

COHESION IN WRITTEN DISCOURSE AND IMPLICATIONS IN ELT

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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that cohesion plays an important role in facilitating unity within a sequence of sentences or the whole text. In terms of the communicative nature of writing, cohesion is regarded as an essential textual component not only to create organized texts but also to render the content comprehensible to the reader. However, the misuse of cohesive devices has been identified as a common problem faced by EFL learners of all levels. Many researchers have explored the connection between the use of cohesive devices and the quality of the writing produced. The purpose of this paper is to identify a variety of cohesive devices which are frequently employed in written texts and highlighted some of the cohesive problems found in writing pieces of ESL learners. In addition, possible pedagogical implications for teachers are further discussed.

Keywords: cohesion, written discourse, pedagogical implications, ELT

1. Introduction

Written discourse, to a great extent, involves communication by using textual material. As compared to spoken communication, which is often presented as unplanned, less structured and interactive in nature, written texts may be neatly categorized as planned, organized and transactional. There are a great number of written text genres, differentiated by their purpose or function as well as their structure or form such as narrative, poetic, persuasive, informative. Moreover, within a genre, texts vary in both their form and content, thus posing a great challenge to ESL learners, especially when they are engaged in reading a certain kind of literacy text.

Another important thing is that while we can rely on visual clues to understand spoken language, the clues for written texts are not so obvious, necessitating an understanding of the relations between paragraphs, sentences and clauses. In that sense, the notion of cohesion helps to facilitate unity within a sequence of sentences or whole text and ease interpretation for the reader. The concept of "cohesion" was introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976), whose major concern is to investigate how sentences are linked in a text. For them, the various parts of a paragraph are connected by cohesive ties and the writer is able to hold together meanings in the related sentences in several ways. Cohesion is also created to establish the structure of meaning and can be considered as a factor that indicates whether a text is well-connected or merely a group of unrelated sentences.

This study, which takes the light of the above discussion, aims to identify and discuss patterns of cohesive devices with specific regard to written discourse taken from previous studies as secondary sources. Then, it examines the frequent errors concerning the use of cohesive devices made by L2 learners of English when they produce a particular written text. Finally, the paper considers some pedagogical implications in language teaching regarding the challenges and opportunities that such text patterns present for students and teachers of English as a foreign language.

2. Research Methodology

Basing on the secondary research approach, a variety of previous researches and studies relevant to the subject are collected. As the limitation of printed documents on the subject, Internet sources were fully taken as the main sources of secondary data. In order to maximize the reliability of the sources, articles and books of interest were carefully selected from distinguished online journals specialized in linguistics and language teaching and learning mentioning popular publications such as *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal*, *College Composition and Communication* *Foreign Language Annals*, etc. In addition, to increase the diversity of the articles, empirical research and review articles conducted from different perspectives were utilized.

3. Findings

3.1. Cohesive Devices

In their study of cohesion in English, Halliday and Hasan (1976) defined cohesion as what occurs when the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. They identified five types of cohesion including reference cohesion, substitution cohesion, ellipsis, lexical cohesion and conjunction cohesion.

Reference

The reference occurs when one item in a text points to another element for its interpretation. Reference ties are of three types namely personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference.

Personal reference is a reference by means of function in the speech situation, through the category of person including personal pronouns (I, you, he, she, him...), possessive determiners (his, her, their, our, your...) and possessive pronouns (mine, yours, hers, theirs...).

Demonstrative reference is a reference by means of location, on a scale of proximity. It is essentially a form of verbal pointing in which the speaker identifies the referent by locating it on a scale of proximity. Demonstrative reference contains two sub-types: adverbial demonstrative and nominal demonstrative. The former one has *here, there, now and then*, which can represent both time and place in general. The latter one has *this, these, that, those, and the* which can represent time and place in particular.

Comparative reference is an indirect reference by means of identity or similarity. There are two kinds of comparative reference: general comparison and particular comparison. By general comparison is meant comparison that is simply in terms of likeness or unlikeness, without respect to any particular property. General comparison is expressed by a certain class of adjectives and adverbs, and the reference items such as *same, equal, additional, identical, other, such, so, otherwise, etc.* all can contribute to cohesion when they provide the source of interpretation for reference item.

Substitution

Substitution refers to the replacement of certain word to make the sentence concise and coherent. If a word or term is repeated several times in a sentence or a paragraph, then it gives the reader the impression of redundancy and the reader feels hard to go on reading. In the category of substitution, there are three sub-types: nominal (*one, ones, same, etc*), verbal (*do*), and clausal (*so, not, etc*).

Ellipsis

The difference between substitution and ellipsis is very subtle. When substitution appears by default, it is ellipsis. In the category of ellipsis, there are nominal ellipses, verbal ellipsis, and clausal ellipsis. Nominal ellipsis works as the "head" of a word that usually functions as a modifier in a sentence. Verbal ellipsis contains two sub-types: lexical ellipsis and operator ellipsis. In lexical ellipsis, the lexical verb does not appear in the sentence, while in operator ellipsis, the operators do not appear in the sentence. Modal operators such as *can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, must, ought to, and be to* are similar. They have a common characteristic, that is, they can not work as a lexical verb. Therefore, if a sentence takes a modal operator as the only verb, then this sentence involves lexical ellipsis. In a clausal ellipsis, a clause is missing from the sentence completely. This case is commonly seen in reply to a question. The listener will find no difficulty in understanding the reply with the preceding information. When it comes to interpretation of these replies, the omitted clause could be interpreted, or still omitted if the speakers know about the situation very well.

Conjunction

Conjunction serves as a function word that joins words or sentences together. Conjunctive words do the task of linking through the connotation they contain. The reader can easily defer the relationship between one sentence and another by referring to the conjunctive words. Halliday and Hasan (1976) explain four types of conjunction:

- (1) Additive: *and or, also, furthermore, besides, etc.*
- (2) Adversative: *yet, though, but, in fact, instead, etc.*
- (3) Causal: *so, for, because, therefore, etc.*
- (4) Temporal: *then, next, after that, later, etc.*

Lexical cohesion

Lexical cohesion contributes a lot to the quality of a written text. A rich vocabulary will make the lexical cohesive devices more effective in linking the paragraphs. Lexical cohesion involves the repetition of a word or phrase, synonymy (e.g. commonly, popularly), antonymy (e.g. *high, low*), hyponymy (e.g. *cigarettes/cigars*), collocation (e.g. *education, classroom, class, and so on*).

3.2. Cohesive-related errors made by L2 learners

Of the explanatory studies to the cohesion-related errors made by second-language users, Nevine Kamal (2006) attempted to examine how Arab students use lexical cohesive devices to create cohesive texts in their L2 English writing. The purpose of the study was to first investigate Arab students' knowledge of lexical cohesive devices and then analyze their errors with the hope that a better understanding of students' errors would help teachers take relevant pedagogical procedures. It can be concluded from the finding that students encounter difficulties when using lexical devices in the form of lack of connector variety, inappropriate use of connectors, long distance between cohesive ties in a chain, and uncertain inference that could lead to several interpretations. The results also indicated that the students relied on extensive use of repetition to establish text cohesion because it is not as challenging as other lexical devices. In addition, students used synonymy, antonymy, and inclusion to provide stylistic variety, though these categories were not used extensively. Finally, the limited occurrences of collocations, especially lexical collocations showed that students need to develop their collocational competence to develop the quality of their writing.

In another study by Heydari (2012), the sources of cohesive errors committed by Iranian undergraduate EFL learners at different levels of proficiency were thoroughly investigated. In this study, the participants were given a writing task requiring them to write an approximately 200-word narrative composition. Regarding the frequencies and percentages of errors, it was found that low-level learners' most frequent errors were involved in references (20), followed by errors in lexical (14), and conjunctive cohesion (1). Besides, the findings showed that errors in references were the most common (17), followed by errors in lexical (13), and conjunction cohesion (2) in the mid-level learners' narrative compositions. Finally, the high-level learners' most frequent errors were involved in lexical cohesion (17), references (14), conjunction cohesion (3), and substitution (1). As far as the sources of cohesive errors are concerned, it was found that errors in the use of relative pronouns, conjunctions, along with different forms of repetition appeared because of the incomplete knowledge of the learners called intra-lingual causes while as the errors in the use of personal, possessive-pronouns, demonstratives and collocations were among the inter-lingual causes of errors.

Al-Jarf (2001) targeted 59 EFL college students to take a cohesion test in which they identified four types of cohesive ties in a reading text. It was found that substitution was the most difficult to process followed by reference and ellipsis, whereas conjunction was the easiest. This study shed some light on the difficulties that EFL college students in Saudi Arabia have in processing four types of cohesion: reference, conjunction, substitution and ellipsis. It was successful to trace cohesion-related errors which involve poor linguistic competence, especially poor syntactic and semantic awareness, and poor or inaccurate knowledge of the cohesion rules.

4. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications in ELT

The present study reviewed the patterns of cohesive devices with specific regard to written discourse and discussed the errors frequently made by second language learners. Analysis of the data of previous studies indicated that cohesion is of prime importance in developing a text because it connects related ideas, allows a reader to interpret texts smoothly, and creates a sense of connected discourse. However, as discussed, there have been great concerns dealing with cohesion-related errors that second language learners of English make. The findings suggested that particular considerations should be given to the teaching of writing with reference to cohesion under different perspectives.

As regards lexical errors, according to El-Gazzar (2006), it would be advisable to encourage students to learn new words in their contexts of use rather than in isolation. For teachers, it would be appropriate to apply the instruction and exercises in various forms with the aim to help poor learners to eliminate redundant repetition, and to use synonyms, antonyms, and collocations properly and more frequently. Since the study showed that errors in lexical cohesion were very common in academic essays, it might be necessary to introduce lessons focusing on these areas into the teaching of writing, explaining clearly with adequate examples the meaning and the correct usage of different lexical items. Moreover, teachers could present model texts and highlight some collocations, synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms used in specific contexts and explain their meanings. In addition, the author proposed to

get students into the habits of reading texts because improving the use of lexical cohesive devices in writing depends on students' independent reading since the time available for classroom reading is limited. Essentially, by analyzing properly used lexical devices in English texts, students could learn and internalize how such devices are used in English academic writing.

As stated by Al-Jarf (2001), giving instruction to cohesion in EFL should proceed in a series of graded stages including sensitization, synthesis, and analysis. Concerning the sensitization stage, the students will be introduced to the concept of cohesion by being presented with two versions of the same texts, then are asked to compare them. In the synthesis stage, texts containing no cohesive ties can be brought in and students can be asked to connect sentences in the text with conjunctions, to substitute nouns by pronouns, verbs by verb substitutes, and delete parts that are repeated. At this stage, cohesive ties should be practised one at a time and students should proceed from the easiest to the most difficult ones. In the final stage, instruction in the recognition of markers of cohesion and in identifying relationships between the anaphor and the referent is recommended. One instructional strategy is asking students to highlight the cohesion markers in a text.

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