

 Research Article

Struggling for Coherence: Analyzing Essay Writing Difficulties among Filipino Junior High School Students

Hazel C. Ada¹ , Aaron A. Funa^{1,2} 

¹Graduate School, Sorsogon State University, Sorsogon City, Philippines

²College of Health and Science, Sorsogon State University, Sorsogon City, Philippines

Abstract

Despite ongoing efforts to strengthen writing instruction in the Philippines, coherence, the logical organization and flow of ideas, remains a persistent yet underexamined difficulty, particularly in essays written in Filipino. Most existing studies emphasize surface-level issues such as grammar and vocabulary, often overlooking the deeper organizational challenges students face. This study addresses that gap by exploring coherence-related difficulties among 131 Grade 7 and 8 students in a public school in Eastern Visayas, using a quantitative-descriptive design. The researchers applied the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory to understand coherence as an emergent, nonlinear skill shaped by learner characteristics and instructional context. Results revealed a mean coherence score of $M = 2.26$ ($SD = 0.45$), indicating poor to fair performance, with “ideas are very difficult to follow” scoring the lowest ($M = 1.73$). Contrary to common developmental assumptions, older students exhibited more coherence challenges ($r = .34$), and male students significantly underperformed compared with females ($r = -.85$). Strong positive correlations were observed between coherence and both general academic average ($r = .87$) and Filipino subject grade ($r = .65$). These findings suggest that coherence is not only linguistically demanding but also developmentally fragile, requiring targeted, differentiated instruction. The study offers new insights into how coherence may be better supported in multilingual classrooms and calls for curricular reforms that treat coherence as a core writing outcome in Filipino, not a peripheral skill.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Coherence in Essays, Filipino Junior High School, Language Education, Multilingual Learners, Writing Difficulties

✉ Correspondence

Hazel C. Ada

hazel.ada@deped.gov.ph

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a core component of language education, serving not only as a medium for self-expression but also as a vehicle for higher-order thinking such as reasoning, organization, and critical evaluation. It plays a vital role in developing students' linguistic competence, including grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, and fosters intellectual growth through structured and purposeful communication (Aliyu, 2020; Dewi, 2021). In the Philippines, writing instruction, particularly essay writing, occupies a central place in the Filipino curriculum, aiming to cultivate language fluency, critical thinking, and a sense of national identity. However, despite sustained exposure to writing tasks from elementary to junior high school, many Filipino students continue to struggle with producing well-organized and cohesive essays in the Filipino language, a skill that remains underexplored in existing research compared with English essay writing (Aradillos et al., 2023; Cabigao, 2021).

These difficulties often persist even among students who show acceptable proficiency in grammar and vocabulary. A more pressing concern lies in their limited ability to logically structure ideas and achieve cohesion across sentences and paragraphs. As Chen (2022) emphasizes, coherence is a crucial yet frequently overlooked aspect of writing instruction. It entails the logical sequencing of ideas, effective use of transitions, and the clear linkage of thoughts within and across paragraphs. As Khalid (2023) points out,

coherence functions as the backbone of written communication, without which even grammatically sound texts may appear fragmented and difficult to comprehend.

This issue is further compounded by linguistic transitions experienced by many Filipino students. For a large segment of learners, Filipino is a second language (L2), with their first language (L1) often being a regional dialect. This linguistic shift imposes cognitive and communicative demands that can affect students' ability to organize their ideas effectively (Saavedra & Barredo, 2020). In addition, Labarrete (2019) observed that writing activities at the junior high school level frequently emphasize surface-level correctness over deeper structural organization. Socio-technological factors – such as the prevalence of texting culture and social media – have further shaped student expression toward short, fragmented phrases rather than well-developed paragraphs (Zakiah, 2022). Although Zakiah (2022) examined students in English language education, the fragmented writing patterns they identified may reflect broader influences on written communication, including those in Filipino. Moreover, as Abragan et al. (2022) argue, systemic challenges in implementing the K–12 curriculum, including limited teacher training and instructional resources, contribute to inconsistencies in writing instruction and hinder the development of coherence.

In the broader context of second language acquisition, coherence is increasingly viewed as an emergent and dynamic skill shaped by the interaction of individual, instructional, and environmental factors. This study adopts the framework of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), which posits that language development does not follow a fixed, step-by-step path but evolves through dynamic and context-sensitive interactions between learners and their environments (Fogal & Verspoor, 2020; Han, 2019; Hiver et al., 2022). From this perspective, coherence-related difficulties are not merely instructional deficiencies but developmental challenges involving cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions (Zhang et al., 2022).

Although prior research has explored general writing difficulties in both English and Filipino (Abellana, 2025; Caupayan & Revelo, 2025; Gatcho & Ramos, 2020; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018), limited empirical attention has been devoted to coherence as a distinct and central construct, particularly in junior high school essay writing in Filipino. Much of the literature has concentrated on surface-level features such as grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary, while often overlooking the more complex skill of organizing and integrating ideas into a unified whole. As Baharudin et al. (2023) note, coherence remains one of the most persistent challenges in writing, especially for learners navigating multilingual contexts.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the coherence-related challenges encountered by Grade 7 and 8 students in writing essays in Filipino during the 2024–2025 school year. Specifically, it aims to identify and analyze the difficulties these learners face in organizing their ideas cohesively. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the profile of the student-respondents?, (2) What difficulties do student-respondents encounter in organizing ideas coherently when writing essays in Filipino?, and (3) Is there a significant relationship between the students' profiles and their difficulties in achieving coherence in essay writing?

By exploring these questions, the study aims to contribute evidence-based insights, uniquely applying CDST to coherence difficulties in Filipino essay writing. It highlights the need for explicit, coherence-focused pedagogy in Filipino classrooms, supported by practical interventions such as paragraph development strategies, transition training, and guided writing models. Through these efforts, the study aspires to enhance both the coherence of student writing and the overall quality of writing instruction in Philippine education.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored in Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), initially introduced by Larsen-Freeman (1997) and further elaborated by scholars such as Han (2019) and Hiver et al. (2021). CDST offers a dynamic perspective on language learning, viewing it not as a product of linear accumulation but as a constantly evolving process shaped by the interaction of multiple internal and external factors.

Under CDST, language is conceptualized as a complex adaptive system – one that self-organizes through continuous interaction with its environment. Learners do not progress through writing skills in a uniform or sequential manner; rather, development occurs through variability, self-reorganization, and sensitivity to context. In writing, this means that coherence emerges not as a fixed output of instruction but as a flexible skill influenced by an individual's prior experiences, emotional states, linguistic repertoire, and exposure to communicative tasks (Fogal & Verspoor, 2020; Han, 2019).

The framework recognizes that writing competence, particularly the ability to organize and connect ideas coherently, is shaped by nonlinear developmental pathways. These are influenced by fluctuating factors such as motivation, cognitive load, feedback, and contextual constraints. In the case of junior high school students, especially those operating in a multilingual environment, these dynamics are further complicated by shifting language proficiencies and limited scaffolding for higher-order writing tasks.

Informed by this theory, the present study views coherence-related difficulties not as isolated skill deficits but as indicators of developmental complexity (see Figure 1). This perspective justifies a closer examination of how student characteristics, learning contexts, and instructional practices interact to support or constrain coherent essay writing in Filipino.

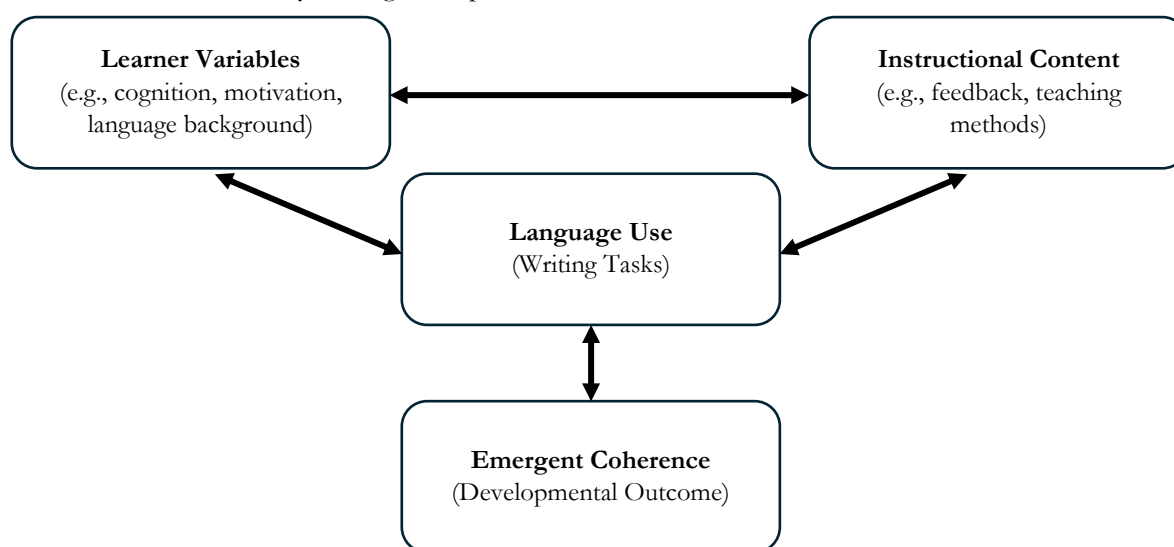


Figure 1. Dynamic Interplay of Factors Influencing Emergent Coherence in Writing

Figure 1 illustrates how coherence in student essay writing emerges through the dynamic interaction of three interrelated systems: learner variables, instructional context, and language use. Rather than depicting isolated factors, these components represent clusters of internal and external influences – such as cognitive processes, language background, teaching strategies, and writing task conditions – that shape each student's developmental trajectory. Informed by CDST, the framework highlights that coherence is not a fixed skill acquired in linear stages but a product of ongoing, adaptive exchanges between the learner and their environment. These recursive and context-sensitive interactions contribute to the unpredictable, yet patterned, development of coherence in writing. As such, the diagram reflects the study's view that writing difficulties are not merely deficits, but manifestations of the complex and evolving nature of language development.

1.1.2. Writing as an Essential Skill

Writing is an essential skill that underpins academic success across all levels of education. It enables students to explore and express ideas, organize thoughts, and engage in critical reflection (Vacalares et al., 2023). Recognized as one of the four fundamental language skills – alongside listening, speaking, and reading – writing is not only a product of language mastery but also a complex cognitive and linguistic process (Khazrouni, 2019). It interacts with other language components such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and enhances critical thinking, argumentation, and linguistic accuracy (Menggo, 2018). As

such, writing instruction plays a vital role in developing both communicative competence and academic literacy.

1.1.3. Common Challenges in Essay Writing

Essay writing, typically structured into an introduction, body, and conclusion (Richards, 2019), requires clarity of thought, logical organization, and adherence to academic conventions. However, research has consistently shown that students at the secondary level struggle to meet these demands.

Gatcho and Ramos (2020) found that most students exhibited surface-level writing errors, particularly in the use of verbs, prepositions, and nouns. Similarly, Pablo and Lasaten (2018) reported issues such as limited variety in idea development, inadequate use of connectives, incorrect word choices, poor sentence structure, and weak formal tone – all contributing to low-quality essays. They concluded that student writing generally ranged from fair to poor in quality.

Portillo-San Miguel (2021) further noted that grammatical inaccuracies, misuse of concepts, and flawed word selection were prevalent in student essays, particularly in humanities and political science subjects. Additional problems included wordy and fragmented sentences, unclear pronoun references, and inconsistent verb tenses. Despite these challenges, some students attempted to improve their arguments using analogies, narratives, and expository techniques.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative-descriptive research design to examine coherence-related difficulties in essay writing among junior high school students. Specifically, it focused on Grade 7 and 8 students enrolled in a public secondary school located in one of the school divisions in Eastern Visayas, Philippines, during the 2024–2025 academic year.

Descriptive research was selected for its appropriateness in systematically portraying the characteristics of a population or phenomenon without manipulating variables or attempting to determine causal relationships. As Bickman and Rog (2009) note, descriptive studies are commonly used “to describe systematically a situation, problem, phenomenon, service, or the like”, while Shields and Rangarajan (2013) define descriptive research as an approach that “attempts to describe characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied.” This framework supports a non-experimental, observational method of analysis that is particularly useful for educational settings where ethical and contextual constraints often limit experimental designs.

The study aimed to profile the student-respondents based on their age, gender, and grade level and section, as well as their general average and final grade in Filipino from the previous school year. It further sought to explore the possible association between these profile variables and students’ reported difficulties in organizing ideas coherently in Filipino essay composition. This approach provides a structured and context-sensitive understanding of the developmental challenges in essay writing, which can inform targeted pedagogical strategies.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were junior high school students from one public secondary school in the Eastern Visayas, Philippines, during the 2024–2025 academic year. Using a purposive sampling technique, the researchers selected Grade 7 and Grade 8 students who were enrolled in Filipino subject classes and were available during the data collection period. The purposive selection ensured that participants were actively enrolled in Filipino classes and had prior experience with formal essay writing tasks. A total of 144 students were initially identified, comprising 85 from Grade 7 and 59 from Grade 8. However, 13 students did not participate due to reasons such as illness and unexplained absences. Thus, the final number of respondents was 131.

Of the 131 participants, 66 (50.38%) were male and 65 (49.62%) were female. The students' ages ranged from 12 to 17 years, with the majority being 12 years old (39.69%) and 13 years old (33.59%). A small portion of the respondents (9.16%) did not mention their age. The overall mean age was 13 years ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 1.84$), with male students averaging slightly older ($M = 13.12$, $SD = 1.29$) than their female counterparts ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 1.59$).

Prior to data collection, the researchers secured the necessary permissions from school authorities and obtained informed consent from both the participants and their parents or guardians. The study strictly adhered to ethical protocols, ensuring that participation was voluntary and that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

2.3. Research Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire composed of two main parts. This was reviewed by three Filipino subject experts for content relevance and clarity prior to use. Part one gathered demographic information from the student-respondents, including age, gender, and grade level and section, as well as their general average and final grade in Filipino from the previous school year. To protect student privacy, pseudonyms were used. The instrument was adapted from Pablo and Lasaten (2018), originally designed to assess six areas of essay writing difficulties. However, this study focused solely on the organization (coherence) component, assessed using a four-point Likert-type scale: 4 – Very Good to Excellent; 3 – Good to Average; 2 – Poor to Fair; and 1 – Very Poor.

To contextualize the evaluation, the students were tasked to write an essay in Filipino based on a prompt provided during data collection. The written outputs were assessed using the rubric aligned with the questionnaire criteria, with special emphasis on the organization of ideas to assess coherence. Prior to the activity, each criterion was clearly explained to the students to ensure consistent understanding. Three Filipino subject teachers served as independent raters and used the instrument to evaluate the student essays. Their collaborative evaluation supported consistency in scoring and helped minimize subjective bias.

Approval to administer the instrument was secured from school authorities, and informed consent was obtained from participants and their guardians. The researchers coordinated with the teachers during administration, distributed the questionnaires, and monitored the process. No time limit was imposed on the essay writing task to allow students to write at their own pace. After collection, the responses were scored, encoded, and organized for statistical analysis.

2.4. Procedures

Prior to the conduct of data collection, the researchers secured approval from the school principal and obtained informed consent from both the student-respondents and their parents or guardians. Ethical protocols were strictly observed to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection throughout the study.

Data collection was carried out during regular class hours in coordination with Filipino subject teachers. The process began with a short orientation facilitated by the researchers, during which the objectives of the study and instructions for accomplishing the instrument were clearly explained to the students. The structured questionnaire, which consisted of two parts, demographic profile and writing difficulties, was then distributed by section.

Following the completion of the demographic section, students were given a writing prompt in Filipino and instructed to compose an essay. There was no time limit imposed, allowing students to write at their own pace. The essay task served as the practical basis for identifying coherence-related difficulties and other aspects of writing performance.

After collecting the essays, three Filipino subject teachers independently assessed the student outputs using a rubric adapted from Pablo and Lasaten (2018). Although the original rubric addressed six areas of writing, this study focused solely on the organization (coherence) component. Each rater scored the essays individually to promote objectivity and reduce potential scoring bias.

Once all instruments were completed and rated, the data were compiled, encoded, and subjected to statistical analysis. The researchers ensured that all materials were properly secured and anonymized prior to analysis.

To complement the quantitative data, the researchers also conducted informal interviews with selected Filipino subject teachers and student-respondents. Informal interviews served as a form of data triangulation, providing qualitative context to the statistically observed patterns. These interviews aimed to gather contextual insights and support the interpretation of results related to writing difficulties, particularly coherence.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Frequency counts, percentage distributions, and measures of central tendency, specifically the mean, were used to summarize the demographic profile of the student-respondents. To identify specific writing difficulties related to the organization and coherence of ideas, the weighted mean was computed based on a four-point Likert-type scale. This provided a quantitative interpretation of students' challenges in sequencing ideas, maintaining paragraph unity, and using appropriate transitions.

To determine whether students' profile variables (age, sex, grade level, general average, and final grade in Filipino) were associated with coherence-related difficulties, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was calculated. Each correlation was then tested for statistical significance using a t -test, with the computed t -values compared against a critical value of 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance ($df = 129$, two-tailed).

While these parametric tests were appropriate for interval-scale data, the study did not formally assess assumptions such as normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Future research may consider testing these assumptions or employing non-parametric alternatives like Spearman's rho when necessary.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Profile of Student-Respondents

Table 1 presents the distribution of student-respondents by age and sex. Out of the 131 total participants, 66 (50.38%) were male and 65 (49.62%) were female, indicating an almost equal gender distribution.

Table 1. Distribution of Student-Respondents by Age and Sex ($n = 131$)

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	f	Percentage (%)	f	Percentage (%)	f	Percentage (%)
17	1	0.76	0	0	1	0.76
16	2	1.53	1	0.76	3	2.29
15	4	3.05	3	2.29	7	5.34
14	9	6.87	3	2.29	12	9.16
13	21	16.03	23	17.56	44	33.59
12	22	16.79	30	22.9	52	39.69
Not mentioned	7	5.34	5	3.82	12	9.16
Total	66	50.38	65	49.62	131	100
Mean	13.12 yrs	-	13 yrs	-	13 yrs	-
SD	1.29	-	1.59	-	1.84	-

As shown in Table 1, the respondents' ages ranged from 12 to 17 years. The majority were 12 years old (39.69%) and 13 years old (33.59%), which aligns with the typical age range for junior high school students in Grades 7 and 8. A small proportion (9.16%) did not indicate their age, while only one student (0.76%) was 17 years old. The overall mean age was $M = 13.00$ years ($SD = 1.84$). When disaggregated by sex, male students had a slightly higher average age ($M = 13.12$, $SD = 1.29$) than female students ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 1.59$). These findings confirm that the participants were primarily early adolescents, an age

group associated with the emergence of higher-order thinking skills, including the ability to organize written ideas coherently.

Table 2 presents the distribution of student-respondents according to grade level and section. Of the 131 participants, 81 students (61.83%) were enrolled in Grade 7, while 50 students (38.17%) were in Grade 8. Specifically, 45 students (34.35%) were from the Grade 7–Amber section, and 36 (27.48%) were from Grade 7–Sapphire. For Grade 8, 22 students (16.79%) belonged to the Topaz section, and 28 (21.37%) to Alexandrite. This distribution reflects a higher representation from Grade 7, which may be attributed to enrollment trends or attendance during the data collection period. Nonetheless, the inclusion of multiple sections from both grade levels ensured that the sample captured a developmental range appropriate to the study's focus on coherence in essay writing.

Table 2. Distribution of Student-Respondents by Grade Level and Section ($n = 131$)

Grade Level	Section	f	Percentage (%)
Grade 7	Amber	45	34.35
Grade 7	Sapphire	36	27.48
Grade 8	Topaz	22	16.79
Grade 8	Alexandrite	28	21.37
Total		131	100

Table 3 presents the general averages of student-respondents from the previous school year. A majority of students performed within the Satisfactory to Very Satisfactory bands. Specifically, 34 students (25.90%) had averages between 80–84, and 31 students (23.60%) scored within the 85–89 range. An additional 24 students (18.30%) attained grades between 90–94 (Outstanding), while 20 students (15.20%) were in the 75–79 range (Fairly Satisfactory). A smaller group of 10 students (7.60%) achieved the highest academic range of 95–99, and 12 students (9.10%) did not report their general average.

Table 3. Distribution of Student-Respondents by General Average in the Previous Grade Level ($n = 131$)

General Average	f	Percentage (%)
95-99	10	7.6
90-94	24	18.3
85-89	31	23.6
80-84	34	25.9
75-79	20	15.2
Not Mentioned	12	9.1
Total	131	100
Mean		83.89
SD		5.67

Note. Grades from 90 to 100 are classified as Outstanding, 85 to 89 as Very Satisfactory, 80 to 84 as Satisfactory, and 75 to 79 as Fairly Satisfactory—all of which are considered passing. Grades below 75 are categorized as Did Not Meet Expectations and are regarded as failing.

The overall mean general average was $M = 83.89$ ($SD = 5.67$), which falls within the Satisfactory category based on the national grading scale. The fact that most students scored between 80 and 89 suggests a generally competent academic performance, potentially indicating readiness for structured writing tasks such as essay composition. As Suastra and Menggo (2020) emphasize, performance assessments like general averages offer valuable insights into learners' language development, particularly in writing. Aliyu (2020) further underscores that academic records can serve as objective indicators of writing-related competencies, helping inform instructional strategies focused on coherence and idea organization.

Table 4 presents the distribution of student-respondents based on their average grade in Filipino during the previous school year. A significant number, 61 students (46.50%), earned grades within the 85–89 range, classified as Very Satisfactory. This was followed by 26 students (19.80%) with Satisfactory performance (80–84), and 15 students (11.40%) who fell under the Fairly Satisfactory category (75–79). Additionally, 10 students (7.60%) received Outstanding grades (90–94), and 6 students (4.50%) achieved the highest bracket of 95–99. Thirteen students (9.90%) did not indicate their Filipino grade.

Table 4. Distribution of Student-Respondents by Average in Filipino in the Previous School Year ($n = 131$)

Grade in Filipino	f	Percentage (%)
95-99	6	4.5
90-94	10	7.6
85-89	61	46.5
80-84	26	19.8
75-79	15	11.4
Not Mentioned	13	9.9
Total	131	100
Mean		87.23
SD		6.53

Note. Grades from 90 to 100 are classified as Outstanding, 85 to 89 as Very Satisfactory, 80 to 84 as Satisfactory, and 75 to 79 as Fairly Satisfactory – all of which are considered passing. Grades below 75 are categorized as Did Not Meet Expectations and are regarded as failing.

The overall mean grade was $M = 87.23$ ($SD = 6.53$), reflecting a Very Satisfactory level of academic performance. These results indicate that most students met or exceeded expectations in Filipino – a subject that integrates both linguistic and writing competencies. This suggests a foundational readiness for more advanced tasks such as essay writing, particularly those requiring coherent organization of ideas. According to Suastra and Menggo (2020), subject-specific performance assessments offer meaningful insights into students' language development. Aliyu (2020) similarly notes that academic records can serve as valid indicators of writing-related competencies and inform instructional strategies targeting coherence, structure, and clarity in student writing.

3.2. Coherence-Related Difficulties in Essay Writing

Table 5 presents the weighted mean scores for specific writing difficulties related to organization and coherence in students' essays. The overall mean score of $M = 2.26$ falls within the Poor to Fair (PF) range, indicating that coherence remains a persistent challenge in student writing.

Table 5. Coherence-Related Difficulties Encountered in Writing Essays in Filipino

Writing Difficulties	Weighted Mean	Description
1. Connectives not used or largely absent	2.85	GA
2. No sense of logical sequence	2.24	PF
3. Ineffective introduction, weak support, and poor conclusion	2.50	GA
4. Poor Paragraphing	2.50	GA
5. Ideas are very difficult to follow	1.73	VP
6. Lacks fluent expression	1.77	PF
7. Little sense	2.26	PF
Mean	2.26	PF

Note. Interpretation of mean scores: 3.25–4.00 = Very Good to Excellent (VGE), 2.50–3.24 = Good to Average (GA), 1.75–2.49 = Poor to Fair (PF), and 1.00–1.74 = Very Poor (VP).

Among the listed indicators, the highest-rated item was “Connectives not used or largely absent” ($M = 2.85$, Good to Average), suggesting that while students may have some awareness of transitional devices, their usage is often limited or inconsistent. This points to a gap between recognizing connectives and applying them effectively to create cohesion across sentences and paragraphs.

On the other end of the spectrum, “Ideas are very difficult to follow” had the lowest mean score ($M = 1.73$), falling under the Very Poor category. This was followed by “Lacks fluent expression” ($M = 1.77$) and “No sense of logical sequence (coherence)” ($M = 2.24$), both categorized as Poor to Fair. These results highlight significant issues in maintaining a logical flow of ideas, expressing thoughts clearly, and ensuring smooth transitions throughout the text.

The data reveal that many students struggle not only with surface-level mechanics of organization but with deeper aspects of coherence, such as guiding the reader, sustaining clarity of thought, and sequencing ideas logically. These difficulties may hinder their ability to develop structured, readable essays, underscoring the need for targeted instructional interventions in writing fluency and coherence-building strategies.

Insights from informal interviews support the quantitative findings presented in Table 5. One student, referred to as Student 14, shared: “*Minsan nabihirapan po akong maintindihan ang aking isusulat o kaya ay yung mga bagong salita po na ngayon ko lang nababasa.*” (“Sometimes, I have difficulty in understanding what I am going to write or the new words that I have just read.”) The student added: “*Dahil hindi dali-daling pumapasok sa utak ko kung ano nga ang aking isusulat.*” (“Because it does not easily come to my mind what I am going to write.”) These responses reflect difficulties not only in vocabulary use but also in idea generation and initial organization – two key components of coherence. As Dao and Dan (2024) explain, writers with limited vocabulary and underdeveloped organizational skills often struggle to maintain coherence, resulting in disjointed and difficult-to-follow outputs. This was further exemplified by Student 6, who stated: “*Minsan hindi naman ako nabihirapan kasi minsan medyo bago ako magsulat ay iniisip ko muna ang mga ideya na aking isusulat... kung ang aking ideya kung siya ay sa pangkataposan doon ko siya inilalagay.*” (“Sometimes, I don’t have difficulty because, before I start writing, I first think about the ideas I want to write. For example, if my idea belongs to the conclusion, that’s where I place it.”) This shows that while some students attempt to engage in pre-writing thought organization, their ability to sustain coherence throughout the composition, particularly through effective transitions and logical sequencing, remains limited. Student 9 expressed a similar struggle: “*Oo, dahil hindi ko naiisip kung ano. Hindi ko naiisip ang isasagot ko. Nabihirapan ako.*” (“Yes, because I can’t think of what to say. I find it difficult.”) This suggests hesitation, cognitive overload, and a lack of fluency – factors that contribute to breakdowns in coherent writing.

These qualitative insights echo the mid-range scores observed in the quantitative data. For instance, the indicators “*Ineffective introduction, weak support, and poor conclusion*” and “*Poor paragraphing*” both received mean scores of $M = 2.50$, falling within the Good to Average range. These results imply that while students may be familiar with basic structural components of essay writing, their application is inconsistent or lacks depth. Similarly, the item “*Little sense*” ($M = 2.26$, Poor to Fair) further supports the notion that many student essays suffer from fragmented or disconnected ideas. These findings are consistent with prior research. Long and Teopilus (2023) found that students often struggle to organize main ideas and supporting details into coherent structures. Hasnawati et al. (2023) emphasized the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge of essay structure and actual application, particularly in coherence and transitions. Saprina et al. (2020) also reported difficulties in maintaining logical continuity, while Baharudin et al. (2023) described writing as a cognitively demanding task requiring deliberate planning and organization. As Salas (2016) emphasized, writing is not merely a demonstration of language proficiency but also a reflection of students’ ability to think critically and organize ideas in a logical, coherent manner.

The results of the study underscore that coherence is one of the most challenging aspects of writing for junior high school students. Their inability to plan, sequence, and connect ideas meaningfully hinders effective communication. These findings point to the urgent need for targeted instruction in idea development, paragraph cohesion, transitions, and pre-writing strategies to help students organize their thoughts and enhance the clarity and structure of their essays.

Table 6. Correlation Between Student Profile Variables and Coherence-Related Writing Difficulties ($n = 131$)

Statements	r -value	Computed t -value		Evaluation	Decision
		Computed	Critical		
Age	0.34	4.10	1.96	Significant	Reject Ho
Sex	-0.85	-18.1	1.96	Significant	Reject Ho
Grade Level	-0.94	-32.55	1.96	Significant	Reject Ho
Final Grade in the Previous Grade Level	0.87	19.79	1.96	Significant	Reject Ho
Final Grade in Filipino in the Previous Grade Level	0.65	9.68	1.96	Significant	Reject Ho

Note. All computed t values were compared with the critical value of 1.96 at $df = 129$, $\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed. All relationships were found to be statistically significant.

3.3. Relationship Between Student Profiles and Their Difficulties in Achieving Coherence

Table 6 illustrates the relationship between students’ demographic and academic profiles and their coherence-related writing difficulties. All computed t -values exceeded the critical value of 1.96 at $\alpha = 0.05$,

indicating that the results are statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected for all variables, suggesting that each profile factor is meaningfully associated with students' challenges in achieving coherence in essay writing.

A moderate positive correlation was observed between age and writing difficulties ($r = .34, t = 4.10$), indicating that older students in this sample tended to experience more issues with coherence. This counterintuitive result may suggest that persistent instructional gaps or developmental delays over time contribute to accumulated difficulty in writing tasks.

In terms of sex, a strong negative correlation was found ($r = -.85, t = -18.10$), revealing significant differences between male and female students. The result implies that male students may face more pronounced difficulties in achieving coherence compared with their female peers. This highlights the potential value of gender-responsive instructional strategies tailored to varying learning needs and writing behaviors.

A similarly strong and negative correlation emerged between grade level and writing difficulty ($r = -.94, t = -32.55$), suggesting that students in lower grade levels, specifically Grade 7, experience more coherence-related challenges than those in higher levels. This aligns with expectations about the developmental trajectory of writing skills and underscores the need for early, targeted intervention.

Academic performance also showed significant associations with coherence. Students' general average from the previous school year showed a strong positive correlation with coherence-related writing ability ($r = .87, t = 19.79$), as did their final grade in Filipino ($r = .65, t = 9.68$). These findings indicate that students who perform better academically tend to write more coherently, while those with lower grades are more likely to struggle with organizing ideas and maintaining logical flow.

Interview responses from students reinforce these findings. As Dao and Dan (2024) explain, low-performing writers often struggle to initiate and organize their thoughts effectively, leading to fragmented and disjointed compositions. Similarly, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) reported that students with weak writing proficiency face difficulties in idea development, vocabulary use, and grammar, factors that contribute directly to reduced coherence.

Given these patterns, targeted instructional interventions are essential. Teachers should emphasize prewriting planning, paragraph structuring, and the explicit teaching of transitions. Differentiated instruction – based on gender, grade level, and academic standing – can better address the diverse needs of learners. The integration of writing frameworks, scaffolding strategies, and metacognitive tools can support students in organizing their thoughts and expressing them clearly, ultimately strengthening their ability to write with coherence.

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated coherence-related writing difficulties among Filipino junior high school students, revealing that the ability to logically organize and connect ideas remains underdeveloped despite generally satisfactory academic performance. The findings point to a critical gap between students' basic language proficiency and their capacity to produce cohesive written texts, particularly in Filipino, which is often treated as a language of familiarity rather than one requiring formal composition skills. As emphasized by Chen (2022) and Khalid (2023), coherence is a complex and often neglected aspect of writing instruction that demands deliberate scaffolding and sustained practice.

Results showed low mean scores in key areas such as logical sequencing, fluent expression, and idea development, indicating that many students struggle to maintain a coherent flow of thought. While the use of connectives was rated "Good to Average," this alone was insufficient to ensure overall text cohesion. These findings are consistent with those of Baharudin et al. (2023) and Pablo and Lasaten (2018), who argue that even when students apply surface-level strategies, deeper organizational logic is frequently lacking. This reflects the need for instructional models that support cognitive structuring over time, something emphasized in integrated and contextualized frameworks such as those explored by Funa (2025) in STEM-PBL environments.

Correlational analyses provided further insight into how student characteristics relate to writing performance. A moderate positive correlation was observed between age and coherence difficulties ($r = .34$, $t = 4.10$), suggesting that writing challenges may persist, or even accumulate, over time. A strong negative correlation between sex and coherence ($r = -.85$, $t = -18.10$) indicates that male students in the sample experienced greater difficulty, reinforcing the need for gender-responsive writing instruction. Funa et al. (2023), in their study on distance education, similarly highlight the importance of learner-centered and differentiated approaches, especially in diverse, digitally mediated environments.

Interview responses reinforced these statistical findings. Students expressed difficulty in initiating writing, sequencing ideas, and articulating their thoughts clearly. These accounts align with Dao and Dan's (2024) assertion that coherent writing requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cognitive clarity and emotional regulation, capacities still developing in many adolescents. Funa's (2024) exploration of clinical midwifery education also underscores the value of gradual scaffolding, real-world relevance, and structured feedback, which are equally applicable in writing pedagogy, especially for developing coherence.

Viewed through the lens of CDST, coherence is understood as an emergent, nonlinear outcome shaped by interacting cognitive, instructional, and sociocultural factors (Fogal & Verspoor, 2020; Hiver et al., 2022). In multilingual contexts such as the Philippines, coherence development is especially complex due to the overlapping influences of language exposure, curriculum gaps, and literacy practices. The emphasis on integration and sequencing in argument-based learning, as shown by Ramallosa et al. (2022), offers one promising pathway toward helping students organize and connect ideas logically.

In addition to structure and scaffolding, motivation plays a key role in students' ability to produce coherent writing. Writing coherence requires cognitive effort and perseverance, especially during planning and revision. In this regard, motivation-enhancing tools such as gamified rewards have been shown to boost engagement and task completion. Funa's (2024a) study on digital badges in science education suggests that such tools can reinforce sustained attention and encourage students to refine their outputs – a promising implication for writing instruction.

Several implications arise from these findings. First, the persistent issues with coherence call for a reevaluation of how writing is taught in Filipino. Despite its central role in the curriculum, Filipino is often perceived as less academically rigorous than English or Science, which may lead to insufficient attention to formal writing instruction. As noted by Labarrete (2019) and Abragan et al. (2022), this perception weakens students' ability to transfer writing skills across subjects and languages. Strengthening students' conceptual understanding alongside explicit teaching of coherence is likely to improve how ideas are articulated and connected (Mediana et al., 2025).

Second, the findings underscore the need for stronger vertical alignment in writing instruction. The coherence difficulties observed likely stem from an absence of structured, progressive writing development across grade levels. Teachers may assume that students have mastered basic paragraphing and sequencing skills, yet the data show that these skills require ongoing reinforcement. Curriculum designers and teacher educators should prioritize spiral writing instruction, supported by exemplars, scaffolded tasks, and performance-based rubrics. Instructional models that connect content to real-world relevance, as Funa (2024b) argues in his work on clinical placements, can improve student engagement and provide structure for skill acquisition over time.

Third, the gender and age disparities revealed in the data emphasize the importance of differentiated instruction. Male students and those in lower grade levels may benefit from more structured support, such as graphic organizers, oral-to-written sequencing tasks, and low-stakes writing opportunities that build fluency and confidence.

Finally, in the post-pandemic learning context, where modular and blended modalities disrupted continuous writing practice, these findings highlight the urgency of revitalizing classroom-based writing instruction. Teachers must be equipped not only to assess writing but to teach how ideas are developed, sequenced, and logically connected. Institutional investments in professional development, peer learning communities, and writing-focused instructional resources are essential.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Filipino junior high school students continue to encounter significant challenges in organizing ideas coherently when writing essays in Filipino. Despite having average to above-average academic performance in general and Filipino-specific subjects, many students were found to struggle with maintaining logical flow, using transitions effectively, and sustaining paragraph unity. The overall coherence of student outputs was rated within the Poor to Fair range, with particular difficulty in expressing connected ideas, signaling that coherence remains a fragile aspect of their writing development.

The observed correlation between coherence difficulties and student profile variables, particularly age, sex, grade level, and academic standing, underscores the multifaceted nature of writing development. Notably, younger students, males, and those with lower general averages or Filipino subject grades tended to experience more pronounced difficulties. This suggests that both cognitive maturity and prior academic experience may shape the learner's ability to produce structured and connected written texts. Furthermore, qualitative responses from students revealed that difficulties often stemmed not only from a lack of knowledge of writing techniques but also from internal hesitation, uncertainty about what to express, and challenges in initiating and sequencing thoughts.

These findings point to the need for coherence-focused instructional support that aligns with students' developmental readiness. Writing instruction must be sensitive to the learner's stage, integrating explicit modeling of paragraph organization, transitions, and idea development. Instructional practices should address the specific needs of students who show signs of struggling, particularly in earlier grade levels and among those with lower academic performance, through scaffolded tasks and guided feedback. Attention must also be given to the underlying planning and thinking processes that contribute to coherence, such as pre-writing strategies and structured outlines.

Given the significant correlation between coherence and Filipino subject grades, it is important that coherence not be treated as a peripheral component of writing instruction but rather as a central learning objective in language classrooms. The study highlights the value of systematically integrating coherence-building strategies into everyday classroom practice, particularly within the Filipino subject area, where students are expected to express themselves with both clarity and structure.

The evidence further supports the perspective of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory, which views coherence as an emergent outcome shaped by interactions among learner characteristics, task design, and instructional context. Thus, writing development should be approached as a dynamic process rather than a checklist of isolated skills. Future instructional design and teacher development efforts should consider this complexity in crafting interventions that respond to the evolving needs of learners.

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