organize those ideas into logically connected discourse. This indicates that students may possess basic topic awareness but still lack higher-order organizational skills needed to create coherent narratives.

The findings also reveal that many students relied heavily on simple temporal connectors such as *then*, *after that*, and *finally*. Although these devices helped create chronological order, they did not always produce meaningful coherence. In many cases, students connected events mechanically without sufficiently explaining causal, evaluative, or elaborative relationships between ideas. This pattern aligns with Alqasham (2021), who found that Saudi EFL learners frequently used cohesive markers superficially without successfully constructing semantic coherence. Similarly, Leli (2020) reported that students often depended on repetitive conjunctions that created only surface-level connections between sentences. These findings reinforce Halliday and Hasan's (1976) argument that cohesion alone does not guarantee coherence because coherence depends on how ideas are conceptually and rhetorically connected.

Another important finding is that students' coherence problems were primarily discourse-level rather than grammatical-level difficulties. Several texts demonstrated relatively acceptable grammar and vocabulary use but still lacked smooth logical progression. This finding supports Mohseni and Samadian (2019), who observed that Iranian EFL learners could produce grammatically correct sentences while still struggling to establish coherent relationships across paragraphs. Similarly, Widhiyanto et al. (2023) found that many EFL students experienced difficulty organizing thematic progression even when sentence-level accuracy was relatively adequate. This suggests that discourse competence develops differently from grammatical competence and therefore requires specific instructional attention.

The difficulties in coherence may also reflect broader instructional tendencies in EFL writing classrooms. Writing instruction often prioritizes grammar, vocabulary, and generic structure while paying less attention to discourse organization and meaning construction. Hyland (2019) argues that many EFL instructional practices emphasize linguistic accuracy more strongly than rhetorical effectiveness. As a result, students may become familiar with structural templates without fully understanding how ideas should be strategically connected. Ahmed et al. (2024) similarly found that EFL learners frequently struggled to maintain unity and coherence because classroom instruction focused primarily on sentence-level correctness rather than idea development. This instructional imbalance may explain

why students in the present study were generally able to follow the recount structure but still encountered difficulty producing coherent discourse.

The imbalance between unity and coherence also indicates that students' use of cohesive devices remains procedural rather than strategic. Many students appeared to apply sequencing markers because they had learned the structural formula of recount texts, not because they fully understood their rhetorical function in organizing meaning. Crossley et al. (2016) emphasize that the effectiveness of cohesion depends not on the quantity of cohesive markers but on how strategically they support meaning construction. In this study, students' overreliance on formulaic connectors suggests limited rhetorical awareness and insufficient flexibility in managing discourse relationships.

The findings are also consistent with recent international studies highlighting coherence as one of the most problematic dimensions of EFL writing. Soomro et al. (2025) found that ESL university students in Pakistan frequently struggled with logical sequencing and paragraph connectivity despite demonstrating basic organizational awareness. Likewise, Alsariera and Yunus (2023) reported that Jordanian EFL students experienced difficulty maintaining coherent argument development because they lacked control over discourse organization. Wakerkwa and Astuti (2025) similarly identified fragmented progression and abrupt transitions as recurring problems in Indonesian EFL students' essays. The consistency of these findings across contexts suggests that coherence difficulties represent a broader issue in EFL writing development rather than a problem limited to a particular educational setting.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings indicate the need for more discourse-oriented writing instruction. Teaching students generic structure alone is insufficient to develop coherent writing competence. Students also need explicit guidance in connecting ideas, developing thematic progression, and using cohesive devices strategically. Fitria et al. (2021) emphasize that explicit instruction in cohesion and coherence strategies can improve students' ability to organize ideas more meaningfully. Similarly, Nhung and Hiep (2023) demonstrate that thematic progression instruction helps students improve coherence by strengthening relationships between sentences and paragraphs.

In addition, instructional innovation may help address students' coherence difficulties more effectively. Bukhari (2016) found that mind mapping techniques support students in organizing ideas systematically before writing, while Harunasari (2023) and Baskara (2023) highlight the potential of AI-assisted writing tools such as ChatGPT in supporting idea development, organization, and revision processes. These approaches may help students move beyond formulaic writing patterns toward more meaningful discourse construction.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the view that writing competence is multidimensional and unevenly developed. While vocational EFL students generally demonstrate acceptable control of unity due to familiarity with genre structure, coherence remains more difficult because it requires deeper cognitive processing, rhetorical awareness, and strategic discourse management. Therefore, improving EFL writing instruction requires a shift from primarily form-focused teaching toward more integrated approaches that emphasize discourse organization, logical progression, and meaning construction.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how unity and coherence are realized in recount texts written by Grade X vocational students, revealing a consistent pattern of uneven development between these two dimensions of writing competence. The findings show that most students were able to maintain thematic focus and paragraph-level unity, indicating a functional understanding of genre structure. However, a substantial proportion of students experienced difficulty in constructing coherent discourse, particularly in managing logical progression, maintaining tense consistency, and employing cohesive devices strategically. These results confirm that unity and coherence operate as related but semi-autonomous competencies, where structural awareness does not automatically translate into effective textual flow.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of EFL writing by providing empirical evidence that macro-level writing competence is multidimensional and unevenly developed. The findings extend previous research by demonstrating that genre-based instruction, while effective in supporting unity, does not sufficiently address the cognitive and linguistic demands required for coherence. By applying a qualitative discourse-mapping approach, this study offers a more nuanced analytical lens that distinguishes between thematic control and discourse connectivity, thereby avoiding the common tendency to conflate organizational competence with grammatical accuracy.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the results highlight the need to reconceptualize writing instruction in vocational EFL contexts. While existing practices appear successful in scaffolding structural awareness, they should be complemented with more explicit instruction on coherence-related skills. This includes guiding students in the strategic use of cohesive devices, developing logical relationships between ideas, and maintaining consistent temporal framing in narrative texts. Emphasizing these aspects is particularly important in vocational education, where writing is expected to fulfill practical communicative functions such as reporting, documenting processes, and conveying information clearly and efficiently.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The data were drawn from a single class within one vocational institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL contexts. In addition, the use of a descriptive qualitative design restricts the ability to make causal claims regarding instructional effectiveness. The analysis was also based solely on students' final written products, without incorporating process-oriented data such as drafts, revisions, or think-aloud protocols, which could provide deeper insight into the cognitive processes underlying writing performance.

In light of these limitations, future research is recommended to expand both scope and methodological design. Studies involving larger and more diverse samples across different educational contexts would enhance the transferability of findings. Incorporating mixed-method approaches, including interviews and process-tracing techniques, would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how students develop unity and coherence over time. Furthermore, experimental or quasi-experimental studies are needed to evaluate the

effectiveness of instructional interventions specifically targeting coherence development. The integration of digital tools and AI-assisted feedback systems also presents a promising direction for supporting students' writing development in scalable and context-sensitive ways.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of addressing both unity and coherence as distinct yet interconnected components of writing competence. While students demonstrate a foundational ability to organize ideas within a genre framework, achieving coherent discourse remains a more complex and demanding aspect of writing development. Addressing this gap requires a shift toward more integrated and discourse-oriented instructional practices that prepare learners not only to produce structurally correct texts but also to communicate meaning effectively in academic and professional contexts.

REFERENCES

- Agustini, M. A. D., Ramendra, D. P., & Adnyani, L. P. S. (2025). Analysis of Coherence and Cohesion in Paragraphs Writing of EFL Students. *Journal of Educational Study*, 5(1), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.36663/joes.v5i1.966>
- Ahmed, F. E. Y. (2019). Errors of Unity and Coherence in Saudi Arabian EFL University Students' Written Paragraph: A Case Study of College of Science and Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, 4(3), 129–130. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.321555>
- Ahmed, F. E. Y., Ahmed, Z. A. D. A., Ali, E. H. F., & Hamed, S. O. E. (2024). Maintaining Unity in the Descriptive Paragraph Writing of Saudi EFL University Students: Challenges and Remedies. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 15(1), 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no1.15>
- Alqasham, F. H. (2021). Coherence and Cohesion in Saudi EFL Learners' Essay Writing: A Study at a Tertiary-Level Institution. *Asian EFL Journal*, 28(1.1), 8–25.
- Alsariera, A. H., & Yunus, K. (2023). Issues and challenges in the use of coherence among Jordanian EFL students in writing academic essays. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 8(2), 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol8iss2pp141-156>
- Altun, M. (2023). Developing Writing Abilities in L2: A Review. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 10(2), 175–178. <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v10i2p175>
- Anderson, M., & Anderson, K. (1997). *Text Types in English* (Vol. 2). Macmillan Education AU. https://books.google.com/books/about/Text_Types_in_English.html?hl=id&id=FThxcN8F66QC
- Anindita, W. K. (2024). Cohesion and Coherence Problems Among Non-Native English Students' Writing Essays. *Lensa: Kajian Kebahasaan, Kesusastraan, Dan Budaya*, 14(1), 58. <https://doi.org/10.26714/lensa.14.1.2024.58-79>
- Baskara, F. R. (2023). Integrating ChatGPT into EFL writing instruction: Benefits and

- challenges. *International Journal of Education and Learning*, 5(1), 44–55. <https://doi.org/10.31763/ijele.v5i1.858>
- Bukhari, S. S. F. (2016). Mind Mapping Techniques to Enhance EFL Writing Skill. *International Journal of Linguistics and Communication*, 4(1), 58–77. <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijlc.v4n1a7>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Resesarch Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Crossley, S. A., Kyle, K., & McNamara, D. S. (2016). The development and use of cohesive devices in L2 writing and their relations to judgments of essay quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 32, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JSLW.2016.01.003>
- Dasril, Zaim, M., & Ningsih, K. (2019). Coherence and Unity of Students' Writing on Background of the Study of Research Proposal. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 335, 399–404. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icesshum-19.2019.65>
- Derewianka, B., & Jones, P. (2016). *Teaching language in context*. Oxford University Press. https://books.google.com/books/about/Teaching_Language_in_Context.html?hl=id&id=_mzUjwEACAAJ
- Dwijayanti, P., & Purnama, S. (2020). The Coherence and Unity in Writing Descriptive Text. *INFERENCE: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 3(2), 126–131. <https://doi.org/10.30998/inference.v3i2.6012>
- Fitria, N., Muchsin, Zahra, C. M., Usman, M., & Usman, B. (2021). Exploring Strategies to Foster Cohesion And Coherence in EFL Writing: A Focus on Simple View of Writing. *Sosiohumaniora Kodepena Information Center for Indonesian Social Sciences*, 5(1), 62–72.
- Graham, S. (2018). A Revised Writer(s)-Within-Community Model of Writing. *Educational Psychologist*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2018.1481406>
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. Longman Group Limited London.
- Harunasari, S. Y. (2023). Examining the Effectiveness of AI-integrated Approach in EFL Writing: A Case of ChatGPT. *International Journal of Progressive Sciences and Technologies*, 39(2), 357. <https://doi.org/10.52155/ijpsat.v39.2.5516>
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second Language Writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Knapp, P., & Watkins, M. (2005). *Genre, text, grammar: Technologies for teaching and assessing writing*. University of New South Wales Press Ltd.
- Kuni Hikmah Hidayati. (2018). Teaching Writing to EFL Learners: An Investigation of Challenges Confronted by Indonesian Teachers. *Langkawi: Journal of The Association for Arabic and English*, 4(1), 21–31.
- Leli, L. (2020). Analysis of Coherence and Cohesion on Students' Academic Writing: A Case

- Study at the 3rd Year students at English Education Program. *Alsuna: Journal of Arabic and English Language*, 3(2), 74–82. <https://doi.org/10.31538/alsuna.v3i2.980>
- Lestari, R. D., Novari, A. F., & Riandi, R. (2022). An Analysis of Students Writing Skill in Recount Text at the Tenth Grade of SMAN 1 Panggarangan Lebak-Banten. *Journal of English Language Learning*, 6(2), 176–181. <https://doi.org/10.31949/jell.v6i2.3636>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage Publication Inc.
- Mohseni, A., & Samadian, S. (2019). Analysis of Cohesion and Coherence in Writing Performance of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners. *Issues in Language Teaching (ILT)*, 8(2), 213–242.
- Nhung, L. T. K., & Hiep, N. H. (2023). The Effects of Thematic Progression in Improving Coherence and Cohesion in EFL Writing. *English Language Teaching*, 16(6), 126–135. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v16n6p126>
- Siska, A., Ilma, R., & Desvitasari, D. (2025). Writing Recount Text in the Efl Classroom: an Analysis of Students' Common Difficulties. *Wiralodra English Journal*, 9(2), 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.31943/wej.v9i2.461>
- Soomro, B., Shah, Z. A., & Chachar, Z. A. (2025). Exploring challenges in unity and coherence in paragraph writing by ESL university students in Pakistan. *UW Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(2), 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.56220/uwjss.v8i2.189>
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Togatorop, F., & Saragih, D. Y. (2024). An Analysis Of Coherence And Unity In Writing Descriptive Paragraph. *Journal on Education*, 07(1), 2701–2710. <https://doi.org/10.31004/joe.v7i1.6844>
- Wakerkwa, D. A. P., & Astuti, D. A. (2025). Patterns and Problems of Coherence in EFL Students' Essays. *Musamus Journal of Language and Literature*, 07(02), 332–339.
- Widhiyanto, W., Hendrawaty, N., Suryani, L., & Pratama, M. R. A. (2023). An Analysis of the Abstracts of EFL Undergraduate Students: Coherence and Cohesion. *Scope : Journal of English Language Teaching*, 8(1), 250. <https://doi.org/10.30998/scope.v8i1.18102>
- Widiati, U., & Cahyono, B. Y. (2006). The teaching of EFL writing in the Indonesian context: The state of the art. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 13(3), 139–150. <https://doi.org/10.17977/jip.v13i3.40>