RESEARCH ARTICLE

COHESIVE DEVICES IN THE ESSAY WRITING OF SUDANESE UNDERGRADUATES

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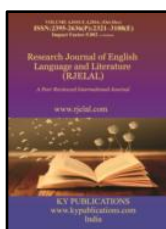
ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of cohesive devices by undergraduate Sudanese Students in writing English essays. The researcher has randomly chosen as many as 50 students that were further divided into two groups, namely experimental and control group. Halliday and Hassan's framework of cohesion was used to analyze the essays written by the two groups in question. An analytical descriptive methodology was adopted to analyze the writing of the two groups to demonstrate the points of strengths and weaknesses in their production. The results indicated that students have demonstrated poor mastery of the cohesive devices and discourse markers due to a number of factors, foremost of which is the syllabus. The syllabus as well as lack of training on the part of the tutors is greatly responsible for the occurrence of such weakness. Tutors should draw the students' attention to the effectiveness of the devices in order to improve their writing.

Key words: cohesion, devices coherent strength, weaknesses, training, effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Coherence refers to the *linking of ideas* in a logical sequence or order. Whereas cohesion deals with the organization of sentences and ideas in one's essay working together as a whole within their paragraphs. They hold together by *cohesive devices* (transitional words and expressions). This makes it very easy for the reader to follow your presentation of information in the essay. They don't get lost or confused. Did you write in clear paragraphs that are organized around central ideas? It's like listening to a story that's smooth and easy to follow.

It is generally held among scholars, practitioners and education experts dealing with the English writing that the use of cohesive devices in writing is one of the most difficult skills for those learners of English to develop. Enkvist (1990) considered the achievement of cohesion in writing as hard to define, obstruct, and controversial concept which is difficult to teach and difficult to learn.

Tanskanen (2006), argues that discourse unity can only be established via the use of cohesive devices that make the different components of the text hang together, hence contribute to the text cohesion. Consequently, a text, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976), is "any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole" and "is best regarded as a semantic unit" (p. 1). Halliday and Hassan (1976) perceived cohesion as the only factor that distinguishes texts from non-texts. This position was supported by Alarcon and Morales (2011), who stated that cohesion refers to the linguistic features which help make a sequence of sentences a text. The mastery of cohesive devices is a crucial element of effective academic writing and essential for academic success in any university program where English is the medium of instruction. Accordingly, the employment of cohesive devices in

academic writing of students who are studying English language as a second or foreign language has drawn the attention of practitioners and experts. In the present case it would be the Sudanese undergraduate students at, specially, Sudan University of Science and Technology.

As far as this field is concerned, quite a number of studies taking as their point of departure the examination of cohesive devices have been carried out in quite a wide range of diverse countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Liu and Braine (2005) investigated cohesive features in argumentative writing produced by 96 1st-year Chinese undergraduate students. The study showed that students were incapable of using cohesive devices proficiently in their writing. Thus, the authors stressed the necessity for more research to be conducted in the area of teaching writing to enhance the awareness of students concerning the significance and implementation of cohesive devices in their texts (Liu & Braine, 2005). Xuefan (2007) analyzed the use of lexical cohesive devices by 15 each of 1st- and 3rd-year English majors from Wuyi University in China. The findings of the study demonstrated that proficiency levels did not influence the students' implementation of cohesive devices in their writing. Furthermore, the researcher indicated that repetition was more significantly used than other types of lexical cohesion. Yang and Sun (2012) investigated the cohesive devices in argumentative writing by 2nd- and 3rd-year undergraduate Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners at different proficiency levels. The researchers emphasized that the writing quality of the students determined the appropriate use of cohesive devices regardless of their EFL proficiency levels. Crossley and McNamara (2012) examined the possibility of predicting second language (L2) writing proficiency through the use of different linguistic features. The analysis included varied linguistic features that evaluate text cohesion and linguistic sophistication. The study's corpus consisted of 514 essays that were collected from graduating Hong Kong high-school students at seven different grade levels. Judging by the analysis, the study underscored the belief that proficiency did not produce texts that were more cohesive, though they constructed texts that were more linguistically stylish.

Undoubtedly, the issue of coherence and cohesion has been addressed in a number of countries by different researches as long as it's a focal point for successful academic writing. Different researchers from across the globe where English is taught either as a foreign or a second language have actively set about exploring the issue. In fact a number of Sudanese researchers have examined different types of cohesive devices in the academic writing of undergraduates. They were puzzled by e total absence of the devices in the texts produced by the undergraduates. In the present study the researcher divided the students into two main groups. One is control group who were not allowed the same opportunity of being exposed to an additional dose of study , whereas the second group were taken care of by being taught and trained how to use the cohesive devices.

Theoretical Framework

Cohesion and Coherence

Upon writing, a number of factors has to be considered. They   include: inducing meaning by drawing on the available information, personal knowledge, and the cultural and contextual frames around which the writer is situated. A native speaker is definitely well placed to give sound or appropriate upon hearing or reading one specific text that whether it is one unified piece of meaning or a collection of fragmented unintelligible sentences. (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 1). For this reason, to use writing as a means of communication, it is necessary to go beyond sentence-level treatment to the production of paragraphs and even more than one paragraphs to multiple paragraphs. Once people are involved in writing two or more interconnected sentences, they have to use cohesive devices and coherence as a means of linking sentences together. They should also have the ability to organize ideas into a unified whole. Cox, Shanahan, and Sulzby (1990) supported the idea that cohesion is important for the reader in constructing meaning from a text and for the writer in creating a text that can be easily comprehended. Connor (1984) defined cohesion as the use of explicit cohesive devices that signal relations among sentences and parts of a text.

NAJLA MUSTAFA FAGEER HASSAN

This means that the appropriate use of cohesive devices enables readers and listeners to capture the connectedness between what precedes and what follows. This means that the dependency of the linguistic elements on each other in a text constructs a semantic unit. This shows that connectedness is an indispensable element in any written or spoken discourse. Consequently, linguists dealing with discourse analysis have been struggling hard to help students to arrive at this cohesion in writing.

Clarity of writing is chiefly assessed on basis of a number of parameters foremost of which is the utilization of cohesion hence it is the focal point of the present study. Witte and Faigley (1981) asserted that the types of cohesive devices and their frequency commonly reflect the invention skills of the writers as well as the influence of the stylistic properties on the texts they write. While some studies (Ahmed, 2010; Connor, 1984; Ferris, 1994; Jin, 2000; Normant, 2002; Reynolds, 2001; Witte & Faigley, 1981) argued that there is a close relationship between appropriate use of cohesion and writing proficiency levels, other studies, such as Scarcella (1984) and Castro (2004), found contradictory results.

In the present study, the researcher is such a veteran practitioner who taught over the different stages of education right from the secondary schools to university level suggests that cohesion is greatly attainable should the writer of a text appropriately uses a set of appropriately chosen form of cohesive devices that the text requires. This opinion seems to be in keeping with the notion stated by Salkie (1995) that cohesive devices play the role of the glue that holds different parts of a text together. Increasing the cohesion of a text facilitates and improves text comprehension for many readers (Gersbacher, Varner, & Faust, 1990). This connectedness of ideas in the text will definitely create a cohesive whole text which facilitates the reader's comprehension, particularly low knowledge readers (McNamara, Kintsch, Butler-Songer, & Kintsch, 1996).

Whoever sets out to explore the question of cohesion is likely to come against a number of nuisances. One such hurdle will be the one that arises from the neighboring concept of coherence. It is generally agreed in the literature that while cohesion is primarily related to structural linguistics, coherence has been studied with the fields of linguistics, discourse psychology, and cognition science (Sanders & Maat, 2006), which all focus on issues beyond the structures of a text. Malmkjaer (2001) noted that "a coherent extended text is the result of interaction between the reader's world and the text, with the reader making plausible interpretations" (p. 549). Thus, a reader or writer constantly endeavors to make sense of the text depending on the shared background knowledge beyond the text.

Despite the fact that some researchers consider cohesion and coherence to be replicas or similar in every respect (Fitzgerald & Spiegel, 1986, 1990; McCulley, 1985), there are those that still others disagree over any kind of resemblance between the two notions (Bamberg, 1984; Tierney & Mosenthal, 1983; Witte & Faigley, 1981). This notion of distinctness between cohesion and coherence is emphasized by Winterowd (1985), who stated that cohesion in a text can be accomplished without coherence and vice versa, depending greatly on the reader of the text. This notion was supported by Oller and Jonz (1994), who stated that the use of many cohesive devices does not necessarily create a cohesive and comprehensible text. To prove this, Enkvist (1990) provided the example, "my car is black. Black English was a controversial subject most people have retired. To retire means 'to put new tires on a vehicle.' Some vehicles such as hovercraft have no wheels. Wheels go round" (p. 12). Though cohesive devices, such as lexical cohesion and repetition, are used, the text lacks coherent meaning. On the contrary, a text with no cohesive devices may be considered coherent as in the example presented by Koshik (1999), "Someone came my house. Says give me money. Husband take gun shoot. Go outside die. Call police. Emergency 911. Policeman come. Take black man go hospital die" (p. 11).

Experiment

Students were asked to write six short paragraphs on the topic "Censorship is necessary in modern society". The role of the tutor is to read every single text to detect the use of cohesive devices:

NAJLA MUSTAFA FAGEER HASSAN

Students from the experiment group have managed to come up with varied uses and applications of different types of cohesion devices, whereas those of the control group have produced greatly poor ones. **Conclusion**

In this study, Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework was adopted to analyze college students' use of cohesive devices. The data of the study was qualitatively analyzed through identifying the numbers and types of cohesive devices used by the two groups Control group: as opposed to experimental.   (natives and nonnatives) and by evaluating the overall quality of essays written by those two groups. According to the discussion of results presented hereinabove, there is a vast difference between the control and experimental members of the two groups. The experimental showed better results , due to excessive training.

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