

Raising Students' Awareness on the Importance of Cohesion in Academic Writing: The Case of the Students of the Second Year English at Hamma Lakhdar University in El-Oued, Algeria.

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Abstract

Using linguistic ties makes the students' written productions more cohesive and understandable. However, it is noticed that they do not use grammatical cohesive devices efficiently. Thus, the present study attempts to measure the students' awareness on the importance of cohesion in academic writing. Meanwhile, this research work aims at investigating the various kinds of grammatical cohesive devices used by the students and their effects on writing cohesive discourse. It is hypothesized that the accurate use of grammatical cohesive devices would enhance students' writing. Seeking to achieve the study's aims, two questionnaires have been administered to four teachers of written expression in addition to twenty five students who have been chosen randomly. The findings of the study revealed that students do not pay much attention to the significant decisive role of cohesion in written discourse. Hence it was suggested that much space should be dedicated to the issue of cohesion in written expression course.

Key words: academic writing, awareness, cohesion; grammatical cohesion, lexical cohesion.

ملخص

إن استخدام الروابط اللغوية يجعل المنتج الكتابي للطلبة أكثر تماسكا وفهما. ومع ذلك فإنه يلاحظ أن هؤلاء الطلبة يفتقدون الكفاءة لاستخدام هذه الروابط اللغوية لبناء تماسك النص. وعليه، تعد هذه الدراسة محاولة جادة لقياس وعي الطلبة بأهمية التماسك في الكتابة الأكاديمية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في أدوات بناء التماسك النحوي المستعملة من لدن الطلبة وآثارها على كتابة خطاب مكتوب محكم التماسك. إن الفرضية التي بنيت عليها هذه الدراسة مفادها أن الاستخدام الصحيح لأدوات بناء التماسك النحوي تعزز التحكم في مهارة الكتابة عند الطلبة. وسعياً لتحقيق أهداف هذه الدراسة، تم تقديم استبيانين لأربعة أساتذة لمادة التعبير الكتابي بالإضافة إلى خمسة وعشرين طالبا تم انتقايم عشوائيا. وقد كشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلبة لا يولون اهتماما كبيرا للدور الجوهرى والهام لتماسك النص. كما نبهت الدراسة إلى ضرورة تخصيص حيز كبير من الوقت لموضوع تماسك النص في البرامج المخصصة لمادة التعبير الكتابي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة الأكاديمية، الوعي، التماسك، التماسك النحوي، التماسك المعجمي.

Introduction

Cohesion is the first standard of textuality. It refers to the surface relations between sentences that create a text. The concept of cohesion was introduced by Halliday and Hassan (1976) whose major concern is to investigate how sentences are linked in a text.

One implication of the present study is that if cohesion is better understood, it can be better taught. At present, in most college writing classes, cohesion is taught, explicitly or implicitly, either through exercises, classroom instruction, or comments on student papers. Many exercises not explicitly designed to teach cohesion do in fact demand that students form cohesive ties. Thus, in the tradition of teaching written expression at tertiary level, a great focus should be made on this issue while teaching writing. It is undebatable that without having a good command of the linguistic ties, one cannot construct a cohesive discourse.

This research work aims at investigating the various types of linguistic ties and their effects on writing cohesive discourse. It is hypothesized that the accurate use of grammatical cohesive devices would enhance students' writing. This study verifies whether students are aware of using grammatical cohesive devices to have a cohesive discourse.

1. Literature Review

This section introduces some of the key theoretical ideas and concepts used in the present study ; it also introduces some of the prior research on measuring textual cohesion, and provides strong theoretical ground for the practical section of this research work.

1.1 Text and Discourse

A text can be in both a written or a spoken form. From Schiffrin (1994: 363-364) point of view, a text is simply referred to the linguistic content, the semantic meaning of words, expressions and sentences, but not the inferences available to receivers relying on the context in which words, expressions, and sentences are used. Hence, a text is a linguistic product of discourse that can be studied without reference to its contextual elements.

It is also noteworthy that a text is not just a sequence of sentences strung together, but a sequence of units connected in some contextually appropriate ways. In the same vein, Lyons (1983: 198) asserts that "a text as a whole must exhibit the related, but distinguishable properties of cohesion and coherence". Similarly, McCarthy (2001: 97) formulates his view point to the text as follows:

The text is not a container full of meaning which the reader simply downloads. How sentences relate to one another and how the units of meaning combines to create a coherent extended

Text is the results of interaction between the readers world and the text.

It should be noted in this context that text and discourse are used interchangeably focusing on language beyond the sentence where the context are taken as a part of any utterances.

In most of the literature related to discourse analysis, cohesion is deeply interrelated with coherence. Contextual meaning at the paragraph or text level is referred to as coherence while their internal properties of meaning is referred to as cohesion.

In brief, Halliday and Hassan (1976: 1-2) state the main factors that constitute a text:

A text is a unit of language in use. It is not a grammatical unit like a clause or a sentence; and it is not defined by its size. A text is sometimes envisaged to be some kind of super sentence, a grammatical unit that is larger than a sentence but is related to a sentence in the same way that a sentence is related to a clause, a clause to a group and so on: by constituency, the composition of larger units out of smaller ones; but this is misleading. A text is not something that is like a sentence, only bigger.

From what is stated above, it emerges that cohesion is a principle factor in determining texture as it is a means that facilitates relating sentences together as one unit.

1.2 Cohesion in Written Discourse

The concept "cohesion" was first introduced by Halliday and Hassan in 1976, whose major aim is to investigate how sentences are linked in a text. For Halliday and Hassan, the various parts of a paragraph or an essay are connected together by cohesive ties:

A text has texture, and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text [...] If a passage of English containing more than one sentence is perceived as a text, there will be certain linguistic features present in that passage which can be identified as contributing to its total unity and giving it texture (p. 2)

In essence, cohesion is a grammatical and semantic property of a text sticking together in some way. A cohesive written production tends to link its sentences together semantically. Halliday and Hassan note that cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse are dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by resources to it

According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), a text is a text rather than a mere sequence of sentences owing to the linguistic features that cause sentences to stick together. According to them, what makes sentences constitute a text depends on cohesive relationships within and between sentences which create "texture". A texture is the basis for unity and semantic interdependence of the different units in a text.

1.3 Types of Cohesion

Cohesion is categorized into two (02) types: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion.

1.3.1 Grammatical Cohesion

In their original work, Halliday and Hassan (1976) emphasized the more systematic grammatical means of creating cohesion, devoting less time and theorizing to lexical cohesion. They categorized grammatical cohesion into a small number of distinct kinds; they refer to them as: (1) reference, (2) substitution, (3) ellipsis, and (4) conjunction.

- **Reference:** Halliday and Hassan (1976) point out that reference features cannot be semantically interpreted without referring to some other features in the text. Reference cohesive ties include personal and demonstrative pronouns as well as comparatives. Reference can be accounted as "exophoric" or "endophoric" functions. Because when we refer

to a given item, we expect the reader to interpret it by either looking forward, backward, or outward.

- **Substitution:** Substitution ties replace a word, a verb phrase, or an entire clause using closed-class words not included in those listed under the reference category.

It is important to mention that substitution and reference are different in a number of points. For instance, substitution is concerned with relations related with wording whereas reference is concerned with relations related with meaning. Additionally, substitution is a way to avoid repetition in the text itself. However, reference needs to retrieve its meaning from the situational textual occurrence. In this framework, Halliday and Hassan (1976: 89) state that: "In terms of the linguistic system, reference is a relation on the semantic level, whereas substitution is a relation on the lexicogrammatical level, the level of grammar and vocabulary, or linguistic form".

- **Ellipsis:** ellipsis ties refer to substitution by zero. That is, some elements are omitted from the surface text, but they are still understood by readers. Harmer (2004: 24) gives the following definition to ellipsis: "words are deliberately left out of a sentence when the meaning is still clear".

- **Conjunction:** Halliday and Hassan (1976: 227) describe conjunction as follows:

In describing conjunction as a cohesive device, we are focusing attention not on the semantic relation as such, as realized throughout the grammar of the language, but on one particular aspect of them, namely the function they have of relating to each other linguistic elements that occur in succession but are not related by other, structural means.

Conjunction is achieved to have grammatical cohesion in texts that show the relationship between sentences. Conjunction, or connective, links two ideas in a text or discourse together semantically. With the use of conjunction, the understanding of the first idea accommodates the interpretation of the second idea. In English, conjunctive relations are usually established through the use of conjunctive ties, which may be a coordinating

conjunction (like *and, but, or*), an adverb (like *in addition, however, thus*), or a prepositional phrase (like *besides that, despite the fact that*). Halliday and Hassan (1976) divide conjunctive relations into five broad categories: *additive, adversative, causal, temporal, and continuative*, each of which is further divided into several subcategories (Supong, 2010: 6).

1.3.2 Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion is created through the repetition of lexical items or use of synonymous items throughout various sections of a text.

Hoey (1991) examined how lexical cohesive elements would make a text organized. He examined how lexical features and syntactic repetition would contribute to cohesion. His study is focused on the text organization which can be achieved through the inter-relationship between cohesion and coherence. Within this framework, cohesion is regarded as an element that accommodates coherence. According to him, lexical repetition as a major cohesive device constructs a matrix and creates a net of bonds in the text. He asserts that lexical repetitions can show the relatedness of sentences within a text. He classifies lexical repetitions into eight (08) types: simple lexical repetition, complex lexical repetition, simple mutual paraphrase, simple partial paraphrase, complex paraphrase, substitution, and co-reference and ellipsis.

Simple lexical repetition can be identified by a link between two lexical items, the first is repeated in a subsequent sentence without great change in form. But, complex lexical repetition is identified by a repetitive link between two lexical items that are not totally identical or that are identical with different grammatical functions. Simple paraphrase in its two forms mutual or partial, is identified by a link between two lexical items, one of which can substitute for another. Finally, complex paraphrase refers to two lexical items which are related to one another without sharing a lexical morpheme as antonym (Supong: 5-6).

2. Methodology

2.1 Statement of the Problem

Researchers such as Halliday and Hassan believe that using linguistic ties makes the students' written productions more cohesive and understandable. But, it seems that students do not use grammatical cohesive devices efficiently. As noticed by teachers, students have many problems in writing effective discourse in general and in using cohesive devices in particular. It is noteworthy that without having a good command of the linguistic ties, one can never construct a cohesive discourse.

2.2 Research Questions

The present research work was conducted mainly to answer the following key questions:

- (1) Are students sufficiently aware of the importance of cohesion in academic writing ?
- (2) Do students appropriately use grammatical cohesive ties in their written productions ?
- (3) What are the teaching techniques adopted by teachers to teach cohesion and raise students awareness on its importance in academic writing?

2.3 Participants and Data Gathering Tools

In order to achieve the study's aims, two (02) questionnaires have been administered to both students and teachers. Four (04) teachers of written expression in addition to twenty five (25) students of the second year English have been chosen randomly. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages, Department of English Language at the University of Hamma Lakhdar in El-Oued, Algeria during the academic year 2016/2017.

2.4 Description of the Data Gathering Tools

2.4.1 Description of Teachers' Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed to elicit more information about teachers' views, attitudes and assessment towards students' awareness and understanding of cohesion in academic writing. The questionnaire comprises twelve (12) questions. The questions used turn around the following broad lines:

- The space devoted to cohesion in writing in the syllabus of written expression.
- Teaching techniques adopted by teachers to teach cohesion and raise students' awareness on its importance in academic writing.
- Ways of evaluating students' written production and whether cohesion is one of the components of assessment.
- Reasons for the misuse of cohesion in class for academic writing purposes.

2.4.2 Description of the Students' Questionnaire

Another questionnaire was designed to obtain reliable information centered around measuring students' awareness on the importance of cohesion in academic writing related to theory and practice. The questionnaire consists of fourteen (14) questions. The questions used turn around the following axes:

- Evaluating students' command of the linguistic ties to construct a cohesive discourse.
- Difficulties encountered by students in writing effective discourse in general and in using cohesive devices in particular.

- Students' views over the best teaching techniques that can be adopted by teachers to teach cohesion in writing.

3 Research Findings and Discussion

The findings shown in the following data analysis of the targeted respondents' responses to the questionnaires attempts to illustrate the implications for EFL teaching, learning, by tracing the causes of the lack of awareness on the significance of cohesion in academic writing. As can be derived from teachers' and students' answers, most students lack knowledge about covert cohesion and its mechanisms, that is why they lack to build links between form and meaning. However, respondents, tend to prefer overt cohesive devices, especially the conjunctions of sequential and reasoning such as *firstly, then, finally, what's more, furthermore*, and so on, for sentence cohesion and to build coherence of the ideas though they lack proficiency even in the use of overt cohesive devices.

The data gathered also shed light on the overall situation of lexical cohesion in the students' written production . What was found that students tend to continue the idea by using a simple repetition , a complex repetition, or paraphrases. However, the data suggest that second year English writers tend to prefer the simple repetition in a way of repeating the exact form due to the lack of training and practice centered around the other types of repetition. That is why, the subject or the objects used in the previous sentence continued in the full repetition of the same form. For instance, *classmate* can be replaced by *the new classmate*, or later *a colleague*; the word *discover* can be replaced by *the discovery*, or later *the finding*, and so forth.

The findings of the present study revealed that every single aspect of cohesion should deserve more attention and more discussion as there still many more issues to be learned about the phenomenon of cohesion. A major outcome of this research paper is the development of a valid and reliable description of grammatical and lexical cohesion in academic writing by viewing the traditions of approaching this issue by both teachers and students . This study offers a novel approach to analyzing cohesion by revising Halliday and Hassan's (1976) taxonomy and proposing an analytical tool that is capable of capturing non-linear patterns of cohesion through larger stretches of text than was earlier possible.

The present study, based on the findings and discussions illustrated above, provided some suggestions for both writing teachers and EFL learners. Firstly, since the number of cohesive devices affects the quality of writing, “cohesion is not coherence” (Carrell, 1982) could be realized. So, a composition with more cohesive devices cannot be considered as a cohesive or coherent one. Therefore, when teachers are teaching their students how to use cohesion devices, it is worth reminding that a proper dose of cohesive devices makes writing better. Secondly, since the findings indicated that the participants preferred repeating words rather than using synonyms and antonyms to describe the main points of their topics, teachers should help students enlarge their choice of vocabulary. Teachers could engage the students in some vocabulary activities such as word association game before writing to elicit and build students' vocabulary.

Conclusion

This paper provides a general overview of cohesion which is an essential element that facilitates textual continuity. The present study addresses the gap existing in the literature by studying the effects of pedagogical intervention on the amount of cohesion in students' written production. Meanwhile, the present researchers shed light on the cohesive errors commonly located in EFL second year students at the Department of English, the University of Hama

Lakhdar in El-Oued aiming at providing them with corrective feedback that may raise students' awareness on the centrality of cohesion in academic writing.

It is advisable that teachers and syllabus designers of the subject of written expression should devote sufficient time for cohesion to enhance students' writing proficiency. Writing teachers could introduce corpora to students since corpora can enhance learners' awareness of lexico-grammatical patterning of texts (Thurstun & Candlin, 1998; Yoon, 2008). Corpus-informed syllabi can be mixed with writing courses wherein students learn to solve their lexical problems through concordances and collocation samplers. Finally, it is essential to incorporate reading into writing in order to enhance students' awareness of coherence and cohesion (Heller, 1999; Hirvela, 2004). Students can acquire syntactic structures, features of genre, or vocabulary through the process of reading to write. What is more, observing the use of cohesive devices can also enhance students' awareness of the characteristics of good English writing. It is expected that the suggestions briefly mentioned above could improve students' writing skills and promote writing teachers' teaching quality.

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