

Cohesion and Coherence in the Writing of Libyan EFL Learners

Majida Omar Abida^{1*}, Fatima Khalifa Mohommed²

^{1,2} English Language Department, Gharyan Language Center, University of Gharyan, Libya

التماسك والترابط في كتابة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا

ماجدة عمر عبيدة^{1*}، فاطمة خليفة محمد²
^{2,1} قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، مركز غريان للغات، جامعة غريان، ليبيا

*Corresponding author: majdaahmed736@gmail.com

Received: January 08, 2024

Accepted: March 02, 2025

Published: March 13, 2025

Abstract

Cohesive devices are fundamental to the linguistic system and are central to constructing readable texts. Research indicates that students often struggle to understand how cohesive ties function to achieve a communicative purpose and improve comprehension. This study employs a

qualitative design to analyze the descriptive texts of students at the Gharian language center. Grounded in Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theoretical framework, the research addresses the observed misunderstanding and lack of awareness of cohesion among learners, which frequently results in the inappropriate use of cohesive devices in their assignments.

Consequently, the study examines the semantic relationships between ideas within the students' texts. The findings provide feedback for instructors, recommending that cohesion and coherence be taught intensively throughout the academic year. The research emphasizes the need to dedicate more instructional time to sub-skills, such as the effective use of cohesive ties, to create semantically coherent written pieces. This approach necessitates a direct focus on explicit writing instruction. For example, conjunctions—as a key cohesive device—should be taught explicitly with sufficient practice to ensure students can master their application in writing assignments.

Keywords: cohesion, coherence, cohesive ties, conjunction, discourse.

المخلص

تُعد أدوات الربط عناصر أساسية في النظام اللغوي، وهي من أهم مكونات النصوص المقروءة. وتشير الأبحاث إلى أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبة في فهم كيفية عمل الروابط النصية معًا لتحقيق الغرض التواصلية وزيادة مستوى الفهم. تستخدم الدراسة منهجًا نوعيًا لتحليل النصوص الوصفية التي كتبها طلاب في مركز غريان للغات. وتستند الدراسة إلى الإطار النظري لهاليداي وحسن (1976). وقد تم اختيار هذا المنهج بسبب ملاحظة وجود سوء فهم ونقص في الوعي بالترابط النصي لدى المتعلمين، مما يؤدي غالبًا إلى الاستخدام غير المناسب لأدوات الربط في واجباتهم. ونتيجة لذلك، تتناول الدراسة العلاقات الدلالية بين الأفكار داخل نصوص الطلاب. وتقدم هذه الأبحاث توصيات للمدرسين، مشددة على ضرورة تدريس الترابط والاتساق بشكل مكثف على مدار العام الدراسي. كما تؤكد على الحاجة لتخصيص وقت تعليمي أكبر للمهارات الفرعية، مثل الاستخدام الفعال للروابط النصية لإنشاء نصوص متماسكة دلاليًا. وهذا يتطلب التركيز المباشر على تعليم الكتابة بشكل صريح، فمثلاً، يجب تدريس أدوات الربط بشكل صريح مع توفير تدريب كافٍ لضمان إتقان الطلاب لتطبيقها في الواجبات الكتابية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترابط، الاتساق، الروابط النصية، أدوات الربط، الخطاب.

1- Introduction

Writing is a complex skill for learners because it requires the integration of various elements, including word choice, sentence variation, punctuation, and linguistic tools for **cohesion** and **coherence**. Mastering these skills correctly demands a high level of proficiency. Cohesive ties are considered the fundamental building blocks for any successful piece of writing. Cohesion, in particular, indicates continuity within and between different parts of a discourse.

For learners, cohesion and coherence pose a significant challenge, as they often lack awareness of the semantic relationships between clauses and sentences. This difficulty is frequently attributed to insufficient training and limited time dedicated to practicing writing and constructing coherent texts. A review of the literature, particularly Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory, highlights the importance of these concepts and their relationship to writing. The study will examine grammatical cohesive devices such as reference, ellipsis, and substitution.

Statement of the Problem

It is hypothesized that EFL learners at Gharian language centers struggle with text writing and have a weak grasp of lexical meaning. This study was conducted over the course of an academic year, with permission obtained from trainers, and data was collected at the end of the course.

Study Aims and Research Questions

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by EFL learners throughout their academic year and assess their familiarity with cohesion and coherence. It also seeks to explore potential solutions to help learners produce polished written pieces.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What are the primary challenges learners encounter when implementing writing aspects?
- Are students familiar with the aspects of cohesion and coherence?
- What solutions and recommendations can be explored to help learners produce readable and coherent texts?

Significance and Scope

The decision to conduct this study was based on the recognition that writing aspects present a major obstacle for students. The findings will lead to recommendations for both teachers and curriculum designers.

The study's data was collected using a **qualitative design** and involved analyzing descriptive texts written by six Libyan EFL learners from a language center at Gharian University. The proficiency level of the participants was determined by their primary instructors, who are responsible for their academic performance. The age and class size of the learners were also included in the study.

2- Literature review

Cohesive writing is the writing organization, which holds together well. It is easy to understand piece of writing, because it uses the writing aspects effectively to guide the reader.

Coherence is one of the factors which can affect the flow of text, and it makes the parts of text fit together. This can be achieved by applying 'semantic ties' in the form of cohesive devices, which blend textual elements into a unified whole (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Rahman, 2013). According to this definition, a text achieves coherence when transitional words and devices are used to link sentences, allowing each sentence to serve as a foundation for the next. This connection can be explicitly stated by the writer and should be recognizable to proficient readers.

Cohesion is a component of the linguistic system that forms a text. It links structurally unrelated elements through the dependency of one sentence on another. Without cohesion, the semantic system cannot be effectively activated (ibid, 1976).

Therefore, it is important for a good writer to understand the components of cohesion. (Jacobus, 1980) stated that sentence loses unity if it consists of more than one idea and a subordinate clause deal with a different idea.

2.1 Cohesion VS Coherence

Language and communication have received a considerable concern from researchers and teachers. They have analyzed the text from two perceptions related to each other; cohesion and coherence.

2.1.1 The term of cohesion

Cohesion is conveyed through both grammar and vocabulary. It refers to the application of linguistic devices to connect ideas and sentences. Cohesion is achieved through explicit devices that can be categorized as either lexical or grammatical.

Grammatical cohesion is transported about by grammatical items such as; use of reference words and pronouns substituting nouns or use of the definite article “the” for anaphoric reference, and discourse markers, which express the logical relationships existing between sentences and paragraphs.

Gutwinski (1976) defines cohesion as the linking of sentences and clauses within a text. The features that connect these sentences, such as anaphora, subordination, and coordination, are termed ‘cohesive’ or ‘textual connectivity’.

2.1.2 The term of coherence

Coherence relations fit into the overall pattern of language. Oshima and Hugue (2006) define coherence as the sequence in a piece of writing from one sentence to the next, or from one paragraph to another in a large essay, to be logically and understandably.

A primary method for learners to achieve the communicative purpose of a text is to develop an awareness of how various vocabulary items, grammatical cohesive ties, and ideas function collectively.

According to Ingles (2006), a text consists of building blocks to facilitate the reading and writing process, which are logically linked together with a number of additionally linguistic techniques existing for cohesion between the text parts.

2.2 Cohesive devices

The grammatical cohesive devices to be discussed are reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctions.

2.2.1. Referencing

Pronoun reference is one of the cohesive techniques that help reinforce the relationship between sentences. It is vital for a good writer to be able to use the equivalent pronoun instead of repeating the same noun. Pronouns are generally different in number and gender. Gehle and Roll (1981) mentioned that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number (singular or plural) and in gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter).

As defined by Halliday and Hasan (1976), reference can be either exophoric or anaphoric. Exophoric reference points to an item outside the text and is often used for generic or abstract concepts without explicit identification. In contrast, anaphoric reference occurs when an item refers back to a previously identified element in the text, primarily to avoid repetition.

- 1- John loves his mother. (The possessive pronoun 'his' can refer back to John (anaphoric use))
- 2- He who hesitates is lost. *He* refers to the forward referent (who hesitates) Halliday and Hassan (1976, p. 37).
- 3- "See page 8". This means go back and check page 8 (Cataphoric references).
- 4-

2.2.2. Substitution

Substitution, a form of grammatical cohesion, operates within the textual framework. Halliday and Hassan (1976) define substitution as the replacement of a specific lexical item with a more general one to prevent repetition. For instance, in the exchange, A: "Which chocolate would you like?" B: "I would like the red one," the word "one" serves as a substitute for "chocolate." This linguistic device can be categorized into three types: nominal, verbal, and clausal substitution.

2.2.2.1. Nominal substitution

The main lexical items which replace the head of the nominal group are '*one, ones or the same*'.

- 4- It is believed that Al-kindī wrote over 270 books on a wide range of subjects, including theoretical works and more practical ones (Phillips et al. 2002, p. 90).

2.2.2.2. Verbal substitution

Verbal substitution involves substituting the verbal element of the preceding sentence with the verbal substitute (*do*) or one of its morphological elements: (*do, did, doing* and *done*).

- 5- The words did not come the same as they used to do. (Halliday and Hassan, p. 112) The verb '*do*' substitutes for the verb '*come*'.

2.2.2.3. Clausal substitution

Clausal substitution involves the replacement of an entire clause with the substitutes 'so' (for positive polarity) or 'not' (for negative polarity).

- 6- Is this mango ripe? -It seems *so*. (Ibid, p.134)

2.2.3. Ellipsis

Ellipsis involves the omission of an item or items that can be recovered from the preceding sentence or clause. This ellipsis is cohesive because a sentence is interpretable only through making reference to the preceding sentence. For example,

- 7- A- Where are you going? B- To city. The full form of B's reply would be: "*I am going to city*".

2.2.4. Conjunctions

A conjunction is a connector device; a word that connects (conjoins) parts of a sentence. (Eggins, 1994) stated that a conjunction refers to how a writer builds and expresses the logical relationships between the parts of a text.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) categorize conjunctive items into four distinct classes: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. The specific meaning of a conjunction is actualized through its interaction with other components within the discourse.

Feng (2010), called conjunctives as discourse markers (DMs); according to him are summarized as follows:

1. Additive: *and, or, also, in addition, furthermore, besides, similarly, likewise, by contrast, for instance.*
2. Adversative: *but, yet, however, instead, on the other hand, nevertheless, at any rate, as a matter of fact.*
3. Causal: *so, consequently, it follows, for, because, under the circumstances, for this reason.*
4. Continuatives: *now, of course, well, anyway, surely, after all; ... etc.*

Research methodology will investigate the performance of EFL learners on writing descriptive texts, which is the main part in any research paper to get the data is needed for the work.

3. Methodology

This study investigates the challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in written production, with a particular focus on lexical deficiencies that impair textual meaning.

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

A qualitative research design was employed for this study. The research was conducted at a language center in Gharian, the site where the phenomena under investigation were observed. The participants comprised six learners at a lower-elementary proficiency level, who had completed their course of study. Participants were selected based on proficiency recommendations from their class teachers and subsequently categorized into high, middle, and low achievers based on an initial assessment of their writing.

The primary data consisted of six descriptive texts, wherein each participant was tasked with describing a classmate. The evaluation of these texts centered on cohesion and coherence, guided by the theoretical framework established in the literature review. Data collection was focused on a single class, selected due to its high volume of written submissions throughout the academic year, ensuring a rich dataset for analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in multiple stages. Initially, two descriptive texts from each achievement level (high, middle, and low) were selected for in-depth analysis. In the first stage, sentences were segmented into clauses to facilitate a granular examination. The texts were treated as first drafts to identify grammatical errors, with a specific focus on the use of transitional devices such as conjunctions and pronouns. All identified grammatical errors were subsequently corrected.

In the second stage, the analysis shifted to orthography (spelling) and the logical progression of ideas within the texts, as correct spelling is fundamental to effective communication. Finally, a comprehensive examination of the cohesive devices employed by the learners was performed to complete the analysis.

3.3 Study participants

The researcher chose English center in Gharian University, which is specified in teaching foreign languages (L2), and the learners' numbers who participated in this study totally were 6; the gender of the participants were four of them females and two were male students. Their ages range from 34 to 40 years old.

The choice of proficiency was different. The first step of the program: learners were asked as volunteers to participate in this study, and then confirming as far as possible. They were given an idea about the study by setting out the goals of the research. The participants were asked to write about the chosen topic to use the data collected later for the research purposes.



Figure 1 shows the gender of study participants.

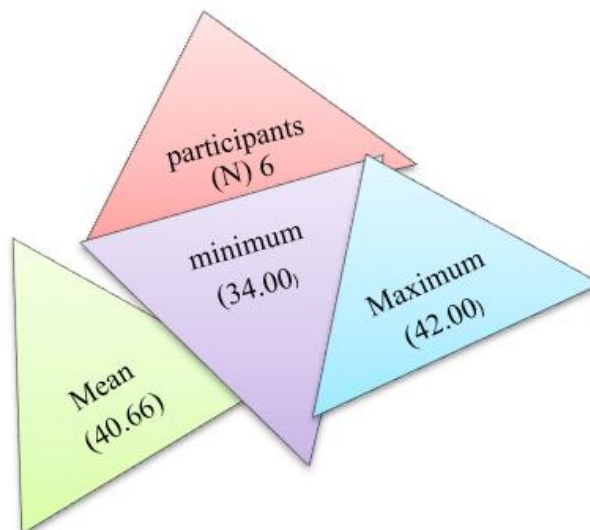


Figure 2 Shows the average age of the study participants.
The average is 40.66 years.

4. Findings and Discussion

The collected qualitative data were analyzed to address the research questions. This involved classifying and examining the descriptive texts produced by the participants.

The classification was done as follows: high achievers used cohesive devices correctly, middle achievers used them rarely and lower achievers avoid using them altogether. As has shown in figure (3).

In this stage, the sentences were divided into clauses and has been analyzed according to this classification; the texts that represent high achievers used more cohesive devices, such as, temporal additive, causal conditional, comparative, and additive are found in the texts, the spelling mistakes was a few and also the progression of the text were acceptable to somehow. Then, middle achievers hardly ever used them, but most of them used incorrectly, their sentences were redundant, the progression of ideas was insupportable. Whereas, low achievers' texts were completely unacceptable. There were not any aspects of writing had appeared in the text.

Jalilifar (2008) emphasizes the necessity of instructing students on various linguistic devices that contribute to textual cohesion. These include referential markers (e.g., pronoun and article reference, ellipsis), lexical sets, lexical repetition, and conjunctions, all of which are essential for constructing coherent texts.

The next figure represents the achievement of the learner's texts.

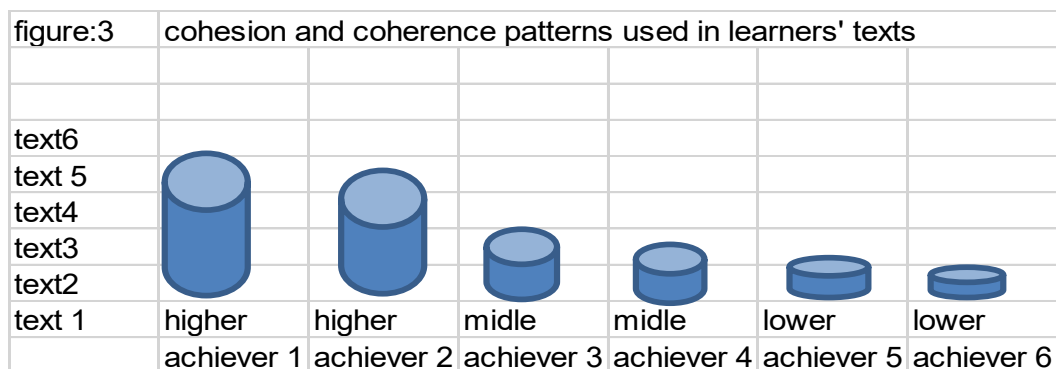


Figure 3 shows the rank of learners' achievements.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of cohesion and coherence in the writing of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at the Gharian language center. The findings show that these learners face a significant challenge in effectively applying cohesive devices to create meaningful texts. This aligns with previous research, such as that by Lee (2002), who highlights that coherence is a persistent difficulty for ESL students, partly because of potential conceptual differences from L1 writing conventions.

By focusing specifically on cohesive texts, the study was able to analyze the materials in greater detail and with more accuracy. This research offers a valuable opportunity to identify cohesive devices, understand their meaning, and learn how to use them as linguistic tools across all language skills, particularly in writing.

The challenges observed may be a result of several factors, including the curriculum design, instructional methods, and a potential shortage of well-trained teachers. The results reinforce the ongoing need for teachers to provide guidance in grammar, information organization, effective teaching strategies, and spelling. This is supported by Forney (2001), who noted that spelling is a crucial matter and that it would be beneficial for learners to correctly spell the most common words. These findings are consistent with previous studies on the topic.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study provides recommendations for both teachers and trainers.

First, teachers should dedicate more time and attention to the subject of writing, particularly focusing on cohesion and coherence, as these are main elements of any written piece. This can be achieved by providing more practical topics and explicit examples in the classroom. Teachers act as facilitators in the learning process, and their role is crucial in this regard.

Second, the study suggests that the problems observed may stem from a lack of trained teachers. Therefore, this research serves as a contribution to course trainers, encouraging them to design programs that will help teachers perform more effectively in the classroom.

References

1. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.
2. Crossley, S. A., Kyle, K., & McNamara, D. S. (2016). The development and use of cohesive devices in L2 writing and their relations to judgments of essay quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 32, 1-16.
3. Eggins, S. (2004). *Introduction to systemic functional linguistics*. A&c Black.
4. Forney, M. (2001). *Razzle Dazzle Writing: Achieving Excellence Through 50 Writing Target Skills*. Maupin House Publishing, Inc.
5. Gutwinski, W. (1976). Cohesion in literary texts: a study of some grammatical and lexical features of English discourse (Vol. 204). The Hague: Mouton & Co.
6. Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*, Routledge.
7. Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (2014). *Cohesion in english*. Routledge.
8. Ingels, M. (2006). *Legal English communication skills*. Acco.
9. Jalilifar, A. (2008). Discourse Markers in Composition Writings: The Case of Iranian Learners of English as a Foreign Language. *English Language Teaching*, 1(2), 114-122.
10. Lee, I. (2002). Teaching coherence to ESL students: A classroom inquiry. *Journal of second language writing*, 11(2), 135-159.
11. Li, F. E. N. G. (2010). Discourse markers in English writing. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 3, 299-305.
12. Oshima, A., & Hogue, A. (2006). *Writing academic english*. Pearson.

13. Phillips, E. (2002). English for Libya: Secondary 3: English specialization: language and culture: Teacher's book. *Reading: Garnet*.
14. Abdul Rahman, Z. A. A. (2013). The use of cohesive devices in descriptive writing by Omani student-teachers. *Sage Open*, 3(4), 2158244013506715.
15. Wang, Y., & Guo, M. (2014). A short analysis of discourse coherence. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5(2), 460.
16. Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford publications.