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Cohesion in the Descriptive Writing of EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

In EFL context, writing is the most difficult skill to master. Saudi students of English, find it very difficult to construct a coherent written essay in English. The difficulties lie not only in the poor organization, the inappropriate thesis statement, the inadequacy of providing examples and details, the limited vocabulary but also the misuse of cohesive devices. Cohesion and coherence are considered as the two important features of good writing. So much attention should be paid to generating and organizing ideas in general and to the role of cohesive devices in particular.

This study will make an important contribution to the basic issue in educational research, as it will provide a description of cohesive devices used in descriptive compositions written by Saudi University Students majoring in English. It is expected that the study might help to determine the relation between the use of cohesive devices and the quality of writing. It also specifies the common characteristics that the students share with regard to the choice and use of cohesive devices. An understanding of students' use of cohesive devices can help pave the way for preparation of writing course materials and upgrading of teaching and learning process to best suit the learners of English in Saudi Arabia.

The technique for eliciting information employed was an achievement test. A sample of 50 Saudi female students was asked to write essays in English that were assessed by the researcher. The students were all majoring in English in the third year. Halliday and Hassan's (1976) model was selected as the most comprehensive framework for the analysis of the cohesive features in the student's writing. Analysis of the data consisted of investigating the relationship of these devices with scores of writing.

The study concluded by bringing together the key findings, recommendations for EFL teachers and suggested areas for further research.

Keywords: Cohesive Devices, Cohesion and Quality Writing, Reference, Substitution, Ellipses, Conjunction, Lexical cohesion

Introduction

Cohesion is a crucial feature to be used in writing. Halliday and Hasan (1976) say that the text is a unit of language in use. It is not only a grammatical unit but also a semantic one. Cohesion is a semantic concept, "it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text" (Halliday and Hasan 1976:4). It is expressed through the grammar and vocabulary. Cohesion features are the properties that distinguish a text from a disconnected sequence of sentences.

Statement of the Problem

Writing is the most difficult skill to master in EFL context. EFL learners face serious problems when they write. They are unaware of the mechanics of coherence and cohesion, besides they face problems in generating and organizing ideas. The problems can be attributed to the fact that students in schools are not well trained in English writing. Teachers at schools focus on the sentence level more than the discourse level and thus they do not emphasize such cohesive devices. Cohesion and coherence are considered as the two important features of good writing. So much attention should be paid to generating and organizing ideas in general and to the role of cohesive devices particularly.

Research Objectives

There are three goals of this study:

- To identify the frequency of each category of cohesive devices used in descriptive compositions of third-year English majors at king Khalid University.
- To examine the relationship between the number and type of cohesive devices used and the quality of the same descriptive composition.
- To come up with recommendations that could improve EFL writing.

Significance of the Study

This study will make an important contribution to a basic issue in educational research, as it will provide a description of cohesive devices used in descriptive compositions written by Saudi university students majoring in English. It is expected that the study might help to determine the relation between the use of cohesive devices and the quality of writing. An understanding of students' use of cohesive devices can help pave the way for preparation of writing course materials and upgrading of teaching and learning process to best suit the learners of English in Saudi Arabia.

This study is presented in four sections: Section 1 presents an introduction of the study, statement of the problem, objectives and finally significance of the study. Section 2 presents a

review of relevant literature that provides readers with the theoretical foundation and applied perspectives of this study. Section 3 presents the methodology and design of the study and explains the data gathering procedures .The discussion and conclusion are reported in section 4.

Literature Review

Some of the important features of English writing are cohesion and coherence. Cohesion is a semantic relation that is realized through the lexicogrammatical system of a text (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Coherence refers to connectedness of ideas for lack of connectedness would make a text difficult to read or unreadable (Brostoff, 1981). Halliday and Hassan (1976) framework of cohesive devices are divided into different kinds such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. This framework was used by researchers and teachers to describe the cohesive devices used by EFL and ESL learners.

1. Reference, it is "the relation between an element of the text and something else by reference to which it is interpreted in the given instance" (Halliday and Hasan: 1976:308). Reference is divided into three types, personal pronouns, demonstrative reference and comparative reference.
    a. Personal pronouns: I, my, you, he, she, it, they, we, our, yours, their, us,…etc.
    b. Demonstrative reference: this, that, these, those, then, now, them, those.
    c. Comparative reference: it is used to compare similarities between items in a text.
2. Substitution, it occurs when there is a replacement of one item by another. Ramasawmy (2004) divided substitution into three types:
    a. Nominal such as (there is one there).
    b. Verbal such as "do" and its various forms. (He does too).
    c. Clausal such as (the manager said so).
3. Ellipses, it refers to "the omission of an item" (Halliday and Hasan 1976:88).

    Ramasawmy (2004) divided Ellipses into three types:
    a. Nominal Ellipses, nouns are deleted as they are understood from the context.
    b. Verbal ellipses, verbs are deleted as they are understood from the context.
    c. Clausal ellipses, clauses are omitted as they are understood from the context. They are used in yes/no questions.
4. Conjunction, it involves the use of conjunctive ties. Halliday and Hasan (1976) divided conjunction into five categories:
    a. Additive such as "and, or, furthermore, similarly, in addition, moreover, besides...etc".
    b. Adversative such as "but, however, on the other hand, never the less, yet, etc"
    c. Causal such as "so, consequently, for this reason, it follows from this, etc."

d. Temporal such as "then, after, that, an hour later, finally, at last, etc"
e. Continuative such as "after all".

5. Lexical cohesion, it is divided into four typs:
   a. Repetition
   b. Synonymy
   c. Antonymy
   d. Collocation

In general, coherence is achieved when the argument is presented in a clear, logical and comprehensible order. Researchers have given considerable attention to how EFL learners write and what problems do they face. Some came to similar findings while others have been contradictory.

Abusharkh (2112) conducted a study on cohesion and coherence in the argumentative essay writing of 60 Palastenian College Students. Cohesive ties were identified, counted and described in terms of the type of cohesion are represented by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Participants 'level was categorized as high, intermediate, and low. Results revealed that the three groups tend to use lexical devices but rarely used substitution and ellipses. Moreover, intermediate and low level students overused reiteration as a cohesive device more than the high level students. Furthermore, intermediate and low level students used language transfer that impedes cohesion and coherence.

Kargozari etal.(2012)conducted a study to investigate the use of cohesive devices in 180 compositions (argumentative, descriptive, and expository) written by Iranian EFL university students. Results indicated that the lexical devices were used most in the student's writing followed by references and conjunctions. Moreover, certain problems such as misuse, overuse, and restriction of reference, conjunction and lexical devices were identified in the students' compositions.

Wenxing and Ying (2012) examined the use of cohesive devices in argumentative writing by Chinese EFL Learners at different proficiency levels. Results showed that Chinese EFL learners significantly used different incorrect cohesive items. Besides, the correct use of cohesive devices correlated significantly positively with the writing quality.

Sayidina (2010) attempted to explain the interference of first language in the acquisition of second language. She examined the use of cohesive devices and transition words in fifty Arabic academic research papers in comparison with English compositions written by Arab students. Results supported both sub-parts of the hypothesis as stated in native Arabic text with reference to Arab culture that additive transition words had the highest percentage of use in English compositions; furthermore, the repetition of the same noun is used more frequently than grammatical cohesion.

Chen (2008) focused in his study on the relationship between the number of cohesive features and writing quality. He examined 46 essays collected from 23 EFL undergraduates.

Results indicated that lexical devices were used most followed by reference devices and conjunctions. In addition, the study showed no significant relationship between the number of cohesive devices and writing quality.

In a study investigating the difficulties of EFL Arab students in processing four types of cohesive ties, reference, conjunction, substitution and ellipsis, Al-Jarf (2001) asked students to read a text to identify all cohesive ties and write the referent or substitute of each anaphor. Then she asked the students to list all the conjunctions in the text and supply the ellipted words or phrases. The results indicated that substitution was the most difficult cohesive tie o process followed by reference and ellipses, whereas conjunction was the easiest.

Similarly, Al-Shatarat (1990) examined the use of cohesive devices by Jordanian intermediate community college students in the English language section. 100 students were asked to sit for two tests. In the first test, students had to choose the best answer of 57 multiple choice items. The second test consisted of about 500 words with 28 blanks. Students were asked to fill in these blanks by using cohesive devices drawn from their own language experience. The findings indicated that nearly 42% of the student's answers were erroneous or inappropriate due to misuse of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices.

Khalil (1989) conducted a study to investigate the use of cohesive devices used in the essay writing of Arab college students. The results indicated that students' writing was incoherent due to the insufficient information about the topic. In addition, students overuse reiteration of the same lexical item as a cohesive device, and underused other lexical and grammatical cohesive links.

Kharma (1985) conducted a study to investigate the problems of Arab students in writing compositions in English. He examined the differences between the cohesive devices students employ in composing cohesive texts both in Arabic and English. The findings showed that all types of mistakes and irregular ties in the students' writing were nearly due to negative transfer from Arabic.

Methodology

Data gathering procedures involved using a variety of measures to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The techniques for eliciting information employed were achievement test. Fifty essays were collected from King Khalid University students and assessed by the researcher. Halliday and Hassan's (1976) model was selected as the most comprehensive framework for the analysis of the cohesive features in students' writing. Analysis of the data consisted of investigating the relationship of these devices with score of writing.

Participants

The participants in this study were 50 female undergraduate students from King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. Their ages range between 18 and 20. They were all majoring in English in the third year. The reason for selecting them was that, since they had taken the required writing courses, they were familiar with preliminary writing rules and skills. It is believed that they are more proficient in English writing than freshmen or sophomores and consequently can produce well-organized and coherent essays.

Research design

In the first stage, the subjects were asked to write the compositions in the descriptive mode. The topic of compositions was, 'Describe your Childhood". It is chosen because nearly all the students had some experience or knowledge about their childhood. The students only had sixty minutes to complete the task for each composition. They were asked to write 150 to 200 words for each composition.

In the second stage, the compositions produced by the participants were scored first by the researcher and then by another rater. The researcher employed Analytic scoring. The scale was from 0-10. The researcher prepared a list of features such as content, cohesion, coherence, vocabulary, grammar, to assess the test and then allots two-points for each of these features that the learner performs correctly.

In the third stage, Halliday and Hassan's (1976) model was selected as the most comprehensive framework for the analysis of the cohesive features in the students' writing. Descriptive statistical procedures were employed for data analysis such as score, means, percentages and frequencies.

Finally, an investigation on the relationship of the devices with scores of writing was conducted. This was done respectively through the use of correlation. Correlation was computed between the numerical scores of the compositions and the frequency of cohesive devices for each.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the data analysis procedures, the findings from the achievement test, was divided into the following components:

1. Description of the frequency of each category of cohesive devices used in descriptive compositions of third-year English majors at King Khalid University.
2. The influence of performance level on the choice of cohesive devices.
3. Recommendations that could improve EFL writing.

Description of the frequency of each category of cohesive devices used in descriptive compositions of third-year English majors at King Khalid University is given. Analysis of the data obtained from the compositions, indicated that EFL students in this study used a variety of language cohesive devices, with some devices being used more frequently than others are. These devices were divided into five categories.

Table 1 lists the cohesive devices that were used by EFL students, their types, frequencies, mean scores and ranks.

Cohesive Device	Frequency	Mean	Rank
Reference	2475	78.87%	1
Conjunction	559	17.81%	2
Lexical	93	2.96 %	3
Substitution	9	0.29 %	4
Ellipsis	2	0.06 %	5

Data shows that out of the 3138 cohesive devices used, the cohesive devices used at a high level were "Reference" 2475 (78.87%), followed by "Conjunction" 559 (17.81%), then "Lexical" 93 (2.96%), and finally, the least frequent ones were "substitution" 9 (0.29%) and "Ellipsis" 2 (0.06%).

Table 2 lists the types of "Reference" that were used by EFL students, their frequencies, mean scores and ranks.

Reference	Frequency	Mean	Rank
Personal Pronouns	1940	78.38%	1
Demonstrative Reference	497	20.08%	2
Comparative Reference	38	1.54 %	3

Data shows that out of 2475 "Reference" devices, "Personal Pronouns" 1940(78.38), were used most frequently, followed by "Demonstrative Reference" 497(20.08) and the least frequent of the references used was "Comparative 38(1.54).

Table 3 lists the types of "Lexical Devices" that were used by EFL students and their frequencies, mean scores and ranks.

Lexical	Frequency	Mean	Rank
Collocation	49	52.69%	1
Antonymy	18	19.35%	2
Synonymy	14	15.05%	3
Repetition	12	12.90%	4

Table 3 demonstrates that out of 93 "Lexical" devices, "Collocation 49(52.69) was used most frequently, followed by "Antonymy"18(19.35), then "Synonymy" 14 (15.05) and the least frequent was "Repetition"12 (12.90).

In general, the findings indicated that EFL students use "Reference" devices that include "Personal Pronouns", "Demonstrative and Comparative" references as the most frequently. This contradicts the finding of Khalil (1989).this is maybe due to the intensive courses of Grammar. Students receive formal instruction of Grammar for four levels, while they study Vocabulary Building for two levels only. On the other hand, students overuse "Conjunctions" to connect their sentences as a result of their weak vocabulary. Despite that, students rely more on "Collocation", "Synonymy" and "Antonymy" more than "Repetition". This implies that they develop a certain amount of vocabulary to form a unified text and do not resort to the use of "Repetition" to write a cohesive text. This indicates that "Repetition" decreases with grade level. In sum, teachers should bring to the learners' awareness that cohesion in their writing is achieved through the use of different types of cohesive devices.

The influence of performance level on the choice of cohesive devices

The total number of cohesive devices used in the compositions of both groups were counted and compared.

Table 4 lists the cohesive devices that were used by EFL Good Student, their types, frequencies, mean scores and ranks.

Cohesive Device	Frequency	Mean	Rank
Reference	909	78.03%	1
Conjunction	191	16.3	2

		9%	
Lexical	56	4.81 %	3
Substitution	8	0.69 %	4
Ellipsis	1	0.09 %	5

The findings indicated that out of the 1165 cohesive devices used, Good students used "Reference" 909 (78.03%) most frequently, "Conjunction 191 (16.39%) , "Lexical 56 (4.81%), "Substitution" 8(0.69%), and the least frequent cohesive devices used was "Ellipsis"1(0.09%).

Table 5 lists the cohesive devices that were used by EFL students, their types, frequencies, mean scores and ranks.

Cohesive Device	**Frequency**	**Mean**	**Rank**
Reference	682	78.57%	1
Conjunction	147	16.94%	2
Lexical	37	4.26 %	3
Substitution	1	0.12 %	4
Ellipsis	1	0.12 %	4

The findings indicated that out of the 868 cohesive devices used, Weak students used "Reference" 682 (78.57%) most frequently, "Conjunction" 147 (16.94%), "Lexical" 37 (4.26%), and the least frequent devices used were "Substitution" and "Ellipsis" 1(0.12%)

In summary, the findings reveal that "Good students" used more cohesive devices in their writings compared to weak students and this supports the findings of Chen (2008). The "Reference" devices were the most extensive used categories of cohesion in the writing of both groups Good and Weak students. This finding contradicts the results of the studies Kargozari etal.(2012)and Al-Jarf (2001).However, in spite of studying two courses in Vocabulary Building", the use of lexis is not frequently used by EFL students. The lexical items that involve the meaning, they are the principal components of any composition; they are used less than reference by both groups. This means that this area needs improvement. Students should be aware of the role of lexis in the connectedness in their writing. Besides the weak students demonstrated a greater use of repetitions more than the Good students did. The great majority of the lexical devices were "Collocation. The frequency of the use of "Synonyms" and "Antonyms" were the same by Good and Weak students. Teachers can develop the use of synonymy and

antonymy by giving some activities on paraphrasing or summarizing. With regard to "Conjunction", although students use them frequently, however, they favour only those commonly used items such as "and, but, or, after, also, or and so on, whereas the items "furthermore, in addition, moreover, besides, nevertheless, seldom occur. The least frequent cohesive devices used by both groups were "Substitution" and "Ellipsis" and this finding is supported by the results of Abusharkh (2112).

Recommendations that could improve EFL writing

Much improvement should be done in the teaching of writing. Consciousness-raising training could be given to learners on cohesion devices. Teachers should allocate some marks to the correct use of cohesive devices in the marking criteria and explain it to the students so they know what to emphasize when writing in English. Students can be asked to write a paragraph using variety of cohesive devices as they contribute to the quality of writing. It is essential to incorporate reading into writing in order to enhance students' awareness of coherence and cohesion (Heller, 1999). In addition, teachers should help students develop their vocabulary by engaging them in some vocabulary activities such as word association and grouping. Students can be trained to paraphrase words or phrases to develop the use of synonyms and antonyms. Further studies can investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction of cohesion during writing courses. Another area can be investigated the similarities and differences in the use of cohesive devices of both Arabic and English.

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