

Discourse Analysis of Cohesive Devices in Saudi Student's Writing

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze a piece of writing written by Saudi student in public schools which is problematic in terms of cohesion. The analysis is based upon the work of Halliday and Hasan (1976) and others such as Hoey (1991). The cohesive devices are defined, described and a framework of analysis is developed to investigate the writing with attention to grammatical and lexical cohesion. The student's writing quality is then judged according to the problems showcased by lack of cohesion. Instructors' role is perceived in dealing with cohesion in students' writing.

Keywords

discourse analysis, cohesive devices, Halliday and Hasan (1976), writing quality, grammatical & lexical cohesion

1. Introduction

"A text does not consist of sentences, it is REALIZED by, or encoded in, sentences" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 2). This perspective of looking at texts has greatly influenced discourse analysis in general. Others like Hoey (1991) and McCarthy (1991) have explained that studying and applying these devices effectively would lead to cohesion and improvement of the writing's quality. This paper aims to analyze the essay of a high school Saudi student with the purpose of identifying the cohesive ties within the text and examining their role in affecting the quality of the student's written discourse. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework will be used as the model of this analysis. The analysis will focus on the difficulties in the student's essay. I hope this will demonstrate the importance of using a cohesive-oriented approach in teaching writing to Saudi students rather than the sole reliance on grammatical structures and teaching vocabulary separately. The following section will examine the concept of cohesion in details.

2. Cohesive Ties

The organization of the texture is based on the relationships amongst items in the text. These items, whether semantic or grammatical, are what Holliday and Hasan (1976) called cohesive ties. That is, the concept of ties enables the process of text analysis to spot and examine the cohesive components of its texture. These ties connect the meaning of items within the text to each other, to the context and the world outside the text. The interpretation of these ties and their relationship with each other create a semantic relationship which is the basis of cohesion.

There are five classes of cohesive devices, which are: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The following section will briefly introduce each device.

2.1 References

References are used refer to something else for their interpretation. Occurring when the reader has to retrieve the identity of what is being mentioned from either within or outside the text. They were categorized in three types: personal, demonstratives and comparatives. Each category will be explained briefly below followed by examples.

Personal references include possessive adjectives, personal and possessive pronouns. For example, the young athletes trained all day. *They* were tired. The item *they* refers to the *young athletes*. Demonstrative references convey locations, e.g., the coach took the young athletes to a restaurant, and they celebrated *there*. Whereas comparative references refer to identity, e.g. I saw two dogs in the street. Then *another* joined and they started barking. The item *another* refers to the *dogs*.

Holliday and Hassan (1976) divided references into two patterns: situational and textual references. The former is labeled exophoric, which “looks outside the text to the situation in which the text occurs for the identity of the item being referred to” (Paltridge, 2012, p. 116). For example, take a look at *this*. The item *this* refers to something both the speaker and the listener can see and understand, but has no meaning outside the context. On the contrary, textual references, known as endophora, refer to something within the text. They are classified into anaphoric references (preceding the text) and cataphoric references (following the text). For example, the book talked about punctuation. *It* was published in 1990. *It* refers to the *book* which is an item mentioned earlier within the text. Another example: Do you believe *this*? I lost my phone. *This* refers to something that would yet to follow which is losing the phone.

2.2 Substitution and Ellipsis

Substitution is when the word/phrase is substituted for another. Substitution can be nominal (same, one, and ones), verbal (do), and a clausal (not, so). An example of nominal substitution is: which cupcake do you like? I'd like the chocolate *one*, please. *One* replaces the noun *cupcake*. Verbal substitution is such as, Jane plays tennis. All her family *does*. The item *does* substitutes the verb *plays*. A clausal example is: Has everyone eaten already? I hope *not*. The single item *not* replaces the entire clause (*everybody has eaten already*).

Another device is ellipsis means omission of elements with the assumption that they will be understood

by the reader or listener. They can be recovered by referring to a preceding item in the text. Ellipsis is generally an anaphoric relation but occasionally can be exophoric. Similarly, to substitution, the omitted item can be a noun, verb or a clause. For example: Where are you going? To school. The full answer would be: *I'm going to school*. However, it was omitted from the response without disturbing the cohesion of the text. Unlike references which can reach a long way back to refer to an item, substitution and ellipsis can be limited to the immediate preceding clause.

2.3 Conjunction

Conjunctions show the relation between clauses and connect their ideas together. Hoey (1991) has noted that conjunctions contribute to the semantic organization of text thus standing on their own as a category covering the usage of adjunct-like elements in the sentences. Furthermore, Eggins (2004) explained: "They express the logical meanings of elaboration, extension and enhancement" (p. 162). Items like however, moreover, firstly, etc., are examples of conjunctions. Bloor and Bloor (2004) grouped them into four classes: additive, adversative, causal and temporal. For example: I was preparing for the party since morning *and* cooking a lot of food (Additive). *However*, I was not exhausted (Adversative). *So* by the end of the day, everything was ready (Causal). *Then*, guests started to arrive (Temporal).

2.4 Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion can be defined as achieving cohesive effect through vocabulary selection. Hoey (1991) deemed lexical cohesion as the most important form of cohesive ties and argued against Halliday and Hasan's coverage of this aspect of cohesion in their work claiming that it was not as in depth as their grammatical cohesion analysis. The main kinds of lexical cohesion are repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy and collocation.

Repetition (reiteration) is simply repeating a lexical item. If a certain item is repeated throughout the text, the reader will recognize a chain of information connected to that item. Other lexical cohesive ties are synonymy which refers to words similar in meaning as "*intelligent*" and "*smart*", antonymy describes contrastive and opposite words such as "*men*" and "*women*". Hyponymy and meronymy, termed super-ordination and composition by Halliday and Hasan (1976), convey special relations between words. Words such as "*scarlet*" and "*crimson*" are hyponym of the colour "*red*". Metonymy happens when words have "a whole to part" relationship with each other as the relationship between "*the white house*" and the "*president of USA*". As of collocation, the term describes associations between vocabulary items that tend to co-occur, e.g., the combination of adjectives and nouns in "*regular exercise*", or noun and noun combination in "*round of applause*", etc. Collocations are part of the textual general knowledge and are not bound to a single text.

The Hallidayan model was adopted by many researchers investigating cohesive ties in various kinds of discourse. Studies were particularly prolific in the field of examining EFL learners' production in an attempt to provide critical analysis and recommendation. For instance, the Iranian study by Samian and Dastjerdi (2011) on students' essays resulted in important implications for EFL learners and teachers.

3. Method

The following section will investigate the cohesive ties found in a Saudi student's essay taken from a high school English class by using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework. The grammatical and lexical ties will be examined thoroughly. After that, the results will provide pedagogical implications that can be used to examine and criticize Saudi high school English writing classes.

3.1 Text Background and Framework

This section will analyze a student's essay with reference to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work. Copies of the essay, titled "friendship", are provided in appendixes with line numbers. The written text belongs to a Saudi student who graduated from high school. Normally Saudi students spend six years studying English as a foreign language starting from middle school to high school. However, the educational system in Saudi Arabia places emphasis on English writing in the last three years of high school. Teaching writing is approached by relying on grammatical structure and the implementation of the textbook's vocabulary. The student, whose essay is analyzed here, is considered an average achiever by her teachers as her grades indicated throughout the three years of high school. The student was asked to write about the importance of friendship. I am going to use Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework to identify and count the number of cohesive devices in the student's text. Then, I will analyze and evaluate her writing's quality in terms of cohesion.

3.2 Analysis of Text's Grammatical Cohesion

3.2.1 References

Table 1 below shows that the student used reference devices sixty-seven times in total. Among the three types of references, personal references were used the most with fifty-one incidences, dominating 76% of the total usage of references in the text, followed by demonstrative references with four incidences. There were only two incidences of comparative references. However, it should be noted that the article *the* was used ten times.

Further analysis of the personal references used in the text shows that the item *you* was used the most occurring fourteen times within this short text, meaning that 27% of the student's usage of personal references is allocated to the reference "*you*". Such excessive usage of this reference could indicate that the student wanted to make her essay personal and subjective, which is understandable in topics such as friendship. Nevertheless, this can be a strong indicator of the student's limited vocabulary. Overusing a single reference in such a short essay affects the essay's cohesion negatively, in line 6, *you* occurred twice "They are ready to listen to *you* any time *you* need them". In addition, *you* and *we* were used as a generalized exophoric reference because the writer dealt with the topic "friendship" as a general experience shared between her and the readers. On the contrary, other personal references were used moderately, e.g., the anaphoric reference "*it*" in lines 19-20, which was used to refer to the word *friendship*.

Demonstrative references were used reasonably in the text. An example of a coherent incidence occurred in line 10 where the item *that* referred to one of "his friends". As of the article *the*, it was

sometimes used excessively. For example, in line 4, “*The* good friends take you to *the* good way”. Contrastive references were used twice coherently, e.g., line 8. More examples are shown in appendix 1.

Table 1. References

Device	Personal	Demonstrative	The article (<i>the</i>)	Comparatives	Total
Number	51	4	10	2	67
Percentage	76%	5%	14%	3%	100%

3.2.2 Substitution and Ellipsis

Examples of substitution and ellipsis in the text were limited which is acceptable considering that substitution and ellipsis occur more in spoken discourse. There was only one incidence of nominal ellipsis, which can be seen line 3, “There are two kinds of friends: *good* and *bad*”. Instead of writing “good friends, bad friends” the writer omitted the item “friends” to avoid redundancy and unnecessary repetition which is a coherent usage of ellipsis. On the other hand, substitution occurred three times: in line 9, the item “one of them” was used to substitute the word *friend* again. Similar situations can be found in lines 16 and 21 with the items “none of them” and “no one”. The later incidence was not limited to substitute the item friend, but can be expanded to include the meaning of “no person or human”.

3.2.3 Conjunction

As demonstrated by Table 2 below, there were twenty-eight incidences of conjunction in this text; twenty-three of them belong to additive conjunctions, followed by three for adversatives and finally only one incidence for each of the causal and temporal conjunctions. Additive conjunctions appeared to be the writer’s favorite, overtaking 82% of the entire incidences of conjunctions with the total number of sixteen occurrences. An effective example of using *and* cohesively to connect two ideas together can be seen in line 7. The item *for example* was used twice in the text such as in line 8. Similarly, the writer’s usage of adversatives was not versatile, that is, it only consists of using *but* including in the beginning of a new paragraph which is a position more suitable for another conjunction such as *however*. This excerpt from line 12 shows the opening sentence of the third paragraph: “*But* the bad friends take you to the darkness”. On the contrary, the writer displayed an efficient usage of *but* connecting two different ideas within the sentence in line 2: “We don’t choose family *but* we choose friends”. In terms of temporal devices, the writer used one item coherently and only when needed as seen in line 9, “*after that* he asked many of his friends”. More examples are shown in Appendix.

Overall, the student’s implementation of conjunctions devices showed a lack of variety and was very limited. This could be due to being comfortable with using the conjunctions devices taught in earlier stages of learning or due to lack of encouragement to practice using a variety of conjunction devices in essay writing.

Table 2. Conjunction

Device	Additive	Adversative	Casual	Temporal	Total
Number	23	3	1	1	28
Percentage	82%	10%	3%	3%	100%

3.3. Analysis of Text's Lexical Cohesion

The item *friend/s* was repeated seventeen times including the usage of the word *friendship*. *Good* was repeated five times while *help* six times, including unnecessarily repetition, which is twice within the same sentence, in lines 5-6: "Give you care and counseling, *helpful*, stand by your side in difficult moments, support and *help* you". As a result, affecting the essay negatively, causing redundancy and lowering the essay's quality. The writer's tendency to repeat certain items could be due to them being directly related the essay's topic, although it can be avoided by employing more effective synonyms instead.

The lexical device Synonymy was used to list the characteristics of friends. The writer provided sets of synonyms and near synonyms in her essay which are "*support, help*", "*care, counseling*", "*deception, lying and fraud*" which can be seen as synonyms or near synonyms within the context of the topic. Relatively, antonym occurred twice within the text, e.g., "*good, bad*", and, "*Happy, sad*". Finally, hyponymy is shown here: "*family, friends and people*", meaning that both *family* and *friends* share certain relationship of belonging to the same category *people*.

The analyzed data indicates that the writer restored to repeating and using simple lexical items to convey her ideas. This could be due to the limited knowledge of lexical items to substitute the simpler ones in her text. Also, she tends to use synonymy only to list characteristics, whereas she could be encouraged to use them to avoid redundancy. There was no incidence of collocation in this text, which does not affect it negatively or positively.

4. Result and Recommendations

This paper has taken cohesive devices as presented by Halliday and Hasan (1967) and has attempted to analyze a student's essay accordingly to explore the effect of cohesion devices on the essay's quality. It is apparent that overusing certain cohesive devices and misusing some others can affect the writing's quality negatively and produce a problematic essay. Such problems could be due to excessive rely on simple forms taught in earlier stages and lack of awareness on the effect of cohesive ties on the writing's cohesion. In Saudi high schools, students are instructed to express their thoughts through previously given grammatical structures and a fixed set of cohesive ties presented to them without much practice. The analyzed essay is a sample of this type of instruction. While this study is limited due to the limited data used it, it still brings into the service the type of quality a Saudi high school student is producing.

I recommend language teachers to improve students' lexical knowledge by encouraging them to use new vocabulary items meaningfully in their written discourse. Students should be aware that the number of cohesive items is not enough to create or display cohesion in essay writing, they have to be used coherently with other items in the text. Furthermore, I encourage teachers to follow McCarthy's (1991) advice and introduce the concept of cohesive devices to their students through different exercises in their English classes and adopt a more cohesive-oriented approach to teaching writing.

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Appendix 1

Data Sample (The student's text has grammatical and lexical mistakes and is presented without modification).

Friendship is a big relationship we make with people we choose in our life. It is not like our relationship with the family. We do not choose family but we choose friends. There are two kinds of friends: good and bad.

The good friends take you to the good way, and they have many features like: always pray for you, give you care and counseling, helpful, stand by your side in difficult moments, support and help you. They are ready to listen to you at any time you need them. The good friends keep your secrets and do not share them with other people. For example, there is a rich man who got into financial crisis, after that he asked many of his friends. One of them helped him and stood beside him to return as he was rich. That friend is similar to the proverb: a Friend in need is a friend indeed.

But the bad friends take you to the darkness, and they have many features like: deception, lying, fraud, gossiping, being rude and careless. Also, they influence you to think and behave wrongly. Bad friends

always make you fall in problems and leave you without help. For example: there is a man who lost all his possessions and he tried to seek help from his friends, but none of them has helped him and they have told him they do not know him at all.

We must choose the good people to be our friends and be part of our life. Friendship is really not just a word that we say and write. It take you to another world, it make you happy if you was sad and lonely. It is priceless not measured by any measure, and no one in the world can live without friends to share life. Friendship is the best gift you give yourself. So choose right.