

The Effect of Identifying Cohesive Devices in Writing passages on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learner`s Academic Writing Performance

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Abstract – This study investigated the effect of identifying cohesive devices in writing passages on Iranian intermediate EFL learner`s academic writing performance. The participants in this study were 60 male and female (30 students as an experimental group and 30 students as a control group) EFL learners. The statistical procedures used for the analysis of the results were T-Test and ANOVA. Since this study investigated the use of cohesive devices in the writing of the participants, the frequencies of these features were counted carefully. The obtained scores were statistically analyzed, using independent samples and paired sample t-test in order to identify the changes that had taken place as an outcome of identifying cohesive devices. According to findings, the employment of different types of CDs (grammatical and lexical cohesive devices) by the researchers did not have any effect on the participants` performance, because there was no positive relationship between the number of cohesive devices and the scores of the same compositions.

Keywords: cohesive devices, writing passages, academic writing performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the thirty years of research and discussion following the publication of Halliday and Hasan`s seminal work *Cohesion in English* (1976), no definitive answers have emerged regarding the relationship of cohesive devices and quality of writing. Simply stated, cohesion refers to the set of linguistic features required for creating a text out of sentences; cohesion is a means for combining sequences of sentences together to form an integrated whole. For example, the cohesive device *instead* links the following two sentences together as a unit, creating a relationship of contrast between the first and the second sentence: “He showed no pleasure at hearing the news. *Instead* he looked even gloomier” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 254).

Although some researchers have found a correlation between cohesive devices and writing quality (Liu & Braine, 2005; Wenjun, 1999; Witte & Faigley, 1981), others have shown no difference in the use of cohesive devices in “good” and “weak” writing (Johnson, 1992; Tierney & Mosenthal, 1983; Zhang, 2000). Another group of researchers falls between the two poles, showing difference for certain types of cohesion (Neuner, 1987; Hinkel, 2001; Yang, 1989). To date, however, no studies have provided an in-depth description of the types and uses of cohesive devices in successful L2 writing.

As writing is a complex process even in one's first language, EFL/ESL learners face greater difficulties learning this skill as far as the communicative nature of writing is concerned, cohesion is regarded as an essential textual component both in creating organized texts and rendering the content comprehensible to the reader. Many researchers have explored the connection between the use of cohesive devices and the quality of the writing. To gain more insight into this area, this study reviews some studies focusing on the use of cohesive devices and the relationship between their number and writing quality.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Writing skills

Writing is a complex skill. It requires the writer to demonstrate a variety of structural forms. It involves the ability to use specific rhetorical structures or explicit cohesive devices, especially in academic essays. It requires the writer to use a variety of grammatical structures and sets of linguistic features that serve differing functions in academic genres. Also, academic writing is characterized by formality that entails frequent nominalizations, parallel structures, or sentential organization (Wennerstrom, 2003, p. 8).

In the academic settings, writing skills are practiced in the form of compositions. "Composing involves combining of structural sentence units into a more-or-less unique, cohesive and coherent larger structure. A piece of writing which implicates composing contains surface features which connect the discourse and an underlying logic of organization which is more than simply the sum of the meanings of the individual sentences" (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014, p. 4). Composing consists of two kinds of writing: the writing as telling or retelling, and the writing that involves transforming.

2.2 Cohesion

The cohesive relations are established only if there are two items linked with each other, and such items have a cohesive force. These elements that are cohesively related create a tie. The notion of a tie is central in the analysis of cohesive properties of a text by providing a systematic account of patterns of texture (Halliday & Hasan 1976, pp. 3-5). They add that cohesion is "a relation in the system" where the writer opts for "sets of possibilities" to make the text "hang together" but also cohesion is viewed "as a process in the text" which means "it is the instantiation of this relation in the text" (1976, pp. 18-19).

Cohesion is the grammatical and lexical linking within a text or sentence that holds a text together and gives it meaning. It is related to the broader concept of coherence. Cohesion as a major component of language ability plays a significant role in connecting the sentences and paragraphs of texts together. It is the grammatical and lexical relationship within a text or sentence which holds a text together and gives it meaning. It is related to the broader concept of coherence. In this way, there are two main types of cohesion: grammatical cohesion which refers to the structural content, and lexical cohesion that refers to the language content of the piece. The purely linguistic elements which make a text coherent are included under the term cohesion.

2.3 Description of cohesive devices

Halliday and Hasan distinguish two types of cohesive relations: the one expressed through grammar and the other through lexis. The former is called grammatical cohesion, and the linking ties are in terms of reference, ellipsis, and substitution. The latter is called lexical cohesion, and the cohesive features included in this category are reiteration and collocations. The conjunctive relations are considered to be on the borderline being grammatical and lexical (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 6).

2.4 Definition of discourse analysis

As mentioned before, discourse is related to many disciplines. The principal concern of discourse analysis is to examine how any language produced by a given participants whether spoken or written is used in communication for a given situation in a given setting. Thus, discourse analysis is concerned with written and spoken forms. Discourse devices also help to string language elements.

In regards to discourse analysis, Fine adds, ‘the organization of stretches of language greater than a sentence [It] can focus on conversation, written language, when searching for patterning of the language. Discourse analysis must determine the units of these larger stretches of language, how these units are signaled by specific linguistic markers, and/or the processes involved in producing and comprehending larger stretches of language’ (Fine, 1988, p. 1).

2.4.1 Written discourse

With written texts, some of the problems associated with spoken transcripts are absent: we do not have to contend with eight people all speaking at once, the writer has usually had time to think about what to say and how to say it, and the sentences are usually well formed in a way that the utterances of natural, spontaneous talk are not. But the overall questions remain the same: what norms or rules do people adhere to when creating written texts? Are texts structured according to recurring principles? Is there a hierarchy of units comparable to acts, moves and exchanges? and are there conversational ways of opening and closing texts? As with spoken discourse, if we do find such regularities, and if they can be shown as elements that have different realizations in different languages, or that they may present problems for learners in other ways, then the insights of written discourse analysis might be applicable, in specifiable ways, to language teaching.

2.5 Research Questions/Hypotheses

RQ1: Does identifying cohesive devices have any effect on Iranian male and female EFL learner’s writing performance?

RQ2: Which cohesive devices do successful L2 writers use in their writing?

RQ3. What is the relationship between the number of cohesive devices and the scores of the same compositions?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: There is no difference in identifying cohesive devices between Iranian male and female EFL learner`s writing performance.

H2: There is a positive relationship between types of cohesive devices and successful writing.

H3: There is a positive relationship between the number of cohesive devices and the scores of the same compositions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 60 male and female (30 student as experimental group and also 30 students as control group) EFL learners from (Gooyesh, Apadana and Kamyab Language Institutes) in Poldokhtar, Iran, with English as their second language. All the subjects belonged to the age range of 15 to 28 with the same level of proficiency in English courses at the intermediate level. They were investigated as two groups that will receive a pretest and posttest. All the subjects participated in the study and completed it with writing compositions as pretest and posttest.

3.2 Instruments

First of all, one writing test was given to the participants as a pretest to find the proficiency level of the students. This research study was done at 10 sessions. Ten writing passages with CDs were given to the students in five sessions, (two texts in each class) as treatment. The researcher show CDs in texts to the participants, then they identified and underlined them. After each identification session, one writing task was given to the students at the next session and the participants were asked to write a passage on different topics. If there are CDs in a text, that text is more likely to be cohesive. The interval between classes was the same.

The researchers scored and assessed writings with respect to using CDs. After ten sessions the students wrote a composition as posttest to evaluate the role of identifying CDs in the learner`s writing performance. All essays had virtually similar topics that the students wrote in 20 minutes. The purpose of choosing nearly the same topics was to make sure that the type of text and topic do not affect the learner`s use of CDs. The topics were not exactly the same to minimize the practice effect. The students were asked to keep the length of their composition at around 100 words in order to eliminate the effect of the length of text on the number of CDs.

3.3 Procedures

Two groups as experiment (30 students) and control groups (30 students) were selected from among the sample (100 learners) for studying, and the main purpose of this study was to answer the research questions. The researchers used a quantitative method in this research. Hence the study had a pretest and posttest in order to find out how the independent variable (identifying cohesive devices) effects the dependent variable (EFL learner`s writing performance).

4. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate using cohesive devices by Iranian male and female EFL learners with respect to identifying more and different cohesive devices with using the previous studies related to this field as regard to the model of Halliday and Hasan (1976) who proposed the concept of cohesion and its effect on writing performance.

The participants in this research study were 100 EFL learners from English institutes (Gooyesh, Apadana and Kamyab) in Poldokhtar, Iran, with English as their foreign language. After pretest and according to OPT 30 male and female (30 students as experimental group and also 30 students as control group) were selected as participants. So the participants were homogenized (table 4.1). Control group had not received any treatment, but experimental group received 10 writing texts with cohesive devices that should have underlined them in five sessions, and after each clarification course they must wrote a text with CDs at the next session. All the subjects were at the age of 15 to 28 with the same level of proficiency in English courses at the intermediate level. They were investigated as two groups that received a pretest and posttest. After all sessions the mean in pretest and posttest was matched by the researchers.

4.1. Data Analysis

At the beginning, the participants were given a writing pre-test, to make sure that they are at the same level of writing skill. The researchers conducted an Oxford Proficiency Test for selecting the participants as two groups from among 100 students at the intermediate level which were selected randomly from three English institutions in Poldokhtar which could show that the participants were homogenized.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the OPT test to homogenize the subjects

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
OPT test	100	36.00	54.00	90.00	74.5300	9.44356	89.181
Valid N (list wise)	100						

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of OPT test for homogenizing the subjects. Thus, as shown in table 1, the mean of the scores was 74 and standard deviation is 9. Therefore, given one standard deviation above the mean, the students whose scores in Oxford Proficiency Test were above 83 were selected to take part in the study (since $74-9=65$ and $74+9=83$). Therefore, out of 100 students, 60 students remained to participate in the study.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of control and experimental groups on OPT

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Control group	30	24.00	63.00	87.00	76.2333	7.40775	54.875
Experimental group	30	22.00	67.00	89.00	77.7333	6.18080	38.202
Valid N (list wise)	30						

As table 2 shows, the number of participants which were selected according to OPT test were, 60 students (30 students as control group and 30 students as experimental group). The highest and the lowest score of the participants in the control group was respectively 87 & 63, and 89 & 67 for experimental group, so there is no significant difference between the scores of two groups.

The mean of two groups was nearly the same (control group: 76.2333, experimental group: 77.7333), so, in order to compare the means on the pre-test, the ‘independent t-test’ was used, the results of which are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Independent Samples Test for equality of means in two groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Control group Equal variances assumed	1.756	.190	-.852	58	.398	-1.50000	1.76141	-5.02585	2.02585
Equal variances not assumed			-.852	56.197	.398	-1.50000	1.76141	-5.02826	2.02826

As shown in table 3, there is no significant difference between variances of the two groups ($F=1.756$, $p=0.398 > 0.05$). In addition, the difference between the mean scores of the two groups is not statistically significant ($t=0.190$, $p=0.398 > 0.05$). That is, the results of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of two groups.

To test the hypotheses, two groups’ post-test essays were evaluated based on the TEEP rubric criteria (2014). However, in order to compare the means the ‘independent t-test’ was used (table 5). Table 4 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for the two groups’ writing post-tests.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for posttest (experimental and control group)

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Control group	30	4.00	5.00	9.00	7.6000	1.06997	1.145
Experimental group	30	3.00	6.00	9.00	7.7000	.79438	.631
Valid N (list wise)	30						

Table 5. Independent Samples Test for posttest of two groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Control group	2.172	.146	-.411	58	.683	-.10000	.24330	-.58702	.38702
Equal variances assumed									
			-.411	53.520	.683	-.10000	.24330	-.58789	.38789
Equal variances not assumed									

According to table 5, there was no significant difference between variances of the two groups ($F= 2.172$, $p=0.683>0.05$). In addition the difference between the means of the scores of the two groups is not significant ($t=.411$, $p=0.683>0.05$). That is the results of the t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of two groups. Therefore, the researchers concluded that identifying cohesive devices has not a positive effect on the writing performance of the participants and just the number of CDs increased.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the essays written by Iranian intermediate EFL learners as regards to the use of cohesive devices. Cohesion is considered to be an important part of the unified texts; thus, the investigation of cohesion in texts produced by EFL students was supposed to provide useful information on how meaning relations contribute to the text being perceived as a whole.

5. 1. Theoretical implications

In addition, in order to have clearer tendencies and bigger certainty of the knowledge of the use of cohesive devices in academic writing, it is necessary to conduct the comparative study on the extensive collection of the material. The analysis conducted for this study showed that various aspects of cohesion were employed by Iranian students after instruction, though sometimes incorrectly. However, some essays that had fewer cohesive ties were still coherent and well written. But further research in this area is needed in a broader scope.

5. 2. Pedagogical implications

The previous findings in the effect of cohesive devices in academic writing are contradictory. Vahid Dastjerdi and Taghizadeh (2006) scrutinized their application in Persian texts and their translation to English in contrast. They considered dense use of discoursal elements in Saadi's *Gulistan*. They followed the model of Halliday and Hasan (1976) in their study. The results of

their study showed some differences, even among the very English versions. Halliday and Hasan (1976) proposed the concept of cohesion and its influence on reading and writing. Cohesion was once known as a predictor of textual coherence but this idea was later rejected by empirical studies and theoretical works in early 1980s (Carrell, 1982; Mosenthal & Tierney, 1984). A more conservative idea is that cohesive ties can contribute to textual coherence though they do not guarantee it. However, in pedagogical atmosphere, there is a belief that cohesive devices are the major means to making writing clear. But these findings are not sufficient for generalizing the results and having a clear conclusion. So, the results of this study can help students and teachers to come to a conclusion about using and identifying cohesive devices in writing performance. This is due to the fact that the types of cohesive ties used by the students in this study were almost higher than other studies.

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