VIETNAMESE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF COHERENCE IN ARGUMENTATIVE PARAGRAPHS BY ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS: A STUDY AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: Academic writing is a crucial genre that English-majored undergraduates must acquire before graduating. The quality of academic writing depends largely on coherence, posing challenges not only for students to learn but also for teachers to assess in English classes. This paper aims to explore how Vietnamese teachers assess coherence in argumentative paragraphs by second-year English-majored students at a university in Vietnam. This qualitative research uses semi-structured interviews to examine teachers' perceptions of coherence in English writing, and employs think-aloud verbal protocol to investigate how teachers assess coherence in two paragraphs by English-majored students. The findings show that the teachers recognize the importance of coherence in English writing, and there is an inconsistency in teachers assigning scores to coherence in students' written work.

Keywords: teachers' assessment, coherence, English-majored students, argumentative writing, Vietnam

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NHẬN THỨC VÀ ĐÁNH GIÁ CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN VỀ TÍNH MẠCH LẠC TRONG ĐOẠN VĂN NGHỊ LUẬN CỦA SINH VIÊN NGÀNH NGÔN NGỮ ANH: NGHIÊN CỨU TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Viết học thuật là một thể loại văn viết quan trọng mà sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh cần nắm vững trước khi tốt nghiệp. Khi dạy thể loại này, giảng viên cần đánh giá tính mạch lạc trong bài viết nghị luận của sinh viên. Bài báo này nhằm tìm hiểu cách giảng viên đánh giá tính mạch lạc trong các đoạn văn nghị luận viết bằng tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm thứ hai, chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc nhằm tìm hiểu quan điểm của giảng viên về tính mạch lạc trong văn viết tiếng Anh, và sử dụng phương pháp tư duy thành lời (think-aloud) để thu thập dữ liệu về cách giảng viên chấm điểm và nhận xét tính mạch lạc trong đoạn văn của sinh viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy giảng viên nhận thức được tầm quan trọng của tính mạch lạc trong văn viết tiếng Anh, và có sự không nhất quán trong việc giảng viên cho điểm tiêu chí tính mạch lạc trong các đoạn văn của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: kiểm tra đánh giá của giảng viên, tính mạch lạc, sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh, văn viết nghị luận, Việt Nam

1. Introduction

Writing in English for academic purposes is an integral part of university curricula worldwide. Academic writing requires students to organize ideas coherently, make claims, and use signposts clearly (Hyland, 2009). Among these requirements, coherence is a crucial component, facilitating effective communication in written discourse (McCulley, 1985).

The assessment of students' academic writing skills has received considerable attention from researchers in foreign language teaching contexts (Oliveira et al., 2018). A common issue for teachers assessing students' essays is variability in teachers' decision-making processes, challenging test validity, reliability, and fairness (Erdosy, 2003). While this variability has been acknowledged, relatively few studies have investigated how such inconsistencies are manifested in the assessment of specific writing constructs, particularly abstract ones such as coherence (Ruecker & Crusan, 2018). This gap is significant because coherence plays a central role in how teachers interpret and evaluate the organization and flow of students' ideas. Coherence is considered an inherently more subjective and less observable construct than surface-level features such as grammar or vocabulary.

Teachers assess not only ideas and information in students' writing but also the development and organization of these elements (Basturkmen & Von Randow, 2014). When assessing coherence, teachers must mentally reconstruct the coherence that students attempt to create in their essays, as coherence is not directly observable, like grammar and vocabulary (Cotton & Wilson, 2011). Thus, assessing coherence is more challenging than evaluating grammar and vocabulary in students' essays (Basturkmen & Von Randow, 2014).

In Vietnam, many bachelor's degree programs in English language consist of compulsory modules requiring students to produce argumentative writing, considered a type of academic writing. From a curricular perspective, writing argumentative essays is an important learning outcome that students must achieve. This involves teacher assessment, as teachers can evaluate students' writing skills and provide feedback for students' improvement in writing essays. However, assessing coherence can be difficult due to its abstract nature compared to other criteria, like grammar and vocabulary (Basturkmen & Von Randow, 2014; Cotton & Wilson, 2011). Evaluating an argumentative essay is time-consuming, prompting this study to explore teachers' assessment of argumentative paragraphs by second-year English-majored students. Writing assessment involves rater perceptions and rating scales (Youn-Hee, 2019). Thus, this study aims to fulfill two objectives: to investigate English teachers' perceptions of coherence in argumentative writing, and to explore how they assess coherence in students' argumentative paragraphs. Teachers' perceptions of coherence can influence their assessment, making the first research question crucial for elucidating the second. These objectives can be translated into the following research questions:

1. *What are Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of coherence in English argumentative writing?*
2. *How do the teachers assess coherence in argumentative paragraphs written by second-year English-majored students?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cohesion and Coherence

Cohesion and coherence are essential criteria to determine the quality of effective writing (Bamberg, 1984). These concepts can be confusing, so distinguishing them is crucial for a clear understanding.

Cohesion refers to linguistic resources that link different parts of a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). In other words, it involves connecting parts of a written text using explicit cues (Crossley et al., 2016), and it is constructed through the dependency of surface features of text (Kern, 2000). Cohesion is achieved by using cohesive relations, categorized into five types, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Each cohesive relation is manifested through a group of words, known as cohesive devices. The definitions mentioned above point to the same understanding of cohesion in a text, which can be determined by looking at cohesive devices used in the discourse.

Coherence refers to the unity of information in a text (Sanders & Noordman, 2000). It involves continuity of a text, decided by the mutual relevance of concepts and relations that underlie the surface of a text (Kern, 2000). Coherence indicates the underlying logical structure of a text (Neubert, 1992). It is constructed when readers interact with a text, making inferences about the idea arrangement to interpret the text (Hoey, 2013). Readers must use background knowledge, and knowledge related to text patterns and genre types, to make sense of a text. Coherence is ensured by guiding readers or listeners to comprehend the underlying message of a text (Bublitz et al., 1999). Therefore, the remarkable difference between cohesion and coherence is that the former describes the explicit connections between sentences and paragraphs using cohesive devices, whereas the latter indicates the implicit connections between concepts and propositions.

Coherence can be constructed using cohesive devices, including references, substitutions,

ellipses, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion (Nunan, 1993). It can also be achieved by repeating key nouns, using pronouns, transition signals, and logical order (Oshima, 2006). Coherence can be determined by cohesive devices that identify cohesive relations across sentences, contributing to text unity (Chen & Cui, 2022). For instance, the word "because" indicates cause-and-effect relations, which help writers to achieve coherence in a text. However, more cohesive devices do not necessarily mean more coherence (Bublitz, 2011), because coherence relies on idea organization rather than linguistic connections. When the information of discourse follows a conventional textual pattern, discourse markers may be unnecessary (Hoey, 2013).

Many English teachers find it challenging to help students achieve coherence in writing essays (Lee, 2002). They explain the definition of coherence in different ways and often refer to coherence in abstract terms instead of explaining it concretely to students (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). They report that coherence can influence essays' scores, but the coherence is not solely determined by the use of cohesive devices (McNamara et al., 2010). The findings of these studies show that English teachers have difficulty helping students improve coherence in their writing, and the teachers consider coherence an important criterion when assessing students' essays.

Numerous English learners struggle to use cohesive devices effectively to achieve cohesion and coherence in writing (Hinkel, 2001; Kang, 2005). They find it difficult to produce coherent, well-connected texts (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Lorenz, 1999). English learners frequently overuse cohesive devices, especially linking adverbials (Shaw, 2009). Excessive discourse markers in academic texts by Chinese-ESL students can negatively impact the coherence in a text (Green et al., 2000). Cohesive devices do not necessarily improve the overall writing quality (Alarcon & Morales, 2011). These results show that many English learners misunderstand that cohesive devices can help them write coherently.

In summary, while cohesion refers to explicit, surface-level linguistic connections, such as linking words and reference, coherence is a reader-dependent, conceptual construct that involves the logical development and organization of ideas.

2.2. Writing Assessment of EFL/ESL Teachers

2.2.1. Rater Variability

Rater variability refers to the differences in the scores teachers assign to students' texts (Bustamante & Yilmaz, 2020). The scores assigned to a written work reflect the quality of the composition and the quality of the rater who makes the judgment (McNamara, 2000). Rater variability is influenced by raters' personal characteristics, such as academic background and professional experience (Attali, 2016; Marefat & Heydari, 2016). However, Erdosy (2003) found that raters' professional experience has a significant effect on their essay scoring, while their academic background has little influence on essay grading.

When assessing students' essays, raters exhibit different behaviors, which fall into two groups: behaviors with an in-text focus and behaviors with a beyond-text focus (Cumming et al., 2002). Raters' behaviors with an in-text focus involve assessing elements of the text, such as rhetorical devices and language use (Erdosy, 2003). In contrast, raters' behaviors with a beyond-text focus involve discussing the relationship among the rubric criteria used to assess the text (Erdosy, 2003).

2.2.2. Teacher Assessment in EFL/ESL Classrooms

Teachers assess students' English language proficiency for various purposes, such as determining students' overall language proficiency level, measuring students' progress, and

identifying students' strengths and weaknesses (Ur, 2012). Assessment can be classified into two types: informal assessment and formal assessment (Harris & McCann, 1994). The former is conducted under normal classroom conditions, using tools, such as observation and a diary, whereas the latter involves using a test that requires students to complete within a specific time frame (Harris & McCann, 1994). Regardless of the assessment types, teachers must use criteria to ensure they can assess specific performance accurately and consistently. Assessment criteria are what teachers expect their students to be able to do (Harris & McCann, 1994).

2.2.3. Writing Assessment in EFL/ESL Classrooms

Teachers can use different assessment formats, such as questions, pictures, notes, diagrams, summaries, and dictation to assess students' writing skills (Harris & McCann, 1994). Evaluating students' written work is time-consuming, so teachers should consider both the type and the number of essays to be assessed during the course (Harris & McCann, 1994). Teachers must list criteria with descriptions before assessing students' written work. Assessment criteria can be displayed using either holistic scales or analytic scales. While holistic scales provide general descriptions of different aspects of ability, analytic scales include descriptions of each specific aspect of ability (Harris & McCann, 1994). In addition to assigning scores, teachers must provide feedback that supports students in improving their written work (Harris & McCann, 1994).

Writing assessment involves rater perceptions and rating scales (Youn-Hee, 2019). Think-aloud verbal protocol is a common method used to explore how raters assess students' written work (Cumming, 1990; Cumming et al., 2002; Lumley, 2002). The think-aloud protocol has two types: the concurrent and the immediate retrospective methods (Ericsson, 2017). Using the concurrent think-aloud method, teachers verbalize their thoughts while reading and giving feedback on students' essays, which reduces the chance of memory loss. The immediate retrospective method requires teachers to read students' essays, either silently or aloud, and then verbalize their thoughts to give feedback. This method may increase the possibility of memory loss, but it facilitates teachers' concentration on the essays. Jacobs (1981) proposed a set of aspects to assess EFL/ESL students' compositions, including content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Cumming (1990) identified that experienced assessors used four criteria (self-control, content, language, and organization) and two strategies (interpretation and judgement) when evaluating essays by ESL/EFL students.

2.3. Previous Studies on Assessment of Coherence in Students' Essays

Little research has been conducted to investigate coherence, as it is not directly observable (Lee, 2002; Struthers et al., 2013), and it is challenging to assess such a concept (Knoch, 2007). One of the first attempts to assess coherence was made by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in which raters judged whether paragraphs in descriptive essays were coherent or not by assessing each paragraph separately before calculating the mean percentage of coherent paragraphs for each essay (Bamberg, 1984). This approach led to the issue that a single paragraph essay could receive a higher score than a two-paragraph, or a three-paragraph essay. In 1980, NAEP started to change the method of assessing coherence by considering the whole essay rather than its separate parts (Bamberg, 1984).

Bamberg (1984) devised a holistic coherence scale with scores varying from 0-Unscorable, 1-Incomprehensible, 2-Incoherent, 3-Partially coherent, and 4-Fully coherent to assess the coherence of essays written by 13- and 17-year-olds in three assessments: 1969, 1974, and 1979 National Assessments of Educational Progress. The assessment results show that essays

written by 17-year-olds are significantly more coherent than those written by 13-year-olds, and coherence is an important component of holistic ratings of writing quality (Bamberg, 1984).

Many raters find it more challenging to assess content and coherence than grammar and vocabulary in students' written work, because it is easier to identify grammatical and vocabulary mistakes than to detect illogical, underdeveloped, and irrelevant propositions (Sokolov, 2022). Using analytic scoring and standardized procedures is not helpful, as criteria descriptions contain overly vague terms (Oshima, 2006; Skoufaki, 2020). Furthermore, analytic scales are intended to increase the reliability of ratings, but criteria descriptions can be interpreted subjectively by raters, which leads to inconsistencies in assessment (Sokolov, 2022). It is suggested that raters should use both holistic and analytic scales when assessing students' written work. While holistic scales are used to judge the overall quality of the text, analytic scales can help raters to examine different aspects of the text, thereby ensuring the reliability of holistic scales (Bean & Melzer, 2021). However, despite the availability of these tools, little is known about how teachers assess abstract elements like coherence in an authentic classroom setting. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Vietnamese EFL teachers at a university perceive and assess coherence in argumentative writing, contributing insights into how rating scales are interpreted and applied in practice.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Setting

The study was conducted at a university in Hanoi, where English-majored students are required to complete 5 writing courses: "English Writing Skills 1", "English Writing Skills 2", "English Writing Skills 3", "English Writing Skills 4", and "English Writing Skills 5". The students take one writing course each semester for five consecutive semesters. "English Writing skills 3" must be taken during the first semester of their second year at university. This course consists of three lessons on narrative essays, four lessons on argumentative essays, two progress tests, and one revision lesson. The first semester of their second year is when the second-year English majors begin learning about argumentative writing, so the study focuses on coherence in argumentative writing by those students.

3.2. Research Participants

The research participants are five English lecturers working at the Faculty of English Language of the university where the study was conducted. Each research participant is identified by a pseudonym, including Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Basic Information of Research Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest qualification	Experience of teaching English argumentative writing
Teacher 1	26	Male	MA (England)	4 years
Teacher 2	30	Female	MA (Vietnam)	8 years
Teacher 3	27	Male	MA (Vietnam)	5 years
Teacher 4	29	Female	MA (Vietnam)	7 years
Teacher 5	38	Female	MA (Vietnam)	12 years

As shown in Table 1, the group of participants includes two male and three female

teachers. The highest qualification among these lecturers is a master's degree in English Language Teacher Education. While only one lecturer obtained a master's degrees in England, others earned theirs in Vietnam. All the participants have at least four years of experience teaching English argumentative writing.

At the research site, the research participants are delivering courses related to English skills for English majors. One participant specifically handles English writing courses for these students. Although the other lecturers primarily teach speaking, listening, and reading courses, they have the experience of teaching students how to write argumentative essays in English. Therefore, all the participants are considered capable of assessing the coherence of argumentative paragraphs written by second-year English majors.

3.3. Research Method and Research Instrument

The current study aims to explore Vietnamese teachers' assessment of coherence in English argumentative paragraphs by second-year English-majored students. A qualitative research approach is adopted, as it allows for in-depth examination of a phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2017).

The first research question focuses on Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of coherence in English writing. To gather data, interviews were conducted, enabling the participants to discuss their interpretation of the phenomenon in the world that they live in (Cohen et al., 2002). Semi-structured interview is used by combining a set of pre-determined questions with the follow-up questions that arise during the interview to further explore specific themes (Creswell, 2017). The pre-determined questions are derived from the Literature Review, addressing topics such as the definitions of cohesion and coherence, teachers' instructions on coherence in a writing course, teachers' views of students' challenges with achieving coherence in English argumentative writing.

The second research question investigates how Vietnamese teachers assess English argumentative paragraphs by second-year English majors. The study employs think-aloud verbal protocol, a commonly used method for examining how teachers apply criteria when assessing coherence in argumentative paragraphs (Cumming, 1990; Cumming et al., 2002; Lumley, 2002). The think-aloud protocol has two types: the concurrent think-aloud method and the immediate retrospective method (Ericsson, 2017). The immediate retrospective method is employed in this study by having the teachers read students' English argumentative paragraphs, and then verbalize their thoughts to give feedback. This method is intended to facilitate teachers' focused assessment of coherence in students' argumentative paragraphs.

Another research instrument involves collecting argumentative paragraphs by second-year English-majored students. In the "English writing skills 3" course, second-year English majors learn about argumentative writing. They are required to write English argumentative paragraphs before writing complete argumentative essays. Students are asked to write a paragraph of 100-150 words in response to the question "Do you agree that children should learn a foreign language at an early age?". Thirty argumentative paragraphs were collected, but two argumentative paragraphs following different writing patterns were selected for the study and assessed by the research participants. One paragraph follows an organized, reason-based pattern with a clear topic sentence followed by focused explanations. The other paragraph is less structured, demonstrating a scattered pattern. These paragraphs represent different student writing styles, as the first paragraph exemplifies a more organized style, while the second paragraph reflects a less structured approach.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure began with collecting two argumentative paragraphs written by students in the "English writing skills 3" course, and two paragraphs that follow different writing patterns were chosen to represent different writing styles of students. English lecturers with experience in teaching argumentative writing were invited to participate in this study. Five English lecturers were willing to take part in this research, so the researcher met them in person to introduce the research purpose, gain their consent for the research, and arrange an appointment to meet each participant. A semi-structured interview was conducted prior to the think-aloud verbal protocol to collect data from the participants. During the think-aloud protocol, the participants were first given two printed student paragraphs to read silently. After reading, they were asked to verbalize their thoughts on the coherence in the texts. To ensure the authenticity and minimize disruption, the think-aloud sessions were conducted in a quiet office setting and audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. Each session lasted approximately 10-15 minutes per participant. Five teachers joined the interview, but four participants assessed students' paragraphs. All the responses are stored in a digital voice recorder with the participants' consent.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The name of each research participant was written under a pseudonym, including Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the think-aloud protocols were fully transcribed verbatim in English. The researcher listened to the recordings twice to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. After the transcription, the data were formatted question-by-question and organized in a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel Version 16. A thematic coding process was then employed, which involved two rounds of coding. In the first round, open coding was used to identify recurring words and phrases related to the assessment of coherence. In the second round, the researcher categorized the codes in the first round into broader themes, such as "definitions of coherence", "assessment criteria". To ensure credibility, the researcher conducted member checking by sharing a summary of the coded responses with two of the research participants for verification. The data gained from the semi-structured interview and think-aloud verbal protocol were transcribed into text data, presented question-by-question, and read thoroughly by the researcher. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved before final interpretation. All the qualitative findings were synthesized and interpreted in the article (Creswell, 2017).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Teachers' Perceptions of Cohesion and Coherence in English Writing

During the interviews, the participants were asked to recall the definitions of cohesion and coherence that they often used to explain to students in writing courses. The results reveal that the participants have different understandings of cohesion and coherence in English writing.

4.1.1. Teachers' Understanding of Cohesion in English Writing

Cohesion refers to "*the connection within a sentence*" (Teacher 2) and "*the closeness in terms of vocabulary and grammar*" (Teacher 3). These definitions are overly simplistic and vague, making it difficult for students to grasp the whole concept of cohesion.

Cohesion indicates "*the connection using words, such as linking words*" (Teacher 1). This definition highlights the role of linking words, but it fails to clarify what is connected in a text.

Cohesion describes "*the connection in terms of language, like the transition from one sentence to another must require linking words*" (Teacher 4). This definition emphasizes the use of linking words for connecting sentences, but it is limited to connection at the sentence level and does not address cohesion across larger text structures.

Cohesion is "*the connection between sentences, paragraphs, using linking words, pronouns, paraphrases of key nouns*" (Teacher 5). Teacher 5 offered a more comprehensive definition, which matches the viewpoints of cohesion, presented by previous researchers (Crossley et al., 2016; Halliday & Hasan, 2014; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Kern, 2000).

The definitions of cohesion provided by Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 are unclear and short of depth, whereas Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 offered incomplete definitions of cohesion. However, only Teacher 5 demonstrated a more thorough understanding of cohesion, which might be due to Teacher 5's attention to teaching cohesion and extensive experience teaching writing courses for English majors.

This study focuses on teachers' perceptions of coherence, but it is necessary to include a subsection on cohesion due to participants' tendency to conflate the two concepts (cohesion and coherence) during the interviews. This conflation is not surprising, as previous research has shown that coherence and cohesion are often misunderstood or used interchangeably by both teachers and students (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014; McNamara et al., 2010). The study gathers participants' definitions of cohesion to demonstrate the extent to which their conception confusion may affect their ability to assess coherence accurately. This also helps to contextualize their later assessments of student writing. Thus, the data on cohesion is not a deviation from the research focus but a necessary element for interpreting teachers' understanding of coherence more holistically.

4.1.2. Teachers' Understanding of Coherence in English Writing

Coherence, as defined by the participants, varied significantly, and this reflects different levels of understanding and perspectives on this abstract concept. The teachers' responses about the definitions of coherence suggest three levels of their understanding of coherence: (1) Surface-level understanding (Teacher 1,2,3), (2) Idea development-focused definition (Teacher 4), and (3) Organization-focused definition (Teacher 5).

Coherence is characterized by "*the connection within a paragraph*" (Teacher 2). This definition is ambiguous because it does not specify what elements in a paragraph are connected.

Coherence is "*the closeness of ideas from sentences to paragraphs*" (Teacher 3) and "*development of ideas, consistency of ideas, logic of ideas, coherence of ideas*" (Teacher 1). These definitions suggest that the participants used vague terms, such as "closeness", "logic", and even "coherence", without providing a clear explanation. These findings are aligned with the previous research, indicating that the teachers often struggle to define coherence clearly (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014).

Coherence means that "*ideas are connected … the main idea of a paragraph is elaborated by supporting ideas, such as evidence, example*" (Teacher 4). This definition emphasizes the development of ideas rather than linguistic features, consistent with findings reported by Hoey (2013).

Coherence means "*the organization of paragraphs, the connection of paragraphs, each paragraph explains one idea, the main idea is developed from supporting ideas*" (Teacher 5). This definition covers many dimensions, including organization, connection, and development of ideas. Teacher 5 perceives coherence as organizing structuring ideas throughout a text, which

aligns with the previous studies (Hoey, 2013; Neubert, 1992).

The definitions of coherence provided by Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3 offer a limited utility for students to grasp the key features of coherence. The teachers used imprecise language, which suggested a partial or incomplete understanding of the concept. In contrast, Teacher 4 viewed coherence as the development of ideas in a paragraph, focusing on the elaboration of the main idea through supporting details. Teacher 5 demonstrated a more comprehensive understanding, addressing coherence through the development and organization of ideas across paragraphs and the entire essay. The participants provided different definitions of coherence (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014), primarily because coherence is an abstract concept (Basturkmen & Von Randow, 2014; Cotton & Wilson, 2011).

The responses of Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 suggest a limited understanding of cohesion and coherence, as reflected in their vague definitions. Teacher 1 defined cohesion and coherence loosely, which implied that the teacher had an incomplete understanding of these concepts. In contrast, Teacher 4 provided a more detailed explanation and Teacher 5 exhibited the most thorough understanding of coherence and cohesion among the participants.

These findings illustrate a spectrum of conceptual clarity among teachers, from limited implicit understanding to more comprehensive views of coherence. This variation suggests some teachers possess tacit knowledge but lack precise terminology to communicate it, while others form a structured definition based on their teaching experience.

4.1.3. Teachers' Views of Coherence in Teaching English Writing Skills

The participants reported that when assessing students' written work, they used four assessment criteria, including grammar, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, and task achievement. Among these criteria, the respondents considered coherence to be the most challenging concept. They recalled that during their university training, coherence had been introduced superficially and was explained in overly abstract terms, which made it difficult for them to develop a clear and practical understanding of this concept.

> *"I remember that I learned about cohesion and coherence when I was a university student. Unfortunately, these concepts are hard for me to comprehend, so after graduation, I had to read other materials to strengthen my understanding of them." (Teacher 1)*

> *"I think cohesion and coherence were too difficult for me to acquire during my university years, so I have poor knowledge about them. When I deliver writing courses, I deepen my knowledge about cohesion and coherence through professional development activities, like discussing these concepts with other colleagues who are also responsible for writing courses for English-majored students." (Teacher 5)*

Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 provided unclear definitions of cohesion, whereas Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3 had difficulty explaining the concept of coherence. It can be said that coherence is slightly more difficult than cohesion, because the former is not as directly observable as the latter, which is consistent with the previous studies (Lee, 2002; Struthers et al., 2013).

4.1.4. Teachers' Views of Teaching Coherence in English Writing Courses

The data from the interviews reveal that the participants reported various methods of teaching coherence in English writing courses.

> *"I give feedback on coherence in my students' English writing. My feedback focuses on giving directions that help students develop their ideas." (Teacher 1)*

> *"I comment on coherence in my students' written work by asking questions about the*

relationship between ideas in a paragraph and requesting clarification of ideas. I often use questions when giving feedback, because I do not want to impose students' views." (Teacher 2)

"I use the <u>PEEL strategy</u> to help students maintain coherence in their English writing. PEEL stands for Point, Explanation, Example, and Link to the point. I learned this strategy from other teachers." (Teacher 3)

"I do not believe in any specific strategies or techniques for achieving coherence. The key to achieving coherence lies in adopting the appropriate mindset when writing English essays. I instruct my students to <u>think from the general to the specific</u>, helping them use supporting ideas to elaborate on the main idea. This mindset propels students to create paragraphs where each following sentence supports the meaning of the previous one." (Teacher 4)

"Coherence is introduced as part of a lesson in the English Writing Skills 3 course, which includes activities designed to help students acquire coherence. Students are presented with a definition of coherence and practice <u>identifying coherence patterns</u> in texts and <u>correcting coherence-related mistakes</u>. They also <u>write essays</u>, such as advantage & disadvantage, problem & solution <u>to develop ideas</u>. Besides, I ask students to make an outline and guide them in <u>arranging ideas in the outline</u> to ensure coherence. I <u>give feedback on coherence in each lesson</u> to raise students' awareness of achieving coherence in writing." (Teacher 5)

The most common method of teaching coherence is giving feedback, employed by Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 5. While Teacher 3 advocates for the PEEL strategy, Teacher 4 emphasizes cultivating students' mindset for coherence. Teacher 5 uses the PPP method (Present-Practice-Produce), with defining coherence, identifying and correcting coherence problems, and producing coherent paragraphs and essays. The participants recognize the importance of coherence in writing, so they employ diverse teaching methods and strategies that help students develop coherence in English writing.

4.1.5. Teachers' Views of Effectiveness of Teaching Coherence in English Writing Courses

This section examines teachers' reflections on their teaching methods and strategies that help students to construct coherence in English writing. While Teacher 1 acknowledged that providing feedback alone might not be effective, other teachers claimed that the success of such methods depended on students' learning disposition. For example, Teacher 5 remarked, "I see students' improvement in achieving coherence in English writing, and this only happens to diligent students".

The effectiveness of teaching coherence can be evaluated through the coherence mistakes that students make during a writing course. Although the participants shared that their teaching methods and strategies were helpful, they noted that students continued to face challenges in writing coherently.

"Some students make a coherence mistake, like <u>the following idea is far from consistent with the previous idea</u> in a paragraph." (Teacher 1)

"My students use cohesive devices to link ideas, but unfortunately <u>their ideas are not connected with one another</u>." (Teacher 2)

"My students have difficulty with <u>transitioning from the main idea to the supporting idea</u>." (Teacher 3)

"My students use <u>supporting ideas, which are not relevant to the main idea</u>." (Teacher 4)

"In many students' essays, <u>the supporting ideas are not aligned with the main idea</u> and <u>the ideas in a paragraph are poorly organized</u>." (Teacher 5)

All the responses of the participants highlight two recurring coherence issues in

students' writing: supporting ideas often fail to elaborate on the main idea, and ideas within a paragraph are poorly organized. Interestingly, while the participants provided varying definitions of coherence, they identified similar problems in students' essays. However, a notable contradiction arises. Although Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3 offered unclear definitions of coherence, they could still identify the coherence issues in students' writing. This suggests that the participants possess implicit knowledge of coherence, but they struggle to articulate its meaning explicitly.

4.2. Teachers' Assessment of Coherence in Argumentative Paragraphs by Second-Year English Majored Students

This section examines how four participants (Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5) assessed two argumentative paragraphs by second-year English majors. Teacher 2 refused to assess students' paragraphs. The paragraphs (paragraph 1 and paragraph 2) follow distinct writing patterns and address the question: "Do you agree that children should learn a foreign language at an early age?"

4.2.1. Teachers' Assessment of Coherence in Paragraph 1

The first paragraph is shown below.

Figure 1

Paragraph 1

> **Topic: Do you agree that children should learn a foreign language at an early age?**
>
> From my perspective, I agree that children learn a foreign language at an early age for two reasons. The first reason is that when children are accessed to foreign language early, it is good for speaking skills. The children will be more confident when communicating. Another justification is that when children learn a foreign language early, it helps them expand their knowledge as well as know about the foreign language. To sum up, learning a foreign language early is very good!

The paragraph above consists of five sentences. The topic sentence presents the author's opinion and introduces two supporting ideas that will be elaborated upon in the body paragraphs. The first supporting idea is marked by the phrase "the first reason", while the second supporting idea is indicated by "another justification". The paragraph concludes with a final sentence, signaled by the phrase "to sum up".

The assessments of participants are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Assessment of Coherence of Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 4 and Teacher 5

Teacher	Coherence score (…/9)	Explanation for assessing coherence of the paragraph
Teacher 1	5/9	There is consistency of ideas in the paragraph. Two supporting ideas are presented, but poorly developed, especially the second supporting idea.
Teacher 3	5/9	The supporting ideas are underdeveloped.
Teacher 4	5/9	The author made it clear that there are two reasons. However, the

		author did not explain how and why learning a foreign language is good for speaking skills, and this idea is not linked to the "communicating" in the following sentence. The second supporting idea "expand knowledge" is not elaborated.
Teacher 5	8/9	The ideas are arranged logically. The supporting ideas are appropriate. However, there is room for further development. The writer should explain more about "speaking skills" in the first supporting idea and more about "expand knowledge" in the second idea.

Table 2 reveals that Teacher 1, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4 assigned the same score of 5/9 for the coherence of the paragraph. However, Teacher 5 gave a significantly higher score of 8/9, indicating that Teacher 5 perceived this paragraph as more coherent compared to other teachers.

In their explanations, Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 used vague terms, such as "underdeveloped", "poorly developed" (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). Teacher 4 identifies both strengths (clear reasons) and weaknesses (lack of connectedness and development). Similarly, Teacher 5 highlighted the strengths, such as the logical arrangement and the appropriateness of supporting ideas, along with a weakness (lack of development). The disparity in teachers' explanations reflects the differences in how the teachers prioritize aspects of coherence, such as connectedness, depth of explanation, and logical arrangement during the assessment of coherence.

4.2.2. Teachers' Assessment of Coherence in Paragraph 2

The second paragraph is shown below.

Figure 2

Paragraph 2

Topic: Do you agree that children should learn a foreign language at an early age?

In my opinion, I agree with that idea. At an early age, children can be taught by teachers and parents easily. Because they do not have many problems to solve, the only thing they have to focus on is learning. Learning another language is a good idea for them to learn. They will have knowledge about foreign language when they are young, that thing helps them easily to learn in the future. Especially, the world has a trend that people should learn more than one language. So children learning a foreign language at an early age is a good idea.

Paragraph 2 contains seven sentences. The first sentence introduces the author's perspective. The other sentences describe two supporting ideas, but they are not explicitly stated compared to paragraph 1.

Table 3

Assessment of Coherence of Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 4 And Teacher 5

Teacher	Coherence score (…/9)	Explanation for assessing coherence of the paragraph
Teacher 1	3/9	The ideas are *underdeveloped*, so it is difficult to follow.
Teacher 3	5/9	*Coherence* is *good* in general.
Teacher 4	4/9	There is *no connection* between two supporting ideas. The second supporting idea is *not explained*.

Teacher 5	4/9	The author does not make it clear which one is the main idea, and which one is the supporting idea. It is hard to find the *connection* between the supporting idea and the main idea. It seems that the paragraph is crafted with rambling thoughts of the writer. The author should identify the writing topic, and then decide which idea should be *explained* in the writing so that supporting ideas will be clear.

As shown in Table 3, Teacher 4 and Teacher 5 assigned the same score of 4/9, whereas Teacher 1 gave a lower score of 3/9, and Teacher 3 gave a higher score of 5/9. This variation in scores indicates a lack of consistent assessment (Erdosy, 2003). Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 used vague terms, such as "underdeveloped", "coherence", and "good" when evaluating coherence (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). In contrast, Teacher 4 and Teacher 5 emphasized the connectedness of ideas and the explanation of ideas in their assessment of coherence.

4.2.3. Teachers' Assessment of Coherence in Paragraph 1 and Paragraph 2

The participants reported difficulties in assessing coherence in students' paragraphs due to its abstract nature, and they struggled to identify the coherence issues in the students' writing (Basturkmen & Von Randow, 2014; Cotton & Wilson, 2011).

Teacher 1, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 assigned lower coherence scores to paragraph 2 than to paragraph 1, indicating that they perceived paragraph 2 as less coherent than paragraph 1. Only Teacher 3 gave the same score to both paragraphs, but provided vague explanations with limited detail. The variation scores and explanations stemmed from the participants not using the standardized criteria. However, this study intentionally did not give standardized criteria to explore how the teachers understand and assess coherence in their natural setting. In other words, providing pre-determined criteria may impose on teachers' assessment of coherence in students' paragraphs.

The variation of participants' age and teaching experience is likely to contribute to the diversity in their assessments. Teachers with fewer years of experience, such as Teacher 1 and Teacher 3, tend to provide more general justifications when evaluating coherence. In contrast, teacher 5, who has over a decade of teaching experience, consistently provided a more detailed comment, even without relying on a structured rating scale. This finding supports Erdosy (2003), who noted that professional experience had a more substantial impact on essay assessment than academic background.

Assessment criteria can promote consistency in assessment, but Teacher 1, Teacher 3, and Teacher 5 did not use specific rating scales when assessing coherence. Only Teacher 4 utilized a nine-point rubric. This likely explains why Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 provided vague and minimal explanations of coherence (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). An intriguing finding is that Teacher 5, despite not using a rating scale, provided detailed explanations for evaluating coherence. Teacher 1, Teacher 3, and Teacher 5 hold master's degrees in English language teacher education. Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 have under 5 years of experience teaching writing and gave comments with little details, whereas Teacher 5, with over a decade of experience, provided detailed comments focusing on key aspects of coherence. This suggests that professional experience, rather than academic background, influenced teachers' assessments (Erdosy, 2003).

Regarding rating scales, Teacher 1, Teacher 3, and Teacher 5 reported that they often used analytic scales, while Teacher 4 applied holistic scales before analytic ones (Bean & Melzer, 2021). However, teacher 4 noted that the coherence criteria descriptions included terms

that were unclear not only to teachers but also to students (Oshima, 2006; Skoufaki, 2020).

Teachers' assessment behaviors in this study suggest several issues for consideration. First, lack of explanation depth is evident in the feedback by less experienced teachers, who used vague descriptors, like "underdeveloped" or "good" without specifying how coherence broke down. Second, focusing on idea development is consistent among more experienced teachers (Teacher 4 and Teacher 5), who evaluated how supporting ideas elaborated on the main idea and how transitions were managed. Third, inconsistency in rating criteria is a recurring issue, as some teachers relied on internal heuristics, while only one explicitly used a rubric. This highlights that even when teachers recognize coherence issues, their evaluation processes differ markedly, underlining the need for shared assessment standards and teacher training.

5. Conclusion

Despite growing attention to coherence in writing assessment, few studies have explored how EFL teachers define and apply the concept of coherence during the assessment process. Prior research (Lee, 2002; Knoch, 2007; Sokolov, 2022) highlights the challenges in assessing coherence and the inconsistencies in rater judgments. However, most studies have focused on large-scale standardized tests or used rater data in experimental settings. This study extends the current literature by exploring how EFL university teachers in Vietnam perceive and assess coherence in naturally occurring classroom conditions without using imposed rubrics. Combining semi-structured interviews with the think-aloud protocol, this research offers an in-depth look at teachers' conceptual confusion between cohesion and coherence, which is an underexplored area, and the influence of teaching experience on coherence judgements. Thus, the study contributes original insights into both the cognitive processes and pedagogical implications of coherence assessment in local ELF contexts.

This study reveals that English lecturers possess implicit knowledge of coherence. However, coherence is an abstract concept, making it challenging for teachers to define and explain clearly to students in English classes. The lecturers recognize the importance of coherence in effective English writing, particularly in argumentative essays. To address this, they employ teaching methods and strategies, like the PPP method (Present, Practice, Produce), and the PEEL strategy (Point, Explain, Example, Link to the point) to help students write coherently. Despite these efforts, many students produced English essays with a low level of coherence, marked by weak connections between ideas and insufficient explanations.

Teachers' varying levels of understanding of coherence impact their assessment of students' written work, causing inconsistency in teachers' scoring. Their assessment highlights the subjective nature of writing evaluation, as scores depend on how teachers prioritize different aspects of coherence. The findings indicate a need for clear, accessible criteria to enable consistent assessment of coherence.

The limitation of this study is the potential bias in self-reported data, especially during interviews and think-aloud sessions. The teachers in the study may have provided responses influenced by social desirability or professional self-image, which may mask gaps in understanding or exaggerating their instructional practices.

The study offers pedagogical implications to improve coherence assessment for teachers. Firstly, the findings highlight the need for targeted professional development programs to enhance teachers' conceptual understanding of coherence. Since the data revealed that many teachers used vague or incomplete definitions of coherence, training sessions should focus on clarifying the distinction between cohesion and coherence and offering explicit

instructional strategies for each concept. Incorporating genre-based approaches and models such as thematic progression may also equip teachers with clearer frameworks to evaluate and teach coherence effectively. Second, the inconsistency in scoring among teachers underscores the importance of shared assessment criteria. Institutions may consider developing rubrics co-designed by experienced writing instructors to standardize coherence assessment practices. This would help reduce subjectivity and improve feedback quality for students.

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