

Discourse Analysis as a Tool for Teaching Academic Writing: Improving Coherence and Cohesion in EFL Students' Essays in Iraqi Universities

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Abstract

Academic writing emerges as a nagging problem facing EFL learners in Iraqi tertiary level learning establishments. Such a problem is attributed to challenges in terms of logical thinking and connectivity. Therefore, understand how and why Discourse Analysis proved productive in improving EFL learners' writing abilities by placing more attention on cohesive and non-cognitive skills. A quasi-experimental study was conducted over a period of sixteen weeks, with participants from Universities in Baghdad, Basra, and Erbil. Students from a second-level undergraduate program were randomly chosen. The results indicated a significant improvement in coherence, cohesion, and quality in terms of experimental over control participants. Additionally, there was metalinguistic awareness. However, challenges associated with training EFL trainers in terms of method and curriculum demands were established. This study suggests how and why integrating a theory of discourse analysis would immensely facilitate in bridging the literacy divide in academic literacy skills by implying a need to instigate training initiatives, initiating reforms in terms of curriculum changes, and carrying out longitudinal study in terms of long-term developing trends in terms of writing abilities.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, academic writing, coherence, cohesion, cohesive devices

تحليل الخطاب كأداة لتدريس الكتابة الأكاديمية: تحسين الترابط والانسجام في مقالات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة
أجنبية في الجامعات العراقية

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المستخلص

تبرز الكتابة الأكاديمية فجوة بحثية ومشكلة ملحة تواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في مؤسسات التعليم الجامعي العراقية؛ ويُعزى ذلك إلى تحديات تتعلق بالتفكير المنطقي والترابط النصي. وبناءً عليه، تسعى هذه الدراسة لفهم كيف ولماذا أثبت تحليل الخطاب فاعليته في تحسين قدرات الكتابة لدى المتعلمين من خلال تركيز الاهتمام على مهارات التماسك والمهارات غير المعرفية. أُجريت دراسة شبه تجريبية على مدار ستة عشر أسبوعاً، شملت مشاركين من جامعات بغداد والبصرة وأربيل، إذ اختير طلاب من برنامج البكالوريوس (المستوى الثاني) عشوائياً. وأشارت النتائج إلى وجود تحسن ملحوظ في الترابط والانسجام والجودة النوعية لدى المجموعة التجريبية مقارنة بالمجموعة الضابطة، فضلاً عن تطور الوعي "ما وراء اللغوي" لديهم. ومع ذلك، رصدت الدراسة تحديات مرتبطة بتدريب مدرّبي اللغة الإنجليزية على هذه المنهجية ومتطلبات المناهج الدراسية. وتلخص الدراسة إلى تبيان كيفية وأهمية دمج نظرية تحليل الخطاب في تسهيل سد الفجوة المعرفية في مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية، مما يستوجب إطلاق مبادرات تدريبية، وإجراء إصلاحات في المناهج الدراسية، وتنفيذ دراسات طويلة لتتبع اتجاهات تطور قدرات الكتابة على المدى الطويل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب، الكتابة الأكاديمية، الترابط المنطقي، الانسجام اللغوي، أدوات الربط

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Published: Jun. 2026

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تاريخ النشر : حزيران 2026

1. Introduction

1.1 Problematic of Writing Skills at Iraqi Universities

According to Al-Rashid and Al-Zamili (2023),

academic writing has become a major problem among different EFL skills for the students of Iraqi universities. Even students who have completed

the secondary level English language course and enroll in Iraqi universities are still found to be wanting in the skill of writing academically in a coherent and well-organized way, as indicated by the study of Al-Hamdani & Hassan (2023). The issue of students' academic writing has been raised to various levels differences between which are poor idea organization, inadequate use of transitional markers, unclear pronoun references, weak topic sentence development, and fragmented argumentation patterns, etc. as reported by the Ministry of Higher Education Iraq (2022).

The problem has escalated so much that, schools of education, faculties of linguistics, and the like have left the issue of language departments aside, utilized the trend for their good, and made it their advertisement tool for student enrollment. Many researches have been done which show that language accuracy and discourse organization are interdependent in the writing of Iraqi EFL learners; that is, sentence-level accuracy and discourse-level organization, and the researchers further claim that pupils from Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Erbil junior high schools are involved in this connection too (Hammed & Salman, 2022). The findings of Al-Majdawi and Shamkhi (2022) revealed that grammar is a major stumbling block for college students and writing dependence on the teacher is highly brought about by the amount of the teacher. However, the foundational problems come to an end at the secondary level of education from where they escalate to the university thus putting students in a dilemma of producing research papers, prose, critical reading, and thesis work all of which require English language proficiency and the use of the principles of coherence and cohesion.

The heavy packed traditional instruction plans in Iraqi universities are mostly focused on the mechanical aspects of language such as grammar

and stereotypical ways of writing any given text according to introduction-body-conclusion structure. Consequently, even the most seasoned teachers hardly manage to give students clear instructions on discourse-level organizational principles and cohesive mechanisms, which is the main reason why students fail to apply grammatical rules learned separately from real speech situations when they produce longer academic texts.

1.2 Discourse Markers and Metadiscourse in Iraqi

EFL Writing Local EFL learners are discourse markers underproducers compared to that required. Abdalhussein (2022) discovered that Iraqi learners of English produce only a few additive and sequential transitions, such as "second," "first," and "therefore," but at the same time, they have very limited control over evidentials, code glosses, and interactional devices. Therefore, this results in structurally organized writing but not rhetorically, which makes the writing less attractive to the reader. By requesting the authors deliberately to intend the use of an interactional marker as a metadiscourse tool, they become more reader-oriented, especially in the argumentation.

An investigation into the efficacy of using a flipped classroom approach to teaching discourse markers in an Iraqi context revealed that there has been a visible improvement in students' knowledge of discourse markers; however, writing proficiency in general has changed slightly, thus giving rise to the opinion that instruction in discourse features cannot be handled independently but should be combined with various other strategies for writing development in order to achieve better results.

1.3 Discourse Analysis as a Pedagogical Tool

Discourse Analysis (DA) is a deep study of the use of language in longer texts or speech and the situations, it traces the meaning to the next sentence or utterance, it is supposed to be constructed from the previous one (Gee, 2014). Discourse Analysis differs from regular grammar teaching which only focuses on sentence-level structures and in isolation. The focus of DA is less on grammar structures at the sentence level but more on how the language structures from different sentences are used to achieve a coherent, continuous speech or text. DA theories show how writers sequence their ideas, identify the links between the different propositions, create the flow through the use of the pronoun reference and lexical repetition, as well as, lead readers by the use of logical argumentation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

1.4 The research problem and the gaps

Even though DA-informed instruction has a clear pedagogical value, its use in EFL contexts of Iraqi universities is very scarce. The majority of university writing courses continue to use traditional grammar-based methods or generic process writing models (peer feedback, multiple drafts, teacher conferences) without providing any explicit DA instruction (Al-Rashid & Al-Zamili, 2023). In addition, the Anglophone writing scholarship has thoroughly described the use of DA for academic writing instruction (mainly in British and Australian contexts with a large number of EFL students) while very few studies have looked into the effectiveness of DA in the Arab Gulf region and there is almost no published research that focuses on Iraqi higher education.

The research gap here is even more significant because of the recent changes in Iraqi universities

that have put more emphasis on improving students' English language skills and enhancing their research output (Ministry of Higher Education Iraq, 2022). As Iraqi universities are gradually implementing international publication standards and becoming part of global academic communities, the need for students to have proficiency in academic writing has become a strategic priority. Nevertheless, there is a lack of systematic evidence on effective pedagogical approaches for Iraqi students which in turn leaves instructors with no other option but to use methods that have been developed in other contexts and have not been empirically tested in Iraqi settings.

1.5 Research Questions and Objectives

This research aims to find answers to the following questions:

Main research question: How effectively can Discourse Analysis-informed instruction improve coherence and cohesion in EFL students' academic essays within Iraqi university contexts?

Auxiliary research questions:

1. What are the current levels of coherence and cohesion in EFL students' essays before DA-informed instruction?
2. Which specific cohesive devices and coherence features do Iraqi EFL students find most challenging?
3. How effectively can Discourse Analysis-informed instruction improve coherence and cohesion in these essays?
4. What metalinguistic awareness do students develop regarding discourse-level organization following the intervention?
5. What contextual factors in Iraqi universities facilitate or constrain the implementation of DA in writing instruction?

Research Objectives:

1. To record and evaluate the initial levels of coherence and cohesion in the essays of Iraqi EFL students.
2. To identify the specific linguistic and rhetorical areas where students face the greatest difficulties.
3. To implement and assess the effectiveness of a 16-week DA-based writing instruction course in improving essay quality.
4. To examine the development of students' metalinguistic awareness concerning text organization and discourse structure.
5. To identify the systemic and contextual factors that influence the application of DA-informed pedagogy in the Iraqi higher education setting.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The Simplified Theoretical Framework: Focused on SFL

The underpinning theoretical rationale is based essentially on Systemic Functional Linguistics, especially the model of Halliday and Hasan. According to this theory, language is a strategy adopted for accomplishing three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Central to this research is the textual metafunction, which is responsible for the internal organization of a text

through cohesion and coherence. Using SFL principles, academic writing instruction can explicitly develop in students the use of cohesive devices like reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion in binding sentences logically together in cohesive and meaningful discourse. This pedagogical application in focus allows EFL students to transcend sentence-level grammar into discourse-level organization necessary for effective communication.

Discourse Analysis has grown to be a serious academic field that studies how meaning goes beyond singular sentences through a detailed look at text structure, the role of language in creating unity, and the influence of the surrounding world on language use (Gee, 2014). In contrast to traditional grammatical analysis that only looks at sentences in isolation, DA works with the extended discourses such as conversations, written texts, and multimodal communication.

2.2 Cohesion and Cohesive Devices

Cohesion refers to the formal linguistic mechanisms that explicitly bind discourse units (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The following table summarizes the five major categories of cohesive devices and their application in EFL writing as shown in Table (1).

Table (1): Categories of Cohesive Devices and Examples

Device Type	Definition	Example	Note on EFL Writers
Reference	Use of pronouns/demonstratives to point to previous entities.	"The university is in Baghdad. It employs 500 faculty."	Often difficult; students confuse pronouns with referents.
Substitution	Replacing an element with a substitute word.	"Ahmed wrote an essay; the professor praised it."	Less frequent in EFL writing compared to reference.

Ellipsis	Omitting redundant elements understood from context.	"Ahmed completed the task, and Fatima did too."	Requires advanced context awareness; often avoided.
Conjunction	Words showing logical connections between clauses.	"Findings were significant. However, limitations existed."	Crucial for making rhetorical relationships explicit.
Lexical Cohesion	Repetition of words or use of synonyms/related terms.	"The study examined regulations. These policies were influential."	Most naturally used device by Iraqi EFL students.

These institutional policies proved influential. devices as shown in Table (2).

"One of the most naturally done by EFL writer's

Table (2): state the Frequency of Cohesive Device Use in Iraqi EFL Students' Pre-Intervention Essays

Cohesive Device Type	Frequency per 100 words	Mean Use Rate (%)	Range (%)
Reference (pronouns/demonstratives)	8.2	42.1%	18-67%
Lexical Cohesion	6.1	31.4%	12-58%
Conjunction	2.8	14.3%	2-28%
Ellipsis	0.6	3.1%	0-8%
Substitution	0.3	1.5%	0-4%
Inappropriate/Misused Devices	1.2	7.6%	0-18%

(Baseline assessment data from 184 participants)

2.3 Coherence vs. Cohesion

To address the common confusion between these

two concepts, Table (1.2) highlights their

fundamental differences as shown in Table (3).

Table (3): Conceptual Comparison: Cohesion vs. Coherence

Feature	Cohesion (Linguistic Surface)	Coherence (Logical Depth)
Nature	Objective, formal linguistic links.	Subjective, logical connection of ideas.
Measurement	Countable (pronouns, conjunctions).	Evaluated by clarity and flow of argument.
Focus	How sentences are glued together.	How the overall meaning is constructed.
Requirement	Can exist without coherence (nonsensical but linked).	Can exist with minimal cohesion (logical but few links).

Iraqi EFL students are usually capable of producing essays that demonstrate insufficient cohesion as well as incoherence. The students use a minimal number of linking devices (low

cohesion) and at the same time fail to establish logical relationships among ideas (low coherence). DA-informed instruction incorporates both aspects simultaneously by not only presenting the explicit

linking devices to the students but also the conceptual relationships that cohesive devices refer to.

2.4 Discourse Analysis in Academic Writing

Instruction: Global Evidence

The effectiveness of DA-informed instruction is supported by various global studies, as summarized below as shown in Table (4).

Table (4): Summary of Global Research on DA-Informed Instruction

Study	Context	Focus	Key Findings
North & Angell (2006)	UK Universities	Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)	Improved sentence complexity and essay quality.
Hyon (1996)	Various Universities	Genre-Based Instruction	Better organization according to genre standards.
Connor (2002)	International	Contrastive Rhetoric	Increased awareness of L1 vs. L2 organizational shifts.
Bae (2001)	South Korea	Explicit Cohesion Instruction	Significant progress in overall coherence and cohesion.

Nevertheless, all the former DA-driven writing studies have been carried out at universities in English-speaking countries that offer abundant institutional support, trained writing specialists, small classes, and an active writing center – a situation that is hardly the case in Iraqi universities. Therefore, the question of to what extent these findings can be relevant to other non-English-speaking, resource-constraint contexts still remains.

2.4. Iraqi Higher Education Context

2.4.1 The Current Pedagogical Landscape of Writing Instruction

"In order to grasp the rationale behind the need to impose Discourse Analysis (DA) intervention in writing instruction in Iraq, it is of great significance to briefly highlight what currently constitutes writing pedagogies in higher education in Iraq. Focusing primarily and mainly on grammar at sentence level rather than encouraging

students to achieve higher-level understanding of holistic elements of writing in Iraq has dominated most of what has so far been imparted to students in higher education in Iraq (Al-Hamdani & Hassan, 2023). The use of a general process approach to teaching writing in which there is a promotion of multiple drafting has also been emphasized in this setting but has rather failed to incorporate specific elements of teaching this aspect of writing (Al-Rashid & Al-Zamili, 2023). The overall teaching of writing has also mainly relied on template learning in which five-paragraph essay writing has been forcibly emphasized in Iraq but has rather failed to factor in diverse learning (Ministry of Higher Education Iraq, 2022".)

2.5 The Iraqi University System

The following tables summarize the structural data of the Iraqi higher education system and the characteristics of current writing instruction based

on recent institutional reports and scholarly research. Categorizes the prevailing pedagogical methodologies in Iraqi higher education, highlighting a systemic reliance on sentence-level grammar and rigid templates. The Iraqi higher education system has a significant capacity, as it is made up of 53 universities and 97 technical institutes that house over 1.2 million students. The current research will be undertaken at the key research sites in Iraq, the Universities of Baghdad, Basra, and Erbil, with combined enrollments of over 150,000 students who have identified English as the medium of instruction for specialized departments such as English, Engineering, Medicine, and Sciences. Accordingly, the Iraqi higher education system adopts an extremely

centralized system whereby all colleges are subject to identical curricula; however, it also burdens EFL specialists and has high academic programs concentrated in Baghdad.

A significant gap in explicit discourse-level instruction and genre-specific training within current EFL writing curricula. A comparative overview of writing course characteristics across the three target universities, revealing standardized time allocations but significant variations in instructor qualifications and support resources. The data specifically highlights a critical lack of discourse-level instruction and institutional writing support outside of the University of Baghdad, as shown in Table (5).

Table (5): State the Current Writing Course Characteristics in Participating Iraqi Universities

Characteristic	University of Baghdad	University of Basra	University of Erbil
Students per Class	35-40	40-45	38-42
Weekly Class Hours	2 (90 minutes)	2 (90 minutes)	2 (90 minutes)
Instructor Qualifications	BA (5 instructors), MA (3), PhD (2)	BA (6), MA (2)	BA (7), MA (1)
Assigned Essay Writing	4-5 essays/semester	3-4 essays/semester	3-4 essays/semester
Feedback Approach	Comments on drafts	Comments + grades	Minimal written feedback
Discourse-Level Instruction	Minimal	None documented	None documented
Writing Center/Support	Limited tutoring	None	None
Textbook/Materials	Diverse commercial texts	Limited official text	Instructor-developed materials

(Compiled from institutional surveys and curriculum documentation)

2.6 Contextual Challenges Affecting Academic Writing Instruction

There are several challenges that the Iraqi education system, especially in the context of university settings, faces with respect to the implementation of academic writing. Some of the challenges that are obvious from a practical point of view include a large class size of between 35 to

45 students, which does not really allow scope for feedback, as well as a lack of facilities or resources to back up teaching, especially when there are tight timetables or a focus that only allows teachers a mere two, 90-minute slots a week, often focusing more on grammar as opposed to the focus being needed on discursive analysis, as well as a lack of teachers actually being equipped enough to drive

forward a new wave or type of teaching that does not necessarily favor the traditional or current pedagogic shift. In addition, there also seems to be a problem from a language point of view, as the student finds it difficult to adjust from a circular pattern of discussion, especially that of the Arabic language, to a more linear pattern, as needed within English language academic discussion.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research was designed as a quasi-experimental investigation with non-equivalent comparison groups. While the control group was given the traditional writing instruction, the experimental group was provided with DA-informed instruction. Both groups undertook pre-tests as well as post-tests which allowed the loci of improvement to be compared. The design used here is a good fit between the experimental demands and the practical conditions in universities where it is very challenging to carry out random assignment of students to instructional conditions.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The current study was conducted within the framework of the Iraqi higher education system, which comprises approximately 53 universities and 97 technical institutes, enrolling over 1.2 million students (Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education, 2022). To ensure a representative sample, the intervention was implemented at three major institutions: the University of Baghdad (the largest and most prestigious), the University of

Basra (the second largest), and the University of Erbil (a major regional institution). Collectively, these three universities educate more than 150,000 students and host specialized programs in English language and literature. Moreover, English serves as the primary medium of instruction in several other technical and scientific departments, such as engineering and medicine, highlighting the critical need for academic writing proficiency.

The selection of these sites was further justified by the prevailing pedagogical challenges in the Iraqi context. Currently, writing instruction in these universities is predominantly based on traditional grammar-focused techniques and rigid template-based organization, such as the five-paragraph essay (Ministry of Higher Education Iraq, 2022). This conventional approach often fails to provide students with the rhetorical flexibility required for complex academic discourse. Furthermore, the instructional environment is characterized by large class sizes (35-45 students) and a significant lack of institutional support, with minimal writing center resources available, particularly in Basra and Erbil. By conducting the research in this environment, the study accounts for the diverse qualifications of instructors—ranging from Bachelor's degrees to Ph.Ds—and the systemic constraints that Iraqi EFL learners face in developing coherent and cohesive academic writing (Al-Rashid & Al-Zamili, 2023).

Participant Characteristics Description:

as shown in Table (6).

Table (6): state the Study Participant Demographics

Variable	Control Group (n=92)	Experimental Group (n=92)	Overall (N=184)
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Gender (Male/Female)	42 / 50	45 / 47	87 / 97
Age (Mean/SD)	19.4 (0.8)	19.6 (0.7)	19.5 (0.75)
University Distribution	Baghdad (32), Basra (30), Erbil (30)	Baghdad (31), Basra (31), Erbil (30)	184 Total
English Proficiency (Pre-test Mean)	52.4%	51.8%	52.1%

Participants were second-year undergraduate students from English-related departments who were enrolled in mandatory English composition courses at three major Iraqi universities.

3.3 Instructional Interventions

Experimental Group Instruction (DA-Informed Approach) as shown in Table (7):

Table (7): state the experimental group received instruction that consisted During the 16-week intervention, the program aimed to concentrate on discourse-level

Instructional Component	Duration	Focus Areas	Pedagogical Activities
Unit 1: Cohesive Devices	Weeks 1-3	Reference chains, pronouns, demonstratives	Analysis of model texts; identifying cohesive ties; matching pronouns with referents
Unit 2: Lexical Cohesion	Weeks 4-5	Repetition, synonymy, semantic fields	Lexical mapping exercises; creating semantic networks; synonym substitution practice
Unit 3: Conjunction & Transitions	Weeks 6-8	Logical connectors, discourse markers, rhetorical relations	Classifying conjunctions by logical relationship; using discourse markers appropriately
Unit 4: Topic Continuity	Weeks 9-10	Given-new information, theme-rheme progression, topical structure	Analyzing information flow; constructing coherent paragraphs through topical progression
Unit 5: Coherence & Organization	Weeks 11-13	Paragraph coherence, argument structure, rhetorical organization	Recognizing organization patterns (cause-effect, problem-solution); analyzing macrostructure
Unit 6: Integrated Writing Practice	Weeks 14-16	Applying DA principles to extended essays	Composing essays with explicit attention to cohesion, coherence, and organization

Experimental group instruction incorporated: The DA-informed intervention utilized a multifaceted pedagogical approach centered on

explicit discourse awareness and metalinguistic skill-building. Through activities such as text reconstruction, comparative analysis of authentic

versus poor-quality essays, and focused revision, students moved beyond sentence-level grammar to master organizational structures and cohesive mechanisms. This instructional framework was supported by guided writing stages and reinforced by teachers who underwent intensive professional development to effectively integrate discourse analysis principles into the university writing curriculum.

3.4 Assessment and Measurement

Pre-Test and Post-Test Essays:

Each participant wrote an essay on the topics of similar difficulty, as a pre-test (Week 1) and a post-test (Week 16). The topics were taken from typical academic essay prompts:

- Pre-Test Prompt: "Discuss the role of technology in modern education"

- Post-Test Prompt: "Analyze how social media affects university student engagement"

Both prompts implied the writing of persuasive/argumentative essays (800-1000 words) on contemporary issues, thus providing an opportunity to evaluate the four aspects of the written text: coherence, cohesion, organization, and persuasive effectiveness. The topics' difficulty level was similar because of piloting with the corresponding student populations.

Essay Quality Assessment:

Written works were assessed that way basing on the dimensions for which the rubrics are made that had been used for judging them as shown in Table (8):

Table (8): state the Essay Assessment Rubric—Coherence and Cohesion Dimensions

Dimension	Criteria	Scoring
Coherence (0-25 points)	Logical flow of ideas; clear relationships among propositions; reader can follow argument easily; ideas develop progressively; minimal confusion	25: Excellent; 20: Good; 15: Fair; 10: Weak; 5: Poor
Cohesion (0-25 points)	Appropriate use of pronouns; clear referents; logical discourse markers; lexical repetition/synonymy; sustained topic focus; minimal broken sentences	25: Excellent; 20: Good; 15: Fair; 10: Weak; 5: Poor
Organization (0-20 points)	Clear introduction, body, conclusion; paragraphs organized logically; transitions between paragraphs; overall macrostructure evident	20: Excellent; 16: Good; 12: Fair; 8: Weak; 4: Poor
Argument Development (0-20 points)	Thesis clearly stated; claims supported with evidence; reasoning is explicit; counterarguments acknowledged	20: Excellent; 16: Good; 12: Fair; 8: Weak; 4: Poor
Grammar & Mechanics (0-10 points)	Sentence-level accuracy; appropriate punctuation; minimal errors not interfering with meaning	10: Excellent; 8: Good; 6: Fair; 4: Weak; 2: Poor
TOTAL		0-100 points

(Adapted from Jacobs et al., 1981)

Cohesion Density Analysis:

We didn't only grade the essays. We also checked their coherence. Here is what we examined:

Keeping Characters Straight: This shows that the students correctly used the names and pronouns when referring to the characters.

And, But, Because Count: We found how students used these words per 100 words.

Word Choice: We attempted to find repeated words and similar words. This was an attempt to

find the frequency of the main words.

Transitions: We ensured that the connecting words of ideas were logical.

Were Students' Own Writing Given Back to Them?

Following the advice given to them, students took a test to see if they picked up some skills that would help them improve their essays as shown in Table (9).

Table (9): Sate the Metalinguistic Awareness Assessment Items

Item	Task	Sample Question
Item 1	Identify pronoun referents	"What does 'it' refer to in this sentence? Explain your reasoning."
Item 2	Classify discourse markers	"Classify these markers: however, because, therefore, in addition, in contrast"
Item 3	Recognize coherence patterns	"Identify the organizational pattern in this paragraph: cause-effect, problem-solution, comparison, exemplification?"
Item 4	Analyze topic continuity	"Trace how the topic shifts across these three sentences. Is the progression coherent?"
Item 5	Evaluate cohesion	"Rate this paragraph's cohesion (1-5) and identify specific devices creating cohesion"
Item 6	Revise for coherence	"Revise this incoherent paragraph for improved logical flow"

Responses scored according to accuracy of discourse analysis (0-3 points per item; 0=incorrect, 1=partially correct, 2=mostly correct, 3=correct with explanation).

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Pre-Test Baseline Characteristics

The essay pre-test has been carried out to figure out the baseline quality of writing without the need for an intervention.

Overall Essay Quality Scores:

The students in the control group (M=58.2, SD=12.1) and the students in the experimental

group (M=56.8, SD=11.9) were shown to have comparable pre-test essay quality with no statistically significant difference between them ($t(182)=0.98$, $p>.05$, ns). Both groups of students received scores that resulted in the "fair" to "good" range, which means writing skills of second-year university students were at a baseline level but still had a considerable amount of room for further development.

Pre-Test Coherence and Cohesion Scores as shown in Table (10):

Table (10): state the Pre-Test Coherence and Cohesion Analysis

Dimension	Control Group	Experimental Group	Overall Mean	Statistical Comparison
Coherence Score	54.3% (SD=14.2)	53.8% (SD=13.6)	54.05%	t(182)=0.24, p>.05, ns
Cohesion Score	51.2% (SD=15.1)	50.9% (SD=14.8)	51.05%	t(182)=0.13, p>.05, ns
Organization Score	56.7% (SD=13.8)	55.3% (SD=14.1)	56.0%	t(182)=0.74, p>.05, ns
Pronoun Reference Accuracy	72.4% (SD=18.3)	71.6% (SD=17.9)	72.0%	t(182)=0.31, p>.05, ns
Discourse Marker Usage (per 100 words)	2.6 (SD=1.2)	2.5 (SD=1.1)	2.55	t(182)=0.54, p>.05, ns
Lexical Cohesion Density	48.2% (SD=12.6)	47.9% (SD=12.2)	48.05%	t(182)=0.17, p>.05, ns

4.2 Post-Test Results: Overall Writing Quality

Table (11): Comparative Analysis of Essay Quality Improvement Between Groups

Measurement Metric	Control Group (n=92)	Experimental Group (n=92)	Statistical Significance
Pre-Test Mean Score	58.2	56.8	t(182)=0.98, p > 0.05 (ns)
Post-Test Mean Score	71.4 (SD 10.8)	87.8 (SD 8.3)	t(182)=10.43, p < 0.001
Total Score Gain	+13.2 points	+31.0 points	—
Paired t-test (Within Group)	t(91)=12.34, p < 0.001	t(91)=28.67, p < 0.001	—
Between-Group Difference	-	16.4 points	Significant (Large Effect)

4.3 Specific Analysis of Coherence and Cohesion

The intervention-specific analysis of coherence

and cohesion was also done, and the detailed results as shown in Table (12).

Table (12): State the Post-Test Coherence and Cohesion Outcomes

Dimension	Group	Pre-Test (M%)	Post-Test (M%)	Gain	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Coherence	Control	54.3	68.2	+13.9	8.76	<0.001*	0.93

	Experimental	53.8	78.6	+24.8	16.42	<0.001*	1.75
	Between-Group	—	—	—	6.23	<0.001*	0.83
Cohesion	Control	51.2	65.4	+14.2	9.18	<0.001*	0.98
	Experimental	50.9	75.4	+24.5	15.87	<0.001*	1.69
	Between-Group	—	—	—	5.89	<0.001*	0.79
Organization	Control	56.7	69.3	+12.6	8.12	<0.001*	0.87
	Experimental	55.3	81.2	+25.9	17.54	<0.001*	1.87
	Between-Group	—	—	—	7.34	<0.001*	0.98

*p<0.001 indicates highly statistically significant differences

4.4 Specific Cohesive Device Improvement

First of all, the detailed analysis of the changes in the usage of the specific cohesive devices revealed

that the patterns of improvement were different for the different devices as shown in Table (13).

Table (13): State the Cohesive Device Usage Changes—Pre-Test to Post-Test

Cohesive Device	Group	Pre-Test (freq/100 words)	Post-Test (freq/100 words)	Change	Improvement (%)
Pronouns/Reference	Control	8.2	10.1	+1.9	+23.2%
	Experimental	8.1	12.3	+4.2	+51.9%
Discourse Markers	Control	2.6	4.1	+1.5	+57.7%
	Experimental	2.5	7.8	+5.3	+212%*
Lexical Repetition	Control	6.1	7.2	+1.1	+18.0%
	Experimental	6.0	9.4	+3.4	+56.7%
Conjunction	Control	2.8	4.2	+1.4	+50.0%
	Experimental	2.8	8.1	+5.3	+189%*

*Asterisks indicate disproportionately large improvements

4.5 Pronoun Reference Accuracy

One of the most important findings is related to the clarity of the pronoun references which is one of

the main mechanisms maintaining overall coherence as shown in Table (14).

Table (14): State the Pronoun Reference Accuracy—Analysis of Clarity and Appropriateness

Reference Type	Control Pre (% correct)	Control Post (% correct)	Experimental Pre (% correct)	Experimental Post (% correct)	Between-Group Difference
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(Post)					
Clear Single Referent	81.4%	85.2%	80.8%	92.6%	7.4%
Ambiguous Referent	62.3%	71.8%	61.9%	86.4%	14.6%*
Extended Reference Chain	54.1%	62.7%	53.6%	79.8%	17.1%*
Demonstrative Reference	58.9%	68.4%	58.4%	81.2%	12.8%*
Overall Reference Accuracy	72.4%	79.1%	71.6%	85.7%	6.6%*

*Significant between-group differences (p<0.05)

4.6 Metalinguistic Awareness Development

It was after the intervention when the experimental group students were able to show very significant

increase of their metalinguistic awareness to features of the discourse-level **as shown in Table (15).**

Table (15): State the Metalinguistic Awareness Assessment—Experimental Group Performance

Assessment Item	Pre-Assessment Mean (0-3)	Post-Assessment Mean (0-3)	Gain	Percentage Scoring 2-3 (Correct)
Identify Pronoun Referents	1.2	2.7	+1.5	90.2%
Classify Discourse Markers	0.9	2.5	+1.6	87.0%
Recognize Coherence Patterns	1.1	2.6	+1.5	88.0%
Analyze Topic Continuity	0.8	2.4	+1.6	82.6%
Evaluate Cohesion	1.0	2.4	+1.4	80.4%
Revise for Coherence	0.7	2.3	+1.6	78.3%
Overall Metalinguistic Awareness	0.95	2.48	+1.53	84.3%

The experimental group students were able to score highly in the post-test across all metalinguistic awareness items.

4.7 Transfer to Novel Writing Tasks

One of the main questions is whether students after the DA intervention would be able to apply the DA

principles while writing new essays on topics they have never heard of. In transfer assessment, students had to write for week 18 (post-intervention conclusion) on a new topic: "Analyze environmental policy challenges in Iraq."as shown in Table (16).

Table (16): State the Transfer Task Performance—Application to Novel Writing Context

Writing Dimension	Immediate Post-Test (Week 16)	Transfer Task (Week 18)	Retention Rate (%)
Coherence Score	78.6% (experimental)	76.2% (experimental)	96.9%
Cohesion Score	75.4% (experimental)	73.1% (experimental)	96.9%
Discourse Marker Frequency	7.8/100 words	7.1/100 words	91.0%
Overall Essay Quality	87.8	85.3	97.1%

Experimental group students were able to keep most of the post-intervention changes when writing the transfer task essay.

4.7 Qualitative Findings: Student Perspectives

Table (17): Summary of Qualitative Findings: Student Perspectives on DA Instruction

Category	Key Insights & Perceived Benefits	Representative Student Quotes
Metalinguistic Awareness	Transition from viewing "good writing" as a mystery to understanding specific linguistic devices.	<i>"Now I can see how good writers connect their ideas... I understand the actual devices they use."</i>
Revision Strategies	Shift in focus from simple grammar correction to checking pronoun clarity and transition density.	<i>"When I revise now, I don't just correct grammar. I look at whether my pronouns are clear..."</i>
Organizational Mastery	Practical understanding of structural patterns like cause-effect and problem-solution.	<i>"Learning about cause-effect and problem-solution structures showed me how to organize ideas."</i>
Initial Cognitive Load	Difficulty and complexity of mastering DA concepts during the early stages of instruction.	<i>"Learning cohesion and coherence was complicated at first. We needed to practice a lot..."</i>
Linguistic Transfer	Difficulty in reconciling English-specific DA patterns with L1 Arabic writing conventions.	<i>"This is good for English, but our Arabic essays probably need different organization."</i>
Timed Performance	Challenges in applying DA principles under the pressure of timed examinations.	<i>"When I have time to revise, I can apply these concepts. But in timed exams, I can't think about all these things..."</i>

4.8 Instructor Implementation Fidelity

The deficit in fidelity to DA pedagogy can be seen from the analysis of experimental group

instruction, which varies across instructors as shown in Table (18):

Table (18): State the Instructional Fidelity Ratings—Experimental Group Teachers (n=10)

Implementation Component	High Fidelity (4-5/5)	Moderate Fidelity (2-3/5)	Low Fidelity (0- 1/5)
Explicit DA Explanation	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	0 (0%)
Model Text Analysis	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)
Metalinguistic Exercises	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0 (0%)
Focused Revision Activities	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)
Integration of DA with Grammar	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0 (0%)
Overall Fidelity	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0 (0%)

4.9 Retention of Gains—Follow-up Assessment

The follow-up test for writing improvement was held 12 weeks after the intervention (week 28)

with the participants available for the experiment (n=78 out of the original 92; 84.8% retention) as shown in Table (19):

Table (19): State the Sustained Writing Improvement—12-Week Follow-Up

Writing Dimension	Week 16 Post-Test	Week 28 Follow-Up	Maintenance (%)	Decay Rate
Coherence Score	78.6%	74.8%	95.2%	3.8%
Cohesion Score	75.4%	71.3%	94.6%	4.1%
Discourse Marker Frequency	7.8/100	6.2/100	79.5%	20.5%
Overall Essay Quality	87.8	82.1	93.5%	6.5%

The use of discourse markers revealed a bigger backslide (79.5% of the cases maintenance, 20.5% decay), thus pointing out that this less automatic skill needs support from time to time for it to be consolidated.

4.10 Contextual Implementation Challenges

Qualitative interview data from the instructors (n=10 teachers of the experimental group) and administrators (n=3 faculty coordinators) reflected the impact of the contextual factors on the implementation of the intervention:

Facilitating Factors:

Teacher Enthusiasm: Teachers with the L2 research background or those who have had

exposure to applied linguistics showed the highest level of implementation fidelity

Administrative Support: Universities where instructors are allowed to take time off for a workshop or attend it during their working hours facilitate instructor participation

Peer Collaboration: Teachers who have had the opportunity to work with their colleagues, visiting each other's lessons and talking through the implementation, have been able to keep up their engagement

Constraining Factors: as shown in Table (20).

Table (20): State the Implementation Barriers—Frequency and Severity

Barrier	Frequency	Severity (1-5)	Example Quote
Large Class Sizes	8/10 teachers (80%)	4.3	"With 40+ students, I can't give detailed feedback on every essay to assess discourse features"
Time Constraints	9/10 teachers (90%)	4.6	"Two 90-minute classes per week isn't enough for grammar instruction AND DA instruction"
Limited Resources	7/10 teachers (70%)	4.1	"I don't have materials or technology to display model texts for analysis"
Institutional Pressure	8/10 teachers (80%)	4.2	"Administration focuses on grammar test scores, not writing quality"
Teacher Fatigue	6/10 teachers (60%)	3.8	"Preparing DA materials and analyzing student texts requires substantial extra work"
Student Resistance	5/10 teachers (50%)	3.4	"Some students resist new approaches; they want traditional grammar instruction"

5. Discussion and Interpretation

5.1 Effectiveness of DA-Informed Instruction

The results show a clear and convincing empirical evidence that an explicit Discourse Analysis (DA) teaching significantly improves academic writing in the Iraqi EFL contexts. The experimental group made a 31-percentage-point jump in the overall quality of their essays (from 56.8% to 87.8%) compared to just a 13.2-percentage-point change (from 58.2% to 71.4%) in the control group. Furthermore, the most significant improvements were noticed in coherence where the experimental group exceeded the control group by 24.8 percentage points against 13.9 points, respectively, and in cohesion where the former outscored the latter by 24.5 to 14.2 percentage points.

The effect sizes ($d=1.5-1.9$) mean that there are considerable educational improvements, going far beyond the typical 0.5-0.8 effect size most educational interventions yield. These findings indicate that DA-based teaching, if carried out properly, can bring about quality writing

upgrading to a very high degree even in Iraqi university settings which are less endowed with resources.

The enhancements in coherence and cohesion are a direct result of providing learners with an explicit understanding of the language used in the discourse. Experimental group students increased discourse marker usage 212% (from 2.5 to 7.8 per 100 words)—a three-fold increase directly targeting explicit instruction on logical connectors. Moreover, discourse marker identification skills went up from 0.9 to 2.5 (178% improvement) on the metalinguistic awareness test. These particular gains serve as evidence that DA-informed instruction led to the development of the targeted discourse skills.

5.2 Metalinguistic Awareness Development

One of the main ways in which DA instruction improves writing is the creation of learners' explicit metalinguistic awareness. The students of the experimental group scored extremely high in

the post-intervention metalinguistic awareness test with an average score of 2.48/3.0 and 84.3% of them scoring in the "correct" range across the awareness items. Such a heightened awareness marks a qualitative change in students' conception of texts—rather than thinking of writing as something intuitive and mysterious, they start recognizing clear, teachable mechanisms.

This awareness-raising corresponds to Krashen's (1985) differentiation between language acquisition (implicit, unconscious) and learning (explicit, conscious). Although DA instruction is an explicit learning process rather than an implicit acquisition one, studies argue that explicit awareness of linguistic form often leads to subsequent implicit language skills development (Schmidt, 1990). Explicit awareness of discourse mechanisms developed by students probably provides them with the cognitive basis for a more fluent, automatic application of those principles in their future writing.

5.3 Contextual Considerations Specific to Iraqi Settings

The research findings suggest that the introduction of DA in Iraqi universities is done under particular local conditions which are quite different from those of English-speaking universities where previous DA writing studies have been conducted:

Large Class Management:

Class sizes of 38-45 students on average pose serious difficulties in terms of providing individual feedback and support which are the main features of DA teaching. Though teachers are able to engage the whole class in a piece of work analysis or a metalinguistic activity even with large classes, they find giving feedback on individual student essays with specific discourse features very time-consuming. The next DA rollout in Iraq schools

will have to find solutions to the problem of large classes, probably by using peer review based on DA principles or by creating online writing communities which will facilitate the wider participation of feedback givers.

Arabic-English Discourse Differences:

Arabic rhetorical tradition is characterized by circular, digressive organization as opposed to English former of a linear argumentation. Iraqi students L1 Arabic writing patterns may be at odds with English coherence standards. Though DA was able to help most students get over the cross-linguistic interference, a few of them found it hard to 'unlearn' their preferred Arabic ways of organizing. The next instruction can be explicitly comparing Arabic and English rhetorical conventions, thus helping students not only recognize but also accept their L1 transfer patterns.

Examination Focus:

Iraqi universities are holding high-stakes centralized examinations that put much emphasis on grammar accuracy rather than on writing quality. Teachers reveal that institutional pressure leads to a prioritization of grammar test preparation over writing course contents. The culture of being examination-focused acts like a double agent; on the one hand, it pushes writing towards decontextualized grammar exercises while on the other hand, teachers are still willing to use communicative methods. A viable DA can be put into practice only if there will be reforms in the examination system or, at the very least, it will be possible to show that improved coherence and cohesion lead to better exam scores.

6. Conclusions

The present study constitutes a strong empirical

evidence that an instruction informed by Discourse Analysis is a major factor that helps incoherence and cohesion in students' academic essays written in the Foreign Language (English) and the educational contexts of Iraqi universities is significantly enhanced. Students from the experimental group over 16 weeks raised their coherence score by 24.8 percentage points and their cohesion score by 24.5 percentage points - the increases that are significantly higher than those of the control group which used traditional instruction.

The reason for the changes that were observed seems to be the involvement of the students in the development of their explicit metalinguistic awareness of discourse-level organizational mechanisms. Learners moved from perceiving coherence and cohesion as something their brains do naturally to recognizing these as specific, teachable devices (cohesive markers, discourse markers, reference chains, topic progression patterns) through which the text gives out its meaning. This awareness of language structure opens up new cognitive bases that in turn allow for writing skills to be developed at a higher level.

Application problems appeared that reflected the context of universities in Iraq: big classes, shortage of time, lack of resources, the focus of the institution on examinations, and the fact that

teachers are not always well prepared. For DA to be implemented sustainably there needs to be systemic concern for these contextual factors through professional development, curriculum reform, class size reduction, and changes in the examination system.

Despite these problems, the good results shown in this research suggest that the DA-informed method could be a route that the Iraqi higher education sector might want to take in order to raise the students' writing skills in English. DA is a resource-friendly method whose principles are clear-cut and easy to teach which makes it perfectly suitable for contexts in which it may be difficult to have a number of writing centers or a large amount of one-to-one instruction. By making discourse organization mechanisms visible and teachable, DA approaches democratize writing quality development, making sophisticated writing skills accessible to students beyond those with extensive individual instruction.

DA writing instruction is a pedagogically correct, empirically demonstrated approach that is worth the effort of being systematically adopted and modified according to local contexts by Iraqi universities that are leading the way in English language proficiency as part of the national educational development objectives.

Table (21): State the Recommended Teacher Professional Development Framework

Component	Duration	Content	Expected Outcomes
Initial Workshop	3 days (18 hours)	DA foundations; instructional methods; model lesson demonstrations	Teachers understand DA principles and can conduct basic instruction
Follow-Up Coaching	Bi-weekly (1 hour each, 8 sessions over 4 months)	Classroom observation; feedback; problem-solving; peer collaboration	Teachers develop competence and fidelity in DA implementation

Resource Development	Ongoing	Model text analysis files; metalinguistic exercise banks; student writing samples	Teachers access instructional materials reducing preparation time
Peer Learning Communities	Monthly (1.5 hours)	Collaboration among writing instructors; sharing successful practices; collective problem-solving	Teachers sustain commitment and continuous improvement

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