Use of Cohesive Ties in English as a Foreign Language Students' Writing

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Abstract

This study aims to understand certain linguistic and semantic resources for the text construction, namely the constructs of cohesion, coherence. The analysis of cohesive ties was conducted on the writing samples of 40 subjects (20 most coherent and 20 least coherent) Iranian undergraduates of English. This prompted us to identify the dominant types of cohesive devices used in most coherent writing samples. The analysis of data revealed that both the writing samples were found highly dense in the use of reference. The correlation analysis also didn't show any overlap between the referential ties and coherence.. Hence, we can claim that referential ties don't play any role in making a text coherent. Among the five major types of cohesive classes, substitution and ellipsis were found least frequently used in both the writing samples. Their occurrence was less than 1%. It, therefore, seems that the two types of cohesive devices aren't widely used in written discourse. In the collective data, since, their occurrence is not even noticed in any of the writing scripts where as they could be the most dominant type of cohesion of spoken discourse.

Review of Literature

Traditionally, much language study and a great deal of language teaching was sentence based. The grammarians didn't work beyond the written sentence; they tended to work with 'sentence' (consequence of words conforming or not, to the rules of grammar for the construction of phrases, clauses etc). The scholars didn't pay much attention to how these stretches of language, i.e., sentences are put together for the construction of unified and meaningful communicative purpose. Since in the majority of cases a single sentence or an utterance doesn't provide the required communicative means, it is necessary to investigate any spoken or written piece of discourse across sentential levels (Neuner, 1987).

During the last thirty years or so researchers working in many domains, particularly in applied linguistics (Fishman 1971, Gumperz and Hymes 1972, Halliday 1978) hold that a purely formal linguistic analysis based on phonology, morphology, and syntax and independent of the circumstances in which the code is used turns out to be completely inadequate for the analysis of discourse. Cook (1989: 6) distinguishes discourse from sentences as follows:

> One abstracted in order to teach literacy or to study how rules of language work and another which has been used to communicate something and is felt to be coherent and may or not, happen to correspond to a correct sentence or correct series of sentences. This latter kind of language in use for communication is called discourse and the search for what gives discourse coherence is called discourse analysis.

Coherence

Coherence is a plot motivated over all structure or plan on the macro level (Berman and Slobin, 1994). It is an overall discourse level property that makes a text hold together (Fitzgerald and Spiegel, 1990).

We thus claim that coherence is a feature of the whole communication process and involves the writer, the subject, the text and the reader.

The approach, which this study follows, is basically functional using some formal features such as grammar, lexicon, and (more particularly) the cohesive devices in the functional interpretation especially their contribution to creating coherent written discourse in the given context.

Textual Strategies/Cohesion

The analysis in our work is largely based on Halliday's functional approach. Out of Halliday's taxonomy of the three semantic functions, i.e., ideational, interpersonal and textual discussed earlier, I taken only the textual aspect. The textual component determines how a text is organized as a flow of message.

Since the present study aims at looking at the criteria that create sexuality, the notion of cohesion/cohesive devices has been the central and key issue of the present work.

Generally, the concept of cohesion and coherence is more technical and unfamiliar to many people as compared with the concept of other more universally understood language related components such grammar, content, vocabulary and mechanics (Bae, 2001). One of the most significant works which has been carried out on the notion of cohesion and has contributed to our explicit understanding of cohesion is Halliday and Hasan (1976). According to

Halliday and Hasan "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one, referring to relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as text".

Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in discourse is dependent on that of another (ibid 1976: 4).

Cohesive devices are crucial in writing for they run separate clauses, sentences, and paragraphs into connected prose, signaling the relationship between ideas and making obvious the thread of meaning the writer is trying to communicate.

Objectives of the Study

To investigate the most prominent kind of cohesive ties in good writing sample. This will help us to see whether cohesion can play any role in distinguishing good writing samples from poor ones.

To identify the type of cohesive ties which are less proponent i.e. having the least occurrences in written discourse

Method

The data for this study came from 40 senior undergraduates of English class at university of Sistan and Baluchestan where the researcher teaches at present.

Forty students were assigned a communicative task i.e. writing a letter to a friend, explaining process of admission at his or her university. Since the subjects had a clear idea about the topic, they were only expected to exploit their linguist abilities in putting their ideas in a coherent and well organized form. Out of the total number of the subjects took part in this study, we took 20 the best sample of writing i.e. those whose written discourse had been selected the best in terms of content, grammar, vocabulary and the most important of all

the most coherent essays, and 20 the worst essay writers i.e. those whose over all writing quality had received the lover score and specially the least coherent writing samples.

Analysis of Coherence

Since coherence as a sub-component of writing doesn't have any explicit feature, previous research studies on writing have used holistic evaluations to rank essays on order to measure (assigning of a single score to a script based on the overall impression of the script. In the present study analytical scoring scale was used (script rated on several aspects of writing criteria rather on a single score). The compositions were ranked by three senior lectures of the Department of English, University of Sistan and Baluchestan. The average percentage of marks given by the evaluators was considered as the score for each examinee on the writing skills in general and coherence in particular.

Analysis of Cohesion

In contrast with coherence, cohesion has explicit linguist markers that are countable; thus, counting the number of makers was considered a method that would give a more accurate account of the dimensions of cohesion demonstrated in the writing samples. Thus, appropriately used cohesive makers were counted in each of the following areas of cohesion: reference, conjunction, ellipsis, substitution and lexical ties.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the score of each variable.

Table 1. Frequencies and types of cohesive ties in good and poor essays

	Good Essays		Poor Essays	
Dimensions of cohesion	Mean Occurrence	Percentage of the total occurrence	Mean Occurrence	Percentage of the total occurrence
Reference	30	36.5%	24	42.4%
Conjunction	14.8	18.2 %	12.8	22.6%
Substitution	0.1	0.12%	0.2	0.35%
Ellipsis	0.1	0.12%	0.2	0.35%
Lexical cohesion	36.7	44.7%	19.5	34.5%
Total	16.3	100%	11	100%

The results of the cohesion analysis of good and poor EFL essays in the present study were rather surprising. It was expected that Poor Students would have low density of cohesion, since writing problem for them are often attributed to not being able to combine sentences so that they cohere effectively. Nevertheless, the density of certain cohesive devices such as *Reference* where the mean scores are 30 and 24 *Conjunction*, 14.8 and 12.8 was not bound to be a discriminating factor between Good and Poor students in this study.

As table 1 shows ellipsis and substitution occurred relatively less frequently in the communicative writing tasks of the two groups (each type less than 1%).

There is a broad assumption that the two sub domains of cohesion i.e. ellipsis and substitutions are most commonly used in spoken discourse than in written communication (Bae, 2001).

Typically, Ellipsis and substitutions is known to occur in responses in spontaneous conversation (Bae, 2001). In the data of this study, ellipsis and substitution were seldom used. The result suggests that for further investigation of cohesion of written language, it may not be important to include these two types of cohesive ties in any study. But, they could be of interesting studies if their application is analyzed in spoken language.

The following are examples of noun and verb substitutions (extracted from the scripts of the subjects).

(1) i. The university in which I am studying is the best *one* throughout Iran.

   ii. I am very happy that you are willing to continue your further studies in my country. But please try to *do* it soon because the academic year will start from the being of October.

In (1.i), *one* substitutes for *university* in the previous clause. Since it has been replaced by a noun, it is called noun substitution. But (1.ii) illustrates that cohesion can be attained with verb. In (1.ii) *do* substitutes for *continue* or more accurately, for the predicate of the first sentence.

Ellipsis: The example in (2.i) is a noun ellipsis.

(2) i. Here students have to pass an entrance exam before getting themselves registered but very tough.

From example (2.i) it is very obvious and clear that an element in the second clause is missing: the word entrance exam rather than being repeated is simply deleted. The reader or hearer of this statement from the context would understand, however, that it is the *entrance exam, which* is very tough.

Bae (2001: 71) says "Typically, ellipsis is known to occur in responses in spontaneous conversations but is seldom used in formal writing".

Lexical cohesion was a significantly dominant pattern of cohesion observed in the communicative writing of good essay writers. The percentage of the

occurrence of lexical cohesion in good writing was 44.7%. This relatively higher occurrence of lexical cohesion could be one of the factors playing a role in distinguishing good writing from poor writing. In the following sections the sub-domains of cohesion are discussed in detail to see how two groups use different cohesive ties.

Reference, Conjunctions, Substitutions, Ellipsis and Lexical Ties

Reference: The sub domains or types of references as cohesive ties and their relative frequencies observed in the writing samples are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Type of reference and relative percentage of occurrence

Types of Reference	Good Writing Samples	Poor Writing Samples
Pronominals: (he, she, him, they)	87%	94%
Proper Nouns: (John, Tom)	0%	0%
Demonstatives: (this, that, these, those, have/there)	12.%	4.9%
Comparatives: (same, bigger, better, similar)	1%	0.4%
Total	100%	100%

The dominant reference type observed in both the writing samples was pronominals. This frequency of occurrence of pronominals as ties were more commonly used by those whose written product was less coherent (poor writings samples). The result suggests that higher use of pronominals doesn't distinguish the coherent from the poor ones, which are loosely organized. This dense use of personal reference could be due to the nature of the writing task itself. Since the task was a communicative one, the subjects kept continuously using the pronominal reference to be closer to their readers in communication.

None of the subjects used the proper nouns as a linker. In fact, the topic or task of writings didn't require any use of proper nouns, as we had not mentioned the name of any person or addressee to whom the letter was supposed to be written. The use of demonstratives was found relatively higher in good writing samples. Since the circumstantial (adverbial) demonstratives here, there and the nominal demonstratives, this, that, these and those refer to the location of something that has already been mentioned in the prior sentences. The task on which the subjects had to write involved the use of high number of demonstratives to make the communication more effective.

The comparative reference occurred relatively less frequently in both of the writing task. (1% to 0.5%).

The following examples (3.i-iii) extracted from the students' essays represent the various types of referential ties.

(3) i. In order to continue your higher education in my country, you will have to pass an entrance exam. In fact, *it* is too tough to pass.

   ii. Regarding the educational procedures of my country, I should say that *here,* we have got one of the most complicated systems.

   iii. Those applicants who get *higher* markers in the entrance exam will definitely have *greater* chances of getting admission.

Each italicized word in the above examples is semantically bounded with another element in its preceding clause or sentence e.g. the pronominal *it* in (3.i) as a cohesive tie presupposes an element i.e. *entrance exam* in the previous sentence. Similarly, the demonstrative reference *here* in (3. ii) can be interpreted only by referring to the element *country* mentioned in the preceding clause.

In (3.iii) the comparative reference markers *higher* and *greater* can be interpreted only in their relationship to the previously identified constituents i.e., *applicants.*

In the first two examples, the cohesive ties don't add to the information contained in the previous sentence, but they instead replace specific words that have been already used. In effect, personal pronouns and demonstratives fill a syntactic slot that could have been filled by what they refer to. However, the case in (3.iii) is different, where the comparative as a cohesive tie also contains semantic information. They add meaning by defining one thing in relationship to another. In fact, it is through the proper use of these ties that clauses and sentences are easily interpretable and semantically fused.

Conjunctions: Four types of conjunctions and their frequency of use in good and poor writing of the subjects of this study was examined and is reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of conjunctions and their relative percentages of occurrences

Subclasses of Conjunctions	Good Writings Samples	Poor Writings Samples
Additive: (and, or, by the way, but)	60%	66.1%
Adversative: (but, yet, however)	6.1%	3.1%
Causal: (so, therefore, thus)	7 %	10.4%
Temporal: (and then, then, soon, finally, after that)	26.4%	18.6%
Total	100 %	100 %

As we see, more than 60% of all occurrences of conjunctives were additive. The poor apprentice writers exceeded the good essay writers in the use of additive conjunctions. The result suggests that additive conjunctions are most frequently used in the early stages of learning the writing skills and it also

seems as the most productive type of conjunction used in communication writing tasks as both the groups i.e. good and poor writers used significantly high number of additive conjunctions. The second rapid use of conjunction is related to the temporal as a sub class of conjunction: good writing samples were relatively richer in the use of temporal conjunction (26%) than the poor writing samples in which only 18% of temporal conjunctions were found. The higher use of temporal conjunction indicates that good writers tend to communicate more comprehensibly, i.e. addressing the stages of admission and the procedures, which take place one after another in more detail. Similarly, good writers' performance in use of adversative conjunction was higher (6.1%) than the poor writers (3.1%). Unlike the additive conjunctions which seemed to be an early acquired conjunction as it simply involve the use of additive (and), which poor writers had used most frequently, adversative conjunction appears far more complicated and the result suggests that they are developmental and can be acquired in later stages.

As far as the use of causal conjunction is concerned the poor writers used higher degree of causal than the good writers i.e., (12% - 7%).

Items in (4.i-iii) represent example from all types of conjunctions extracted from the students' essays.

(4) i. Normally teachers introduce the syllabus to the students *and* ask them to read and present seminars

ii. The above given information are all about majoring in English. *But* if you want to do another course, the procedure is different.

iii. In Iran, the medium of instruction is Persian. *So, before*, coming here you'd rather take some courses of Persian language in your country.

The italicized words in (4.i-iii) are all conjunctions, each serves or specifies a semantic relation e.g. in (4.i) the additive conjunction *and* produces cohesion

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simply by signaling that there is more to say about the topic of the previous sentence or, even more generally, that the two sentences linked by *and* are intended to be seen as related.

But the adversative tie in (4.ii) indicates a contrastive relationship. The second sentence in the linked pair presents a proposition that contradicts or is contrary to the proposition expressed in the first sentence.

The causal connective ties *so* in (4.iii) means 'for this reason' and for 'this propose' links the two sentences by representing the reason as why the applicant should learn Persian before coming to Iran. The same example also contains a temporal tie *before*; it obviously provides information about relationship in time or sequences of events.

Lexical Ties: Subdomains of lexical cohesions and their relative percentage of occurrences are represented in Table 4.

Table 4. Lexical ties and their relative percentage of occurrence

Types of Lexical Ties.	Good Writing Samples	Poor Writings Samples
Repetition	75 %	68.3%
Synonym	3.81%	2.43 %
Antonym	0 %	0 %
Superordinates	6.34 %	1.5%
General noun	2 %	1.49 %
Collocation	22 %	20.9%
Total	100 %	100 %

As mentioned in Table 1, there is a relatively high lexical cohesion in both the writings of the two groups 34.5% to 44.7%. There is no significant difference between the two writing tasks in terms of other cohesive devices. However, the only cohesive feature that distinguishes good writing from the poor writing is the sub domain of lexical cohesion. Good writers have a high

percentage of lexical repetition, with a relatively higher number of synonym and collocation than the poor writers. Lexical repetition, i.e., repeating the key lexis in the subsequent stages as ties seen more frequently used in the good writing samples seem to have crucial role in making a written product more coherent.

Similarly, the better rated essays in terms of their coherence displayed a relatively high control on using and choosing synonyms in addressing the various stages of admission process, using hyponyms, superodinates etc. Connor (1985) too comes out with the same findings. He says that the use of cohesion may be developmental. The more students are exposed to the knowledge and the application of the target language, the more synonyms and collocation as sub classes of lexical cohesion can develop. In our study lexical cohesion played a more important role in distinguishing good writing from the poor writing samples than other cohesive devices.

Examples in (5.i-iv) represent the various types of the reiteration extracted from the writing samples of the subjects.

(5) i. After high school, you have to take a university entrance exam, called 'Konkour'. If you pass the *entrance exam* successfully then you are allowed to get registered.

ii. I am very happy that you have decided to pursue your higher studies in Iran. But since you have asked my help, it is my duty to inform you that *continuing* higher studies especially at university level is extremely tough.

iii. Expenses in Tehran are much higher than any other parts of the *country*.

iv. Our University has got an extremely big campus. *The place* is full of grass and flowers.

In (5. i) the repetition of the same word *entrance exam* creates cohesion between the two sentences. Many discourse analysts believe that one of the factors that lead to the creation of a coherent text is repeating the important words e.g. Salki (1995) claims that if we heavily rely on pronouns instead of repeating the words properly the text would make very little overall sense.

(5. ii) illustrates another feature of reiteration. Instead of repeating exactly the same word, another ideal way of making a text coherent and create cohesion between clauses and sentences is the use of a word and then using a synonym of that word. If the same word is repeated over and over, the reader may get bored and quit reading and this is one of the reasons why synonyms are sometimes preferred over repetition of the same lexical item. A synonym is a word that has the same meaning as another word does, e.g., the word *continuing* is functioning as a cohesive tie because it is used as a synonym referring to the word *pursue* in the preceding sentence. Synonyms create cohesion in the same way as exact repetition does, because both repetition and synonyms are bounded to the same element in their preceding sentences. The uses of synonyms do not only contribute to the cohesion and coherence of a piece of discourse, but they also add variety to the over all structure of text or discourse.

Another way of linking words in a text and creating cohesion is to refer back to a word by using what is called superordinate term e.g., in (5. iii) there is a link between *Tehran* and the *country*. Tehran is a specific instance of the more general word country. The general word is called superordinate and the more specific word is called hyponym. In a text it is often the hyponym, which is used first, the superordinate is used to refer back to it as in the case of example (5. iii). The superordinate *country* in the second sentence is used to denote *Tehran* in the first sentence, thus bringing about cohesion in a way resembling

reference since the interpretation of *country* depends on the presence of its referent earlier in the discourse.

(5. iv) is an example of general noun cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976: 274) argue, *general noun is a set of noun having a generalized reference within the major noun class.* They claim that general noun in cohesion is almost always accompanied by reference *the* is anaphoric. They further argue that from the lexical point of view, general nouns are superordinate members of major lexical set and therefore, their cohesive use is that it operates anaphorically as a kind of synonyms.

(5. iv) shows the general noun *place* in a cohesion function. It is accompanied by the reference *the*. The item general noun *place* as a cohesive agent refers anaphorically to a more specific element *campus* where the identify of reference is signaled by the presence of the anaphoric reference item *the.*

Example (6.i.) below represent the co-occurrence of the lexical items which have been defined as collocational cohesion:

(6) i. After going through the *M.A Course,* which takes at least two years, those who are interested in doing their *Ph.D.* will have to follow the same rules as they had done for their masters i.e., taking the *course works* which is, subsequently, followed by writing a *thesis.* It is worth noticing that before starting the *research project,* the applicants usually consult their concerned *supervisor* who is appointed by the *university authorities to* guide the *research scholars* through out the course of *the study.* This is an over all glance and general information about the system of *higher education* in the universities of my country. (cited as in the original).

Semantically all the italicized lexical items in the above paragraph are related to each other. Hence, it is easy to discover the features that account for

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cohesion e.g. the words *M.A*, *Ph.D*, *course works*, *thesis*, *research project*, *supervisors*, *university*, *research scholars*, and *higher education* are all related words. As pointed out earlier it is hard to say precisely what the relationship between the items are, but it is clear that the words come from a general area of vocabulary, and that they help the text to coherence.

Correlation Analysis

The descriptive analysis helped us to see the type and frequency of cohesive ties in good and poor essays. We took the correlation analysis to see whether cohesion correlates with coherence and the over all writing quality of the scripts.

There has been a controversial opinion of scholars such as Connor (1985) and others who claim that coherence is not enhanced by the density of cohesion or cohesive devices. It is said that it does not play any role in making text coherent. But Halliday and Hasan (1976) believe that coherence is achieved by the explicit cohesive ties. Correlation Matrix in (Appendix XIV) shows that cohesion and sub classes of cohesion have a marginal relation with coherence.

As can be seen from the correlation matrix (Appendix 11), there is a significantly high correlation between coherence and 'repetition of lexical cohesion' ($r= .71$ $p \leq .01$) and 'collocation' ($r= .45$ $p \leq .01$) indicating that the more the lexical ties are properly repeated, the better coherent and well organized is the text. So, lexical repetition is one of the important factors in making an essay coherent and semantically comprehensible to its reader.

Similarly correlation is highly significant between coherence and lexical cohesion ($r= .72$ $p \leq .01$). The result suggests that among other sub classes of cohesion, lexical cohesion is the dominant pattern of cohesion, which plays a crucial role in making a coherent piece of written discourse.

There is a significantly high correlation between coherence and content (r= .64 p≤ .01) since both content and coherence are semantic aspects of writings, it suggests that the more meaningfully connected the text, the clear and more thorough the topic and content of an essay.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The linguistic analysis of the study was conducted on the writing samples of 40 subjects (20 good and 20 poor) to investigate the nature of cohesive ties used in the communicative writing of Iranian as foreign learners of English. This also prompted us to identify the dominant types of cohesive devices used by good student writers which not only enriched our understanding of the distribution of cohesive ties used in communicative writing tasks but their occurrences also shed light on our explicit realization of the role of specific type of cohesive markers which distinguish good writing from poor writing samples in terms of coherence and the quality of discourse.

The result of the analysis and the suggested pedagogical implications are briefly discussed bellow:

1. Out of the five main classes of cohesive devices, the writing scripts of both good and poor students were found highly dense in the use of reference, lexical cohesion and conjunctions. Poor essay writers used relatively higher number of referential ties and conjunctions than other writers. The most dominant type of referential ties was pronominal. The correlation analysis also didn't show any overlap between the referential ties and coherence or the sum of writing quality of the subjects. Hence, we can claim that referential ties don't play any role in making a text coherent. Although, the use of demonstrative pronouns was found to be relatively higher in good writing samples as they refer to the location of something that has already

been mentioned in the prior sentences, only moderate correlation was noticed between demonstrative pronouns and coherence.

2. Among the five major types of cohesive classes, substitution and ellipsis were found least frequently used by both the groups of writers. Their occurrence was less than 1%. It, therefore, seems that the two types of cohesive devices don't have any application in written discourse. In the collective data, since, their occurrence is not even noticed in any of the writing scripts where as they could be the most dominant type of cohesion of spoken discourse. It would be interesting to investigate their occurrence in spontaneous speech in a different study. The result also suggests that since they don't seem to be used in written discourse, it would be ideal not to include them when a study is conducted on the analysis of cohesion in written discourse.

3. Lexical cohesion i.e. synonyms, collocation, repetition were found to be relatively higher in good writing samples and a significantly high correlation was noticed between coherence and repetition of lexical items, collocation and total number of lexical ties. This seems that coherence can be enhanced if certain types of cohesive ties mentioned above are appropriately used. This also implies that if we teach our students the dominant types of cohesive chains observed in good essays explicitly, it may help them to develop their performance particularly in arrangement of their ideas in a coherent form.

   a. Among other types of conjunctions, poor apprentice writers used many more additive conjunctions as compared to the good essay writers. This seems that additive conjunctions are most frequently used in the early stages of learning writing skills. However, adversative conjunction appears to be far more complicated. They are perhaps developmental

by nature i.e. the more proficient the writer, the higher the use of adversative conjunctions

b. In sum, we conclude that general density of cohesion, which was found in both the writing samples, is not a good discriminator of good and poor writing sample of this study. The poor essay writers were found, however, to lack the variety of lexical cohesive ties that good writers displayed. This implies that we should teach our students the explicit features of lexical cohesion i.e. exercises on co-reference, including synonyms, hyponyms, collocations, repetitions etc. which were used relatively more frequently by the good writers. It showed also a significantly stronger correlation with coherence and hence should be practiced more in composition classes than other cohesive ties.

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