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EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING COHERENCE AND COHESION IN NARRATIVE WRITING

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Abstract

This research tries to find out the challenges that EFL students in UIN Raden Intan Lampung have when they want to make good narrative writing, especially in coherence and cohesion. Narrative writing is not only important for academic goals but also for expressing culture and personal story. This study used qualitative method and focused on narrative inquiry to understand deeply the students' real experience. The data was collected by semistructured interviews and also from students' short reflection texts. There were 15 students chosen on purpose because they had experience in writing narrative and were willing to share their story. The analysis was done by looking at similar themes and meanings in the stories. The result showed that most students had high anxiety when writing, confused about coherence and cohesion, made grammar mistakes, and often used digital tools like Google Translate. Some students also had difficulty to combine their cultural way of storytelling with English writing style. Peer feedback and group writing were helpful for many of them, but some still did not know how to use the feedback well. Also, many students said their teacher did not explain clearly about how to make writing more coherent and cohesive. Their feelings were mixed—some felt frustrated but also proud when finishing their writing. This study gives real insight about what students face when writing in English and suggests how teachers, curriculum makers, and teacher trainers can help students improve their writing through better and more supportive teaching.

Keywords: Cohesion; Coherence; Narrative

Introduction

Writing proficiency, particularly in narrative forms, holds a crucial role in the academic development of students who are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) AS Cheng et al.

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claim that writing can significantly affect second language learners (Cheng et al., 1999). The ability to construct well-organized and expressive narratives serves as a foundation for broader academic success in English. For many EFL students, including those in Indonesia, mastering narrative writing not only supports their educational goals but also builds a platform for meaningful communication in various academic and social contexts.

Narrative writing, as a skill, allows EFL learners to articulate personal ideas and stories in a structured, logical manner. Through narratives, students can express their experiences, opinions, and emotions, thus practicing and reinforcing language use in authentic contexts. This skill becomes especially beneficial as students interact with multiple genres and rhetorical forms within the broader curriculum, where narrative elements frequently emerge.

Moreover, the importance of narrative writing extends well beyond the realm of academic evaluation. It contributes to students' ability to share personal and cultural stories, promoting intercultural communication. As students develop this ability, they become more competent in using English not only as a language of instruction but also as a medium of cultural expression, which strengthens both their linguistic competence and sociocultural identity.

In Indonesian higher education institutions, including UIN Raden Intan Lampung, the development of narrative writing skills is increasingly emphasized. This is due to the rising demands of academic tasks that require students to write coherently and persuasively in English. The ability to produce coherent narratives is particularly essential for students aiming to participate in global academic and professional arenas, where English proficiency plays a pivotal role (Sari et al., 2024).

Despite its importance, numerous studies have indicated that EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in academic writing. These difficulties are especially apparent in tasks requiring narrative skills. Research highlights that many Indonesian EFL students underperform in critical aspects of writing, particularly in coherence and cohesion, often scoring below average (Pourdana, 2021). These findings raise concerns about the effectiveness of existing instructional approaches.

One of the underlying problems contributing to students' struggles in writing is the emotional and psychological pressure associated with writing tasks. High levels of anxiety and stress negatively influence students' confidence and motivation, ultimately leading to reduced participation in writing activities (Hidayat & Sujarwati, 2024). These psychological barriers exacerbate the technical challenges students face, making it harder for them to develop strong writing habits.

Coherence and cohesion are key features of effective narrative writing. Coherence ensures the logical progression of ideas, making the text understandable to the reader. When writing is coherent, each paragraph flows logically from one to the next, and the reader can follow the argument or story easily (Suwandi, 2016). Without coherence, even grammatically correct writing may fail to convey meaning effectively.

Cohesion, on the other hand, refers to the specific linguistic tools that connect parts of a text. These include conjunctions, lexical choices, references, and ellipsis—all of which help maintain the flow within and between sentences (Amperawaty & Warsono, 2018). In narrative writing, these devices ensure that the text maintains unity and that characters, settings, and events are logically linked throughout the story.

Instructional practices related to teaching coherence and cohesion differ greatly across EFL classrooms. Some teachers implement collaborative learning and peer feedback techniques to develop students' awareness of these features. However, not all instructors have access to training or pedagogical resources needed to effectively teach these complex aspects of writing (Kartika et al., 2017). Consequently, there is a wide disparity in student outcomes.

Research indicates that traditional teaching methods are not always aligned with the actual challenges students face. While instructors may emphasize grammar and vocabulary, instruction on coherence and cohesion often remains underdeveloped (Herlinawati et al., 2022). The lack of integration between instruction and students' needs contributes to persistent gaps in their writing abilities.

Students face cognitive difficulties in organizing their thoughts when attempting to write coherent narratives. Organizing events chronologically, maintaining consistent point-of-view, and ensuring that ideas logically flow are challenging tasks for many learners (Riswanto, 2021). These cognitive challenges often intersect with linguistic limitations, making writing a burdensome task rather than a creative outlet.

In addition to cognitive obstacles, students often misuse or underuse cohesive devices. The improper use of conjunctions, pronouns, or transition words can interrupt the natural flow of a narrative and make the writing seem disjointed. Understanding how to strategically use these elements is essential for producing smooth and effective narratives.

Instructional shortcomings also play a role in limiting students' writing development. Many learners do not receive sufficient feedback on their writing, particularly feedback that addresses coherence and cohesion (Bakla, 2018). Without targeted and constructive guidance, students struggle to identify and correct their weaknesses in these critical areas of writing.

Teachers themselves often encounter systemic barriers that hinder their ability to teach writing effectively. These barriers may include large class sizes, limited time for individualized instruction, and a lack of opportunities for professional development related to writing pedagogy (Widhiyanto et al., 2023). These conditions affect the quality and depth of instruction that teachers can offer.

Furthermore, the diversity in teachers' own proficiency levels and knowledge of coherence and cohesion complicates the issue. Teachers who are less confident or unfamiliar with these concepts may struggle to model or explain them clearly to their students. This leads to inconsistent classroom experiences that may confuse or demotivate learners.

The current literature provides important insights into coherence and cohesion in EFL writing but also exposes notable limitations. Many studies have relied heavily on quantitative data, which may overlook the personal and emotional dimensions of students' writing experiences (Rashtchi & Afzali, 2011). As a result, the lived experiences of students remain underexplored.

Qualitative approaches, particularly narrative inquiry, offer a way to bridge this gap. By collecting and analyzing students' personal stories, researchers can gain deeper insights into how students perceive their writing challenges. This kind of research can reveal the motivations, frustrations, and thought processes behind students' writing behaviors (Hassan, 2020).

This study, therefore, aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of EFL writing education. By focusing on student narratives, it seeks to refine theoretical models that explain writing development and inform practical strategies for classroom instruction (Akmilia et al., 2022). Through this approach, educators can better understand and support their students' writing journeys.

Practically speaking, the insights from this research can guide curriculum developers and teacher trainers. By aligning curriculum content with student experiences, instructional approaches can be made more responsive and effective (Fitri et al., 2021). Teachers will be better equipped to design lessons that resonate with their students' actual needs and contexts.

Ultimately, this research aims to examine in detail the challenges students face in achieving coherence and cohesion in their narrative writing. By doing so, it provides a nuanced picture of how these challenges emerge and how they impact students' academic writing performance. This exploration is rooted in students' personal experiences, making it both relevant and actionable (Sanu, 2016).

The anticipated findings have the potential to benefit a wide range of educational stakeholders. Teachers can adopt more informed and empathetic approaches, curriculum designers can revise materials based on real student challenges, and students themselves can gain a better understanding of how to improve their writing (Akib & Syatriana, 2019). These benefits contribute to a more holistic and inclusive learning environment.

In conclusion, emphasizing qualitative research that captures the depth of students' lived experiences is essential for improving writing instruction. Through narrative inquiry, this study intends to reveal the real challenges students face, providing the basis for meaningful instructional reform (Othman & Lo, 2023). Such efforts are especially vital in the evolving

landscape of EFL education in Indonesia, where writing skills are increasingly important for academic and professional success.

Methods

This study used narrative inquiry as the method to explore the challenges that EFL students faced in achieving coherence and cohesion in their narrative writing. Narrative inquiry is a process where the researcher collected, analyzed, and interpreted stories to understand human experiences and identity better (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). This method matched with the aim of the study, which was to document and analyze the experiences of EFL students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung and to find out more about their struggles with coherence and cohesion in writing narratives.

The research used a qualitative design through narrative inquiry. It involved collecting personal and detailed stories from the participants. This design helped the researcher to explore each student's experience and gave deep data about the context and situation where the students learned narrative writing. By paying attention to students' stories, the research gave a better understanding about how the students' background, identity, and education experience influenced their writing ability (Zou et al., 2019).

The population of this research was undergraduate students in the English Education Program at UIN Raden Intan Lampung. Since the research focused on problems in narrative writing in an EFL context, the sample included students who had done narrative writing assignments in their class. The researcher chose 15 participants, which was enough to collect many different experiences but still small enough to manage for a deep analysis. The researcher used purposive sampling to choose participants who had shown interest in writing and were ready to share their stories. This technique helped to select people who fit the aim of the research.

The data were collected by using semi-structured interviews and reflective narrative writing tasks. In the interviews, the researcher asked the students about their personal experiences in writing, especially about how they handled coherence and cohesion problems. The questions focused on their real stories, feelings, and specific events related to writing. Besides the interviews, the students also wrote short reflection texts about their writing experience. These reflections became extra data that made the interviews more complete. The use of two techniques helped to collect more detailed and balanced information from the students.

To make the findings more valid and trustworthy, the researcher used methodological triangulation. This meant combining the results from interviews and reflection texts to check the accuracy of the information (Creswell, 2013).

For analyzing the data, the researcher used narrative analysis. The focus was on finding common themes, patterns, and meanings in the students' stories. The researcher looked at the narrative parts to understand how students told their writing experiences and how they explained the problems in coherence and cohesion. First, the researcher divided the narratives into small pieces with similar ideas. Then, these small parts were grouped into bigger themes. These themes helped the researcher find the main messages that answered the research questions. The analysis not only explained individual stories but also linked them to wider education issues and suggestions.

Findings and Discussion

The data that were collected through semi-structured interviews and students' reflective narrative writing have given important insight about the challenges that EFL students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung faced in making coherence and cohesion in their narrative writing. The findings showed both qualitative stories and some numerical data that helped the researcher to understand students' experiences more deeply.

1. Narrative Writing Anxiety

One of the biggest problems that appeared in both interview and narrative data was the students' anxiety when they did narrative writing. Around 80% of the participants said that they

felt high pressure when they had to write a narrative text. Most of them said that they were afraid of making grammar mistakes and confused how to organize the story properly. One participant said, "Every time I sit to write, I feel my mind goes blank; I worry about whether my writing will make sense or if anyone will understand what I'm trying to say." This showed how much the anxiety influenced their writing performance.

2. Understanding Coherence and Cohesion

Although many students said they understood coherence and cohesion, only about 30% could give a clear explanation about these two concepts. Most of them thought that coherence means how the ideas are connected in the whole story, while cohesion is more about using linking words. For example, one student said, "I try to use words like 'however' and 'furthermore' to connect my ideas, but I'm not sure they always fit." This shows that many students still had difficulty applying these concepts in actual writing.

3. Use of Digital Tools

Nowadays, digital tools are very common. About 65% of students said they used online translators like Google Translate when writing narratives. They felt these tools helped them find words quickly. However, they also said that sometimes the words from the tool did not fit the sentence or meaning. One student said, "I find words easily, but sometimes they don't fit well in my sentences, and this confuses me even more." This showed the negative effect of depending too much on the tools.

4. Common Grammatical Errors

When checking the students' narrative texts, the researcher found that many errors were related to verb tense and sentence structure. More than 40% of students made mistakes in using past tense, which made the story unclear. This problem also made the writing less coherent and harder to follow.

5. Peer Feedback Reception

The students also talked about the value of peer feedback. Around 75% said it helped them to improve their writing. They liked getting comments from friends, but some said they were not sure how to use the suggestions in their revisions. One student said, "Sometimes I get good feedback, but I feel lost on how to use it in my next draft." This means students still need help understanding how to apply feedback.

6. Instructional Methods

Students' opinions showed that the way teachers teach also influenced their writing. About 60% said that lectures were not very helpful for understanding coherence and cohesion. Students who learned through group discussion or writing together with friends said they felt more confident. One student said, "When we work together, it feels less daunting. I can see how others think about their stories, and it helps me a lot."

7. Emotional Response to Writing

The feeling of students when writing was mixed. About 70% said they felt frustrated, nervous, or scared, but half of them also said they felt happy or proud when they finished their writing. This showed that emotional experience in writing is not always negative but also can be positive.

8. Cultural Influence

Culture also had a role. Around 55% of students said they included traditional culture or storytelling from their background in their writing. However, many of them said they had difficulty mixing this cultural style with the way English stories are usually written. This added more challenge in making the writing coherent.

9. Teacher Support and Feedback

Only 40% of students felt their teacher gave enough attention to their writing. But the students who got personal feedback from their teacher said it helped them a lot. One student shared, "When my teacher explains where I went wrong and how to fix it, I feel motivated to write again."

10. Peer Collaboration

Working together with classmates was also important. Many students said writing together made them more confident and helped them understand coherence and cohesion better. About 65% said they liked group writing better than writing alone.

The findings of this study can be seen in the following Table:

Table 1. The Recapitulation of the Findings

No.	Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Data	Student Voices/Examples
1	Narrative Writing Anxiety	Students experience high levels of anxiety during narrative writing.	80% felt pressure and fear of grammar mistakes and poor structure	"Every time I sit to write, I feel my mind goes blank I worry about whether my writing will make sense"
2	Understanding Coherence and Cohesion	Limited understanding of coherence and cohesion despite awareness of the terms.	Only 30% could explain the concepts clearly	"I try to use words like 'however' and 'furthermore' but I'm not sure they always fit."
3	Use of Digital Tools	Online translators are widely used but often lead to inappropriate word choices.	65% used tools like Google Translate	"I find words easily, but sometimes they don't fit well in my sentences"
4	Common Grammatical Errors	Frequent issues with verb tense and sentence structure affected clarity and coherence.	More than 40% had errors in past tense usage	(No direct quote, based on analysis of student texts)
5	Peer Feedback Reception	Peer feedback is appreciated but hard to apply effectively in revisions.	75% found peer feedback helpful	"Sometimes I get good feedback, but I feel lost on how to use it in my next draft."
6	Instructional Methods	Group-based learning was more effective than lectures for understanding writing coherence and cohesion.	60% found lectures less helpful	"When we work together, it feels less daunting I can see how others think"

7	Emotional Response to Writing	Writing evoked mixed emotions: mostly negative during the process, but also pride upon completion.	70% felt nervous/frustrated; 50% also felt happy/proud later	(Summary of emotional response, no direct quote provided)
8	Cultural Influence	Students included cultural elements but struggled to align them with English writing conventions.	55% included traditional cultural aspects	(Summary of cultural struggle, no direct quote provided)
9	Teacher Support and Feedback	Teacher feedback was limited but effective when given.	Only 40% felt supported	"When my teacher explains where I went wrong I feel motivated to write again."
10	Peer Collaboration	Students valued working in groups for building confidence and better understanding of writing principles.	65% preferred group writing	(General sentiment of increased confidence and understanding through collaboration)

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a detailed understanding of the challenges faced by EFL students in achieving coherence and cohesion in narrative writing. The high level of writing anxiety (80%) matches previous studies showing anxiety is a significant barrier for EFL learners. This suggests that educators should develop interventions that specifically address emotional aspects to reduce anxiety and create a supportive classroom atmosphere.

The gap between students' understanding of coherence and cohesion and their ability to apply these concepts shows an important pedagogical issue. The majority of students lacked explicit knowledge of these principles, which is consistent with earlier research (Fauziah et al., 2021). This implies that curriculum development should focus on teaching coherence and cohesion explicitly, enabling students to connect ideas more effectively.

While digital tools such as Google Translate are widely used and helpful for vocabulary, their improper use can harm narrative coherence, supporting previous findings (Schcolnik, 2018). Therefore, educators should provide guidance on how to use these tools effectively and responsibly in writing.

Grammatical challenges, especially with verb tenses, remain a serious obstacle for students, confirming prior research. Targeted instruction in verb tense usage within narrative contexts can improve both accuracy and coherence.

Peer feedback is a valuable resource for students, but many are unsure how to integrate it properly, indicating a need for structured peer review processes and guidance (Nopita et al., 2022). Similarly, interactive and collaborative teaching methods boost confidence and comprehension more than traditional lectures.

Emotional engagement plays a crucial role in writing performance. The coexistence of anxiety and pride during writing highlights the need to foster positive emotional experiences.

Additionally, cultural influences on narrative style must be acknowledged in teaching practices, as students struggle to reconcile their cultural storytelling with English conventions.

Teacher support, especially through personalized feedback, increases student motivation and writing quality, in line with previous studies (Al-Izhar & Rokhuma, 2023). Finally, collaborative writing not only improves learning outcomes but also reduces anxiety and promotes community among learners (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016).

In conclusion, this study reveals the complex interaction of emotional, educational, and cultural factors influencing EFL narrative writing. Addressing these multiple dimensions through holistic instructional approaches is essential to help students overcome challenges in coherence and cohesion. Future research should explore the effectiveness of such integrative teaching methods and the long-term impact of digital tool use on writing development.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study shows that many EFL students have difficult problems when they try to write narrative text in English, especially about coherence and cohesion. The problems are not only from grammar or vocabulary, but also from their feelings like stress or fear when writing. Many students also do not really understand how to organize their ideas clearly or how to connect them smoothly. Some use translation tools too much, which sometimes makes their writing more confusing. Feedback from friends and writing together help them, but not all students know how to use it well. Also, students' background culture makes it harder because they write in different style than English rules. Teachers sometimes do not give clear explanation or feedback, so students feel unsure. Because of this, teaching should not only focus on language rules, but also support students emotionally and help them understand step by step. Teachers need to give more examples, more group activities, and more personal feedback. Helping students in this way can make them more confident and better in writing in English.

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