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## CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING COHERENCE AND COHESION: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE EFL STUDENTS' ESSAYS

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to highlight the prevalent challenges faced by Hong Kong Chinese students in utilizing connectives and ensuring coherence in their English academic writing. Research indicates that constructing fluent, effective, and cohesive English written texts that maintain logical flow poses a significant challenge for Chinese learners studying English as a foreign language (EFL). This difficulty is likely attributed to the substantial cultural differences between the English and Chinese languages, regardless of the learners' grasp of English grammar and vocabulary usage. In order to raise awareness among EFL teachers regarding the struggles Chinese students encounter in mastering connectives and cohesion in English writing, this qualitative study analyses five sample English term papers written by Hong Kong university students majoring in English in 2023. The findings reveal that the Hong Kong EFL participants tend to present their arguments in an indirect and circular manner within their English essay assignments. Additionally, due to cultural norms and politeness, the true intent of their writing is often withheld, and the thesis statement is implicitly inferred towards the end of the essay rather than being explicitly stated at the beginning in the introduction. Furthermore, a focus group interview with the student participants conducted after the written analysis demonstrated that their English academic essays reflect the influence of Chinese social interaction norms on rhetorical patterns. The relevance of this study lies in its potential to inform EFL instruction, enabling educators to better support Hong Kong Chinese students in navigating the complexities of English academic writing and to adapt pedagogical approaches that bridge cultural and linguistic gaps.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, coherence, connectives, academic writing, EFL, cultural variation.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

For many years, EFL teachers have been searching for the best methods to teach English academic writing. The dilemma is: should the English rhetorical patterns be taught as the universal writing standards? Or should EFL students be allowed to write in the rhetorical style which they are most familiar with in their own culture? How does one strike a healthy balance between following the academic writing conventions and writing with one's own rhetorical style? Recent studies [Tso, 2021; Li & Ngai, 2018] indicated that among all English writing conventions, logical thinking and clarity in writing are two big challenges for Chinese students. With reference to Halliday and Hasan's coherence and cohesion theory [1976] as well as Kaplan's cultural thought patterns in writing [1966], this paper aims to shed light on the discussion regarding cultural influence on L2 writing, especially in the context of academic writing by EFL students in the tertiary sector of Hong Kong, China.

## 1.1. Literature review

The coherence and cohesion theory widely accepted in the field of discourse analysis was outlined by Halliday & Hasan [1976] of the London School of Linguistics. According to the theory, cohesion and text connectedness are formed through small units of grammatical and lexical devices which hold the text together, namely reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction, and lexical ties:

- 'reference' (e.g. *it, this, those cars, neither*);
- 'ellipsis' (i.e. leaving out part of the sentence structure, avoiding repetition);
- 'substitution' (i.e. avoiding repetition by the use of a substitute item such as *one, so*, etc.);
- 'conjunction' (e.g. *but, also, meanwhile, however, in conclusion*);
- 'lexical ties' (e.g. repetition of lexis, the use of synonyms and co-occurrence of lexical items).

All these explicit linguistic clues contribute to the formation of cohesion, which helps to create a coherent text. However, as Ghasemi [2013] remarks, "a composition with more CDs [cohesive devices] cannot be considered as a coherent one" [Ghasemi, 2013, p.1620]. Yao also points out that the "overuse of conjunction devices" [Yao, 2014, p. 114] is a sign of weakness in Chinese students' writing. This implies that cohesion and coherence are two independent but intertwined concepts. A text filled with cohesive devices may not necessarily form coherence. In their book titled "Cohesion in English" [1976], Halliday & Hasan explain that a coherent text must fulfil two criteria, "one [criterion] is a text must be consistent with context in which it is created" [cited in Wang & Guo, 2014, p. 461], and the other criterion is "a text must have cohesion, that is, all parts in a text must be connected by cohesive devices" [Op. cit.]. More explicitly, Beaugrande & Dressler [1998] laid out the key difference between cohesion and coherence, providing a solid definition of coherence, "[cohesion] bears on the connectivity of the surface expressions" [cited in Moens, 2002, p. 6], while coherence "concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations that underlie the surface are mutually accessible and relevant" [Op. cit.]. Based on this definition of coherence, Tso, Ho & Chung [Tso et al., 2016] have listed a number of common methods to build coherence in terms of the configuration of concepts and ideas in English academic writing, which include:

- showing the general picture before boiling down to specific details;
- providing the topic sentence before discussing specific examples;
- raising the problem of the matter before suggesting the solution;
- asking the question first before giving out the possible answer;
- stating the argument before offering the counter-argument.

Since coherence is not as visible and easily understandable as cohesion, mastering the use of coherence in English academic writing can be challenging, especially for EFL learners. As indicated in Li, Yuan & Zhang's corpus study of university English writing in Tianjin [2014], most Chinese students have problems in mastering coherence in their college English writing. Their study is supported by Liu & Wang [2011], who also reveal that "errors in paragraph coherence" [Liu & Wang, 2011, p. 584] is one of the most common errors found in English compositions written by Chinese undergraduates. The "negative influence of their mother tongue" [Ibid, p. 591] is believed to have greatly interfered with their use of coherence in writing.

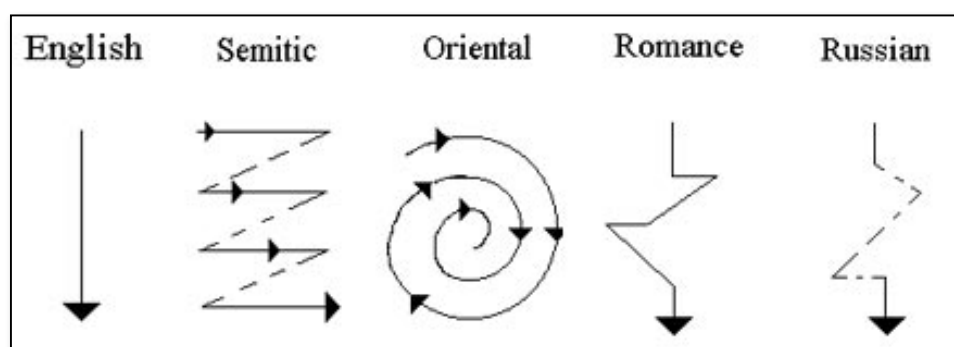
## 1.2. Focus of the paper

Having taught English language and literature for over ten years in various universities in China, I notice that many EFL students do have a hard time understanding and mastering discourse coherence in their English essays, as many other EFL researchers have noticed [Li et al., 2014; Ji, 2011; Hyland, 2009]. In EFL students' writing, it is not uncommon to see awkward utterances that are cohesive but incoherent, and those that are logically coherent at the idea level but not necessarily cohesive at the sentence level. It appears that more or less, cultural variations do play a role in the reasoning and usage of cohesion and coherence in writing. Cultural variations lead to different cultural patterns, which in turn bring about different thought patterns. Since different cultural thought patterns of different language groups may perceive the notion of coherence and cohesion differently, what native English speakers considered as loose organization, a lack of a logical link, misuse, or overuse of transitional markers in EFL writings may, in fact, mean more than just poor organization or/and careless mistakes. In 1966, Kaplan made the brave suggestion that learners whose first language is not English tend to organize and structure their expository writings according to the cultural thought pattern shared by their particular language group: "Examining samples of expository essays written in English by foreign students enrolled in at the University of Southern California, Kaplan found that even those students who have mastered the grammatical structure of English have been unable to compose academic prose in English following appropriate rhetorical styles. Based on his analysis, he identified five rhetorical patterns...linked to five broad lingua-cultural groups: "English," "Semitics," "Oriental," "Romance," and "Russian". [...] The "Oriental" group follows an indirect spiral approach coming to the main point only at the end... the English group...follows a straight line linear development" [Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 85].

Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric (CR) model of ethnicity-based rhetorical patterns has been criticized for oversimplifying the Chinese language discourse [Chien, 2007] and stereotyping the cultural dichotomies between the East and the West [Hyland, 2004]. Nevertheless, Kaplan's CR model has generated a great deal of interest in the field of ESL writing, i.e. English writing as a second language. Over the years, scholars have revised and reimagined CR. For instance, based on Kaplan's CR, Kubota and Lehner [2004] put forward the framework of critical contrastive rhetoric (CCR). Besides cultural variations, CCR "affirms multiplicity of languages, rhetorical forms, and students' identities, while problematizing the discursive construction of rhetoric and identities, and thus allowing writing teachers to recognize the complex web of rhetoric, culture, power, and

discourse in responding to student writing” [Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p.7]. More recently, Connor [2018] has also introduced the idea of intercultural rhetoric (IR), emphasizing that the English academic discourse is a set of social conventions shared by particular communities. Should the ESL/EFL user want to write like a native English user, he/she will need to be familiar with both the academic conventions and the cultural thought patterns of native English users. Interestingly, having taken into consideration the socio-cultural variables raised by Kubota and Lehner’s CCR and Connor’s IR, the indirect Chinese writing pattern is still apparent in English academic writing, according to Qin [2017] and Ramsay’s [2000] studies of Chinese EFL writing. One reason for the indirect Chinese writing style may stem from the Confucian philosophy, which encompasses ethics, social behaviour, and statesmanship. According to Confucian teachings, a gentleman should possess qualities of humility and gentleness. While the goal of writing may be to win an argument, maintaining harmony is considered paramount. When writing, one should adhere to the approbation maxim, which involves minimizing criticism and maximizing praise for others. Criticisms are downplayed to avoid causing embarrassment. Therefore, what may be perceived by English teachers as disorganized writing, lacking a central idea, and containing awkward expressions, could in fact be a manifestation of a rhetorical writing style that reflects the modest thought patterns shared by considerate native Chinese writers.

**Illustration 1.** Kaplan’s cultural thought patterns in writing [1966]



To examine the Chinese writing style and the rationale behind it, this paper has two objectives: firstly, through conducting a written discourse analysis of five English essays written by Chinese undergraduate students majoring in English, the study shall identify the most common cohesion and coherence problems encountered by English-major students in Hong Kong, China. Secondly, through the students’ focus interview, the study shall also try to explore the key factors that influence the way EFL students in China use cohesion and coherence in their English writing. The study shall provide first-hand evidence of the validity of Kaplan’s model of ethnicity-based rhetorical patterns, a hypothesis which was suggested over five decades ago.

### 1.3. Research questions

With a view to raising Hong Kong Chinese EFL learners’ awareness towards their (mis)understanding of coherence and cohesion in the English rhetorical pattern, this small-scale observational study poses two research questions:

- i. What common cohesion and coherence problems can be found in EFL/ESL university students’ English essays?

ii. What are the reasons behind the writing patterns (problems) observed in these Chinese students' English writing?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Regarding the written discourse analysis of Chinese learners' English writing, there are two dimensions: the first dimension concerns grammatical mistakes [Lin et al., 2020], including such common mistakes as run-on sentences, dangling modifiers [Tso & Ho, 2017], "word choice and word form, spelling, tenses, use of articles and determiners, number, and agreement of subject and verb" [Dipolog-Ubanan, 2016, p. 1841]. The second dimension centres on exploring the divergent cultural ideologies inherent to English and Chinese [Tweed & Lehman, 2002]. In this study, the aim is to keep the research focus on the latter. Hence, the English essays chosen for written discourse analysis were collected from five upper-year undergraduate students majoring in English at a university in Hong Kong, China. The written discourse analysis will focus on Halliday & Hasan's [1976] cohesion and coherence, rather than grammatical mistakes.

### 2.1. Sample / Participants

Compared to other EFL students who majored in other subjects at the same university, the five Chinese student participants of this research study were much more proficient in their spoken and written English because they had benefited from a better English learning environment. On the one hand, all their major courses were taught in English by near-native English speakers. On the other hand, the core course materials, which were mostly English literary classics authored by canonical authors including Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce, had helped them to become more exposed to authentic written English. After years of English-major schooling and training, the English majors were expected to write English essays with few grammatical and vocabulary errors.

**Table 1.** Individual profile information of the five student participants as of Spring 2023  
(All the names used are pseudonyms).

Name	Sex	Age	Major (Year)	Mother Tongue
Vivian	F	21	BA (Hons) in English Year 3	Cantonese
James	M	25	BA (Hons) in English Year 4	Cantonese
Rose	F	23	BA (Hons) in English Year 4	Cantonese
Calvin	M	21	BA (Hons) in English Year 3	Cantonese
Yolande	F	22	BA (Hons) in English Year 3	Cantonese

### 2.2. Data Collection

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, Vivian, James, Rose, Calvin and Yolande were asked to write an English essay assignment according to the following instructions:

- Write a 1,500-word English essay on any one of the British and American texts taught in the course.
- Your essay should have three clear parts: the introduction, the body and the conclusion.



- In the introduction, clearly state your topic and tell your readers what to expect in your paper.
- Do not provide a long plot summary. If you must summarize the plot, make it very brief.
- Conclude with a strong statement that echoes your main argument. A good conclusion should reinforce your point and leave an impression.
- Provide the sources of your information clearly. Follow the MLA documentation style.

After the five English majors had submitted their works, a written discourse analysis of the five essays was conducted with reference to Halliday & Hasan's [1976] coherence and cohesion theory as well as the reimagined contrastive rhetoric model. In addition, to gain a better understanding of how and why the participants organize and structure their essays, the essay analysis was also followed up by a focus group interview with the five student participants.

### Interview Questions

1. What makes a good English essay?
2. How would you describe your English essay writing style?
3. Would you prefer your ideas to be presented specifically, explicitly and straight to the point, or implicitly and indirectly? Why?
4. Do you think signposting/linkage/transition is important? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think you have problems with coherence and cohesion when writing English essays? Do you think your Chinese ethnicity and cultural background may have played a part in causing the problems? Why or why not?
6. Do you apply the Chinese writing style to your English essay assignments? Why or why not?
7. How would you like your teachers to help you with English essay writing in terms of enhancing coherence and cohesion?

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the discourse analysis of the Hong Kong Chinese students' English essays, a number of common characteristics regarding coherence and cohesion can be discovered in terms of the essay structure, paragraph organization, coherence formation between sentences and passages, not to mention the usage of cohesive devices. These typical rhetorical patterns, in the eye of EFL teachers and native English speakers, include the 'symptoms' of (1) a lack of a clear thesis statement in the introduction; (2) a lack of effective topic sentences in the body paragraphs; (3) a lack of logical link in between sentences; (4) an overuse of cohesive devices, and (5) a wrong use of cohesive devices. Read from the perspective of cultural variation, however, these seemingly awkward rhetorical features may as well be called Chinese indirectness [Kaplan, 1966], or the humble Chinese "inductive pattern" [Chien, 2007, p. 134]. As Ren [2013] has stated, communication styles are "rooted in different culture, or different philosophy, word system, and history in specific" [Ren, 2013, p. 523]. It was also interesting to note that all EFL majors who participated in the study were able to give an explanation for the loose and indirect plan of development of their essays.

### 3.1. A lack of a clear thesis statement in the essay introduction

To Western readers who are used to the linear organizational structure, it is the essay authors' responsibility to "first summarize what they want to express into a topic sentence or a thesis statement in writing, then illustrate the main idea with examples or details" [Ren, 2013, p. 521]. However, even with the English major training, EFL students in China do not seem to feel comfortable stating the thesis statement directly in the introduction. As can be seen in Vivian's introduction paragraph in illustration 2 below, minimal information is given in the introduction, and the thesis statement at the end of the introduction is fairly ambiguous. Rather than delivering the thesis statement directly and explicitly in the linear development pattern, Vivian presents the thesis statement in the form of a philosophical metaphor. Beautifully and poetically, she describes Proulx's narrative strategy as "a journey from trust to empathy".

**Illustration 2.** The introduction in Vivian's essay on Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" [1997]

<p style="text-align: center;">Journey through "Brokeback Mountain": From Trust to Empathy</p> <p>Published in 1997, Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" has been regarded as one of the most famous gay-romances ever written. It features the forbidden love and loss of the two cowboys in the conservative 1960s Wyoming where homophobia was prominent. This paper suggests Proulx directs readers gradually through the journey from trust to empathy by presenting the story through an omnipresent and reliable narrative voice in "Brokeback Mountain".</p>	<p><b>Comment [CKLE1]:</b> Is this a thesis statement? It does not sound like a valid argument. (It echoes the title but the writer's stance should be clearly stated here.)</p>
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Apart from stating that the narrative in the short story "Brokeback Mountain" is "omnipresent and reliable", no further specific information is provided. It is highly likely that the English reader will find Vivian's thesis statement confusing and sub-standard.

**Illustration 3.** The conclusion in Vivian's essay on Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" [1997]

<p>In conclusion, Proulx strategically makes use of the reliable and omnipresent narrator to first gain the readers' trust and then gradually elicits the empathy in them to sympathize by presenting a God-like impression, characterizing the ill-fated couple as sympathetic characters, illustrating the characters' emotions detailedly and ending without resolution.</p>	<p><b>Comment [CKLE10]:</b> 1. Too short. 2. The whole paragraph looks like a thesis statement, which should be put in the introduction. The writer can restate the same thesis using different wordings.</p>
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Intriguingly, juxtaposing the thesis statement in the introduction and the concluding statement together, one will see that the main ideas, though brief, are summarized more clearly and specifically in the conclusion. This indicates that Vivian does have the ability to articulate her main arguments more explicitly. The only question is: why wouldn't Vivian show the key points that she means to convey in her essay right in the beginning? What is holding her back? In the interview, Vivian said a good essay is one that "makes the reader feel comfortable." When asked question

3, “Would you prefer your ideas to be presented specifically, explicitly, and straight to the point, or implicitly and indirectly? Why?”, Vivian replied that she preferred to state the ideas implicitly. She felt that it may not be appropriate for the author to “take advantage and show off every single time.” She explained that “if the argument is strong, the reader can feel it and there is no need for the author to spell out everything explicitly”.

The other focus group interviewees also supported Vivian’s view. This echoes Qin’s [2017] observation that “the [Chinese] writer does not explicitly tell the reader about the topic statement, for he or she wants the reader to elicit the topic statement by inferring from what has been written in the front part of the essay” [Qin, 2017, p. 12]. It is interesting that assertiveness and ambitiousness, two positive qualities in academic writing, were perceived as negative by the Chinese participants. Regarding this matter, one possible reason behind the phenomenon is that the Chinese writer does not want to be rude. In the Chinese culture, it is a virtue to avoid straightforwardness which may lead to rudeness, interpersonal conflict, and social disruption [Chen & Chung, 1994].

### 3.2. A lack of effective topic sentences in the body paragraphs

Likewise, in Rose’s essay on Doris Lessing’s short story, Rose does not show explicitly the main idea in the topic sentence, not to mention giving out the topic sentence in the first line of the body paragraph, a common writing practice with which the Anglo-American academic reader finds comfortable. Instead, Rose starts the paragraph off with “first of all”, an expression that signals enumeration (but there is no enumeration in the passage that follows). Next, using a direct quotation from Alcoff, Rose simply uses Alcoff’s statement as her own topic sentence.

**Illustration 4.** The inappropriate use of enumeration in Rose’s essay on Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen” [1978]

The Loss of a Self to the Confirmation of Female Identity in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen"	
First of all, for the meaning of female identity, referenced to Alcoff's book, she states that, "The identity of a woman is the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history as mediated through a cultural discursive context to which she has access" (Alcoff 324). [Which means the construct of female identity for each woman completely depends on her own choices in life, for examples in the story, the occupation Susan has chosen, where and who she lives with, after such these decision makings, she is able to clarify and define her own identity in the society. Within the story, after Susan married with Matthew when in their late twenties,	<p><b>Comment [CKLE2]:</b> Awkward use of "first of all". Its purpose is not clear.</p> <p><b>Comment [CKLE3]:</b> Problematic topic sentence (TS). The definition itself can't be a TS; instead, the writer needs to mention what is brought by the definition, which is the better TS.</p> <p><b>Comment [CKLE4]:</b> A run-on with problematic use of commas, which makes the 'sentence' less coherent.</p>

What makes it so hard for the EFL students to state the argument and prove it directly? What could be the reasons for the recurring indirect rhetorical pattern in both the introduction and the body paragraphs? The responses from the focus group interview with the student participants are particularly revealing:

<b>Response 1</b>	Do I need to explain explicitly my main argument every single time? The authoritative quotation is more powerful than my words. I believe the reader has the intelligence to infer what I mean to say through the in-text citation.
<b>Response 2</b>	Is it not better to leave things open for interpretation? Even if I have a strong argument to offer, I prefer to present it indirectly and implicitly, especially in the introduction, when the evidence is not yet provided for the reader.



<b>Response 3</b>	Sometimes I worry that after several years, things change, and people may look at things very differently from now. Would my essay look silly? I had better use mild words, hedge around, and not present my viewpoints too openly and specifically.
<b>Response 4</b>	We need to consider what readers with opposing views feel when they read what we wrote. I don't want to be blunt and arrogant. The argument must leave some room for all. It cannot be too straightforward and finalized. Among all, harmony is the most important.
<b>Response 5</b>	I just think it may not be polite to point out mistakes made by others directly. I suppose if the reader find the evidence from my paper convincing, then naturally he/she will find the answer on his/her own.

None of the student participants said they had the intention to apply the Chinese writing style in their English academic writing. Yet, from their responses shown above, it is apparent that indirect communication and Chinese politeness have been brought into play as they organize the arguments and contents in their essays.

### 3.3. Lack of logical link in between ideas

Besides the absence of a clear thesis statement and the intentional avoidance of explicit topic sentences written on one's own, other coherence issues noticed in the EFL students' writing include unexplained digressions and a lack of transitional markers in between ideas, especially as the EFL students suddenly start a new paragraph without wrapping up the previous paragraph. As shown in Illustration 5, in the first paragraph of the introduction, Calvin is laying out the essay development to the reader. Then all of a sudden, he ends paragraph 1 abruptly and starts paragraph 2. Without the use of any cohesive devices, he literally jumps from the plan of development to the definition of Orientalism, leaving the reader dazed and confused.

**Illustration 5.** The sudden mention of a new definition in Calvin's essay on David Henry Huang's "M Butterfly" [1988]

<p>Two main parts are covered in this essay. First part is about how Song represents modesty and the passive image to Rene Gallimard. Second part is about how Song shows an image of obey and the image of women willing to sacrifice to have a baby for Rene Gallimard.</p> <p><u>(Orientalism)</u> is a regularized manner of writing, vision and study dominated by ideological biases suited to the Orient. (Tso 5) "The Orient was a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). The Image of the orient in western people sense, usually object, femininity, considering others more and weak. (Tso 8)</p>	<p><b>Comment [CKLE4]:</b> To talk about 'orientalism' at the beginning is a bit sudden unless it has been mentioned in the overview.</p>
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A similar unexpected jump in topics can also be found in between the body paragraphs in Calvin's essay. In Illustration 6, we can see that Calvin is trying to move on and discuss the plot of *M Butterfly*. However, he has left no signals to the reader that there is going to be a change in focus in the paragraph that follows. The discussion about white men's view on oriental women is cut out completely and instantly. No transitional markers are used to form any logical link between the two paragraphs either. This breaks the flow of the written discourse, making Calvin's essay difficult to follow and understand. While most English readers may find Calvin's writing style ir-

responsible, Calvin's writing approach may also be read 'sympathetically'. According to Qi & Liu [2007], "Chinese has a different way of interpreting the communication process: It is the reader's responsibility to understand what the author intends to address" [Qi & Liu, 2007, p. 148]. The lack of logical link in Calvin's writing may just as well reflect the reader-responsible rhetorical style in the Chinese language.

#### Illustration 6. Weak transition in Calvin's essay on David Henry Huang's "M Butterfly" [1988]

<p>The important thing is western people think oriental women usually cannot resist white men. Therefore, we can see in western people perspective, they would think oriental women are more controllable and would have a great pleasure when they have relationship with the oriental women.</p> <p>(According to <i>The Oxford Dictionary of Plays</i> by Michael Patterson, <i>M. Butterfly</i> is based on a true story)</p> <p>(which showing Hwang's play embraces the impossibility thing that Gallimard did not know his ideal woman was male by showing the idea that 'only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act'.</p>	<p><b>Comment [CKLE6]:</b> Once again, if the writer said s he would talk about the play after orientalism, this linkage would sound natural. Now it reads sudden.</p>
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On being asked about the reason why he used neither transition markers nor any other cohesive devices in between paragraphs, Calvin embarrassingly replied that he thought it was only natural for the reader to build the bridges on his/her own after absorbing all kinds of information relevant to the essay topic. He also tried to show me how he had linked up the main points towards the end of his essay. To Calvin, explaining how things are logically linked can be boring for readers. It may be better to save the explanation and summary till the end, according to Calvin. When answering interview question 9, Calvin admitted that his English writing was influenced by the Chinese rhetorical agenda.

### 3.4. Wrong use of cohesive devices

Apart from the failure in formulating a clear thesis statement, constructing topic sentences and building sensible transitions, it is observed that EFL student participants often have problems using English cohesive devices. As shown in Illustration 7, Yolande struggles hard with the use of 'therefore', 'thus', and 'originally' in the passage. For example, there is nothing 'original' when Yolande uses "originally" in the sentence. What Yolande truly means to express is that Roderick and Madeline (the two main characters in Edgar Allan Poe's short story) could have found their other half easily. There is no need for the twin brother and sister to remain single and live with each other under the same roof.

### Illustration 7. The odd use of transition in Yolande's essay on E. A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

<p>Because he is now forced to return to the reality and remind his what has happened in the past, the haunted past that can paralyze him. Consequently, he fails to have a nice sleep and claims there are some noises surrounding him. All his suffer signifies he is no longer a "complete" person. Therefore, from my own point of view, Poe wants to demonstrate a very strong and close bonding between the twins, not just physically speaking but mentally as well, they are intensely tied together by the same type of mental disorder. Besides, their thoughts and actions are also very alike too. Thus, the twin setting also helps foreshadow the doomed downfall of the "Usher house", their inevitable fate. Originally, they can actually find their partners if they want to, it should be not a difficult thing for them. Both come from wealthy family, with attractive physical attributes. Nevertheless, the two protagonists Roderick and Madeline are confined to a dreary dwelling and alienating themselves from the outside world.</p>	<p><b>Comment [CKLE[4]]:</b> Why? Because of losing the sister? The reason is not clearly explained.</p> <p><b>Comment [CKLE[5]]:</b> Problematic use of 'therefore'.</p> <p><b>Comment [CKLE[6]]:</b> The use of 'thus' is problematic as what comes before it still can't explain why the twin setting could explain the shadowing effect.</p>
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One possible reason for the unsuccessful cohesion is the difference from English writings, "there are much fewer connecting words in Chinese writings" [Yu, 2012, p. 201]. This lack of cohesion in the mother tongue makes it hard for Chinese learners to master the usage of English cohesive devices, such as conjunction, reference, ellipsis, etc. When being asked interview question 5, Yolande confessed that she was weak in mastering the use of cohesive devices in English writing.

### 3.5. The overuse of cohesive devices

Equally evident in the EFL students' essays is the abusive use of cohesive devices, which ends up with messy run-on sentences packed with subordinating conjunctions, as displayed in Illustration 8. In formal English writing, there can only be one subordinating conjunction in each sentence. For instance, in the excerpt in Illustration 8, the first sentence should have been written as "Although Winterbourne, Mrs Costello and Mrs Walker are born in America, they live in Europe." or "Winterbourne, Mrs Costello and Mrs Walker are born in America, but they live in Europe." The subordinating conjunction "so" should be deleted, and "they are deeply inspired by European values" in the second line should be an independent sentence on its own. James has not done a good job in his proofreading.

### Illustration 8. The abusive use of cohesive devices in James's essay on Henry James's *Daisy Miller* [1878]

Although Winterbourne, Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker are born in America, as they live in European countries for so long, so they are deeply inspired by European values. Mrs. Walker is an example of a woman with Old Money, who is very critical to Daisy's interaction with men, even though she is rather sociable among the old rich: "It is really too dreadful... That girl must not do this sort of thing. She must not walk here with you two men... It's a pity to let the girl ruin herself!" (James 54)

When asked why he had problems with coherence and cohesion in his English writing, James confessed that to a large extent, there was L2 cognitive interference in his perception of signposting, linkage and transition. Indeed, in Chinese writing, it is common to use a pair of conjunctions in the same sentence:

e.g. Although 雖然 \_\_\_\_\_, but 但是 \_\_\_\_\_.

e.g. Because 因為 \_\_\_\_\_, therefore 所以 \_\_\_\_\_.

e.g. Not only 不僅 \_\_\_\_\_, but also 還有 \_\_\_\_\_.

e.g. On the one hand 一方面, \_\_\_\_\_; on the other hand 另一方面, \_\_\_\_\_.

Furthermore, in the Chinese author's mind, it is normal to recite the main points in an ordered list with the help of a range of ordinal numbers such as firstly, secondly, thirdly, fourthly, fifthly, sixthly, seventhly, etc. While the sample size of this study was small, the Chinese thought patterns can be discovered across all English essays written by the student participants. The Chinese rhetorical styles in these students' English writing are obvious and recurring.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

From the discourse analysis of Chinese students' essays and the focus group interview with the five EFL student participants, this research study has revealed a range of common coherence and cohesion problems encountered by Chinese students in their academic writing in English. While the data from this small-scale study may not be able to provide a full picture of intercultural communication, the findings largely echo Kaplan's hypothesis of cultural thought patterns in writing. Although these Chinese students majoring in English in Hong Kong have been well exposed to the textual organizational traditions in English, they are still largely influenced by the Chinese rhetorical style in writing, which reflects the Confucian philosophy about ethics, social behaviour, and statesmanship. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Confucian view implies that a junzi (i.e. a gentleman) should be humble and gentle. While winning an argument is the writing goal, keeping harmony is crucial. When writing, a junzi should follow the approbation maxim by minimizing dispraise and maximizing praise of others. Criticism is played down to avoid embarrassing others. Thus, what EFL teachers considered as loose organization, lacking academic muscles (with the absence of a controlling idea), and awkward expressions may in fact be a set of rhetorical writing styles that reflects the modest thought patterns shared by the considerate native Chinese users.

While there is no fast track for improving the mastery of coherence and cohesion in English writing when teaching the use of cohesive devices, English teachers can provide their EFL students with teaching materials that include guidance notes on establishing coherence and cohesion in English academic essays, exemplars with a special focus on coherence and cohesion in English; and an appendix listing various discourse markers that signal opening, sequencing, topic switching, emphasizing and closing. Teachers should also remind their students not to overuse cohesive devices without taking other textual factors into consideration. It is important to convey to Chinese EFL learners that the overuse of cohesive devices is a sign of weakness in academic writing.

#### *Conflict of interest*

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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