

Cohesive devices in students' written products: a challenge facing EFL students of Biskra University

Information	1 st author	2 nd author	3 rd author
Full name	HANANE SAIHI	//	//
Degree	PhD	//	//
Affiliation Lab	Applications d'intelligence artificielle dans le traitement linguistique et l'analyse du discours	//	//
Affiliation University	Mohamed Khider University- Biskra	//	//
Country	Algeria	//	//
E-mail	h.saihi@univ-biskra.dz	//	//
Corresponding author's Full name and E-mail		Hanane Saihi h.saihi@univ-biskra.dz	
Abstract in English			
Abstract :	In the Algerian University, academic writing is the most important skill to be taught, for it is used to assess and evaluate English language users' productive skills. Therefore, the present paper investigates the use of cohesive devices in the paragraphs written by the EFL students of Biskra University. It further aims to investigate the main cohesive devices used among these students and identify their challenges in focusing on certain types of devices. To conduct this research, we selected a convenient sample of 50 students who wrote about different topics; this resulted in a corpus of 50 paragraphs that were used to identify the cohesive devices used by these students. The analysis of the paragraphs indicated that the EFL students used cohesive devices in their paragraphs, but they were used in a fluctuating manner to some extent. Precisely, they focused much more on grammatical devices and used fewer lexical devices. Thus, this issue is one of the main factors that hinder consistency,		

	unity, and coherence across the students' academic papers. The results reveal that many students struggle with the appropriate use of cohesive devices, leading to fragmented and poorly structured texts. Common issues include overuse, underuse, or misuse of conjunctions, references, and lexical chains. These challenges highlighted the need for targeted pedagogical interventions, such as explicit instruction on cohesive strategies and practices. The present study underscores the significance of cohesive devices in fostering students' writing proficiency and offers recommendations for enhancing their academic writing skills in EFL contexts.
Keywords :	academic writing, cohesive devices, paragraphs, Biskra University, grammatical devices, lexical devices

1. Introduction

Developing writing skills is a complex task for both EFL teachers and their students. Among the so many challenges that face EFL writing classes is arranging their ideas logically and precisely using connectors or the so-called cohesive devices. These latter are indicators to prove students' writing skill mastery. However, this presents a challenge EFL Students sometimes misuse, neglect, or ignore the importance of achieving their writing assignment, which can be a criterion for their grading. The present study sought to detect the common challenges and difficulties that lead students to write less cohesive paragraphs where they misuse or do not use cohesive devices in their writing. We opt to raise their awareness of the importance of using cohesive devices to gain coherence, cohesion, logical order, and organization of content in the academic writing genre. We further sought to classify the challenges according to the types of cohesive devices to uncover the challenge to writer teachers to spot its importance in their writing course design. This issue raised the following questions:

- What types of cohesive devices are used by the EFL students of Biskra University?
- Are they aware of their importance in consolidating the whole written product?
- What is the position of cohesive devices in the academic writing course design?

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of writing

Language teaching scholars esteem that writing is one of the most important communicative skills that ensure the success or failure of the student profile in Language teaching curriculum. This skill involves various sub-skills that enclose the production of organized and coherent texts. Byrne (1988) states that when writing, we utilize visual symbols by combining letters that correspond to the sounds we make when talking; these letters are then joined together to create words, and words ultimately develop sentences. In other words, Writing involves using visual symbols on a surface to communicate and is a form of graphic representation.

Writing is not limited to the block of symbols and letters or even words. It further addresses a specific audience for a specific purpose. It occurs within a specific environment and achieves a goal, specific use, and is tailored to suit its target audience (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997, 8). This skill is not an effortless task to express ideas by just combining sentences and paragraphs; it is then a knotted operation that provokes all the students' writing prerequisites to showcase the student's productive skills. Thus, Writing is seen as an extension of grammar, a way to strengthen language structures through regular practice. It is also the process of training and evaluating students' skills in creating correctly structured sentences (Hyland, 2003). In other words, writing is the process of assembling a range of sub-skills to contribute to an effective and comprehensive written production.

2.2. Organization of written productions

Producing a piece of academic writing has a special organization of content. Organization of student's academic writing is an effective method for structuring a paragraph is to first present the key supporting points in the topic sentence, and then elaborate on each point in the following sentences. Moreover, the process of organizing writing can occur in a thematic or rhematic manner. Paragraphs are then structured with a main idea at the beginning and supporting details that further explain the main idea. This is known as thematic organization (Widdowson, 1978). The supporting and developing sentences extend the text with more examples and arguments to develop the main idea.

2.3. Cohesion and coherence

Cohesion and coherence are essential sub-skills mastered by the student writer. They can be categorized as the key characteristics of effective written pieces that can be a parameter of a logically connected piece of writing. Supposedly, cohesion is considered as the feeling of observing sentences fitting perfectly together, Cohesive devices are tools that help establish connections between different parts of a text, such as lexical, grammatical, and other

relationships, making it easier for readers to follow along (Baker, 1994). Yet coherence is regarded as the perception of understanding how all the sentences in a written work come together. Harmer (2004) pointed out that writers often achieve coherence by organising information.

2.3.1. Cohesive devices

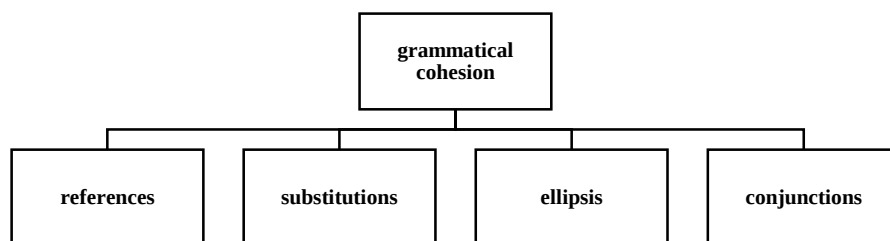
Cohesive devices are essential mechanisms for writing effectively; they further stick the text together in a harmonic flow of ideas. When writing for Communication, it is important to move from manipulating individual sentences to creating paragraphs and multi-paragraph compositions. As individuals connect two or more sentences in their writing, they must utilize cohesive devices to ensure a smooth flow (Abdurrahman, 2013). Furthermore, Reid (1992) defined cohesive devices being Words and phrases that serve as cues to the reader, connecting what is being said with previous or upcoming information. Hedge (2005) regarded them as Linkers are used to connect different parts of text in a way that shows the relationship between ideas and conveys the writer's intentions.

2.3.2. Types of cohesive devices

Halliday and Hassan (1976) categorized cohesive devices as grammatical and lexical. Grammatical cohesive devices ensure the form of the text moves from one sentence to another in the same paragraph or between paragraphs.

2.3.2.1. Grammatical cohesion

Grammatical cohesive devices are clear connectors between sentences in academic text. Carter et al. (2005) considered them the grammatical features interlacing sentence boundaries. Moreover, Halliday and Hassan (1976) classified grammatical cohesive devices into several categories: references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions.



Note. Types of grammatical cohesive devices

The above figure sums up the four main types of grammatical cohesive devices asserted by Halliday and Hassan (1976), Akindele (2011), Eggins (1994), and many others who emphasized

the importance of cohesive devices in ensuring the unity and organization of the academic paper.

Reference devices. They are the cohesive devices used to avoid repetition in the text. Akindele (2011) stated that this type is used mainly to ensure and keep unity across the text, and it further maintains the absence of unnecessary repetitions. Yet, these devices are further divided into two sub-types: the situational (exophora) and the textual (endophora). The exophoric devices refer to signals that point to no objects or ideas, but they can be used only in context (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). The endophoric reference devices refer to a person, an idea, or an object that can be subsequently mentioned across the text.

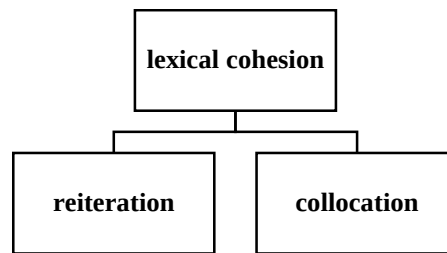
Substitution devices. Another grammatical device refers to an earlier stated person, object, place, or idea. They are used to substitute signals in the context. In other words, it is a word that is not identical in meaning, but it can perform the same structural function (Mather and Jaffe, 2002).

Ellipsis devices. They are devices that presuppose a word by omitting some parts of the text. Akindele (2011) stated that the concept of ellipsis is to skip parts of a sentence so that previous sentences can clarify their meaning. Harmer (2004) further defined ellipses as words deliberately eliminated when the meaning is clear without them.

Conjunction devices. They are the fourth subtype of grammatical devices that are regarded as formal connectors to combine sentences and keep the logical organization of the paragraph. They are connectors used by the writer to signal the types of relationships between sentences in the same text. In forms of words and phrases, conjunctive connectors represent semantic relations that express how clauses and sentences are related to previous clauses or sentences (Mather and Jaff, 2002).

2.3.2.2. Lexical cohesive devices

Lexical cohesive devices represent an important type that focuses on one topic. In other words, they function to link words or phrases in the text to indicate repetitions using synonyms, subordination, general words, or even co-occurrence of words from the same environment. Eggins (1994) reported that lexical devices are lexical items that show lexical relations. The text writer can either then use nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs or even use the sequences to keep consistency across the text.



Note. Types of lexical cohesive devices

Reiteration is repeating an earlier item using a synonym, subordinate or even general words. Yet, collocations occur with the words that are mainly related to their potential to co-occur in similar texts by the other writers. Eggins (1994) reported that lexical devices are lexical items that show lexical relations. The writer then is to use nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs to ensure the focus of the text. They can even use the sequences to keep consistency across the text.

3. Research Method

The research was corpus-based research that entails quantitative data obtained from the study of the student-written products using literature of cohesive devices as a measurement tool. Corpus-based research is then a method of research that uses a corpus to illustrate theories and classifications (Togrini-Bonerlli, 2001). According to McEnery and Hardie (2012), corpus-based research uses corpus data to validate, refuse or reform a certain theory.

3.1. Sample

To detect the use of cohesive devices in students' written products. I selected (N=50) students from second-year classes who studied writing in a separate course for two successive years. The students were selected in a non-probability convenience sampling technique. They participated in the research as they were officially students in writing class.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The researcher engaged the students in a writing assignment as part of their instruction. They were to write a text of two or more paragraphs that deals with various topics to give them a space to think freely about non-limited topics to get a rich and diversified cohesive device in different contexts. The collected texts were analysed according to the device categories that were already shown in the literature review section published by scholars such as Halliday and Hassan (1976), and Akindele (2011). I used tables to classify and interpret them.

4. Research results and interpretations

The classification of results was mainly based on the two types: grammatical and lexical cohesion.

4.1. Grammatical cohesion

Table 01 indicates the total number of grammatical devices used by the participants which is (N=967). These devices are divided according to their subtypes below:

Table 01 total use of grammatical cohesive devices)

References (N=594)		Substitution (N=20)		Ellipsis (N=11)		Conjunction (N=342)	
Sup-type	frequency	Sup-type	frequency	Sup-type	frequency	Sup-type	frequency
Personal	360	Nominal	11	Nominal	6	Additive	221
Comparative	33					Adversative	17
						Clausal	37
Demonstrative	201	Verbal	9	Clausal	5	Temporal	67

Note. The Author

The results show that the prominently used grammatical devices are reference devices. The student participants used personal reference-type devices (N=360). They used subject and object personal pronouns and possessives. This represents 37.22 % of the total number of grammatical cohesive devices. This indicates that these participants give more focus on avoiding repeating subjects and objects in the sentences. Meanwhile, demonstratives are of a total number of (N=201) which represents 20.85%. These devices type is classified as the second-used reference devices in their texts. Comparatives represent only 3.41% of the reference devices used, for it is based on the topic nature in this assignment.

The substitution and ellipsis devices represent less frequency. The participants did not use the same extent used for the reference devices. The nominal substitution is 2.06% of the total grammatical devices, yet the verbal devices are 0.93%. The participants may be unacquainted with it. Whereas, the ellipsis is approximately 1.13%. These results affirmed that the students are unaware of its sound importance in keeping coherence and cohesion across the whole text.

Regarding conjunctive cohesion, additive conjunction represents 22.84% of the total grammatical devices used in the students' texts. Most of the additives used are (*and, also, in addition to, such, for example, moreover, furthermore*). The focus on these additive conjunctions may be due to the ignorance of the rest of them. For the adversative conjunction,

1.75% of the total number is mainly (*however, but, although*). Concerning the causal conjunctions, it represents 3.82% of the total number which is limited to (*because, therefore, consequently, for the reason*). The temporal conjunction is 6.92%, for it reflects their use of (*first of all, second/secondly, third, finally, then, after, in conclusion, to conclude*). The frequency turns around a limited number of conjunctions.

4.2. Lexical cohesion

Table 02 Total use of lexical cohesive devices

Reiteration		Collocations
Repetition	15	19
Synonyms	6	
Antonyms	12	
Hyponymy	4	

Note. The Author

The reiteration cohesion represents (N=56) frequencies. The participants proved the prevailing use of grammatical devices compared to lexical ones. They use repetitions 26%, antonyms 21.42%, synonyms 10.71%, and hyponymy 7.41%. The participants repeated words and phrases; they used opposites like: (*day and night, low and high*). They also use synonyms in some positions, and they use expressions with specific semantic relations: (*house and home*).

The Collocation cohesion represents 33.92% of the total lexical devices. The participants used expressions from the same context such as: (*father, family, children, motherhood/ car, gas, drivers, and tyre*). This resulted from the requirements of the topic itself.

4.3.Type of errors in cohesive devices used by the participants

4.3.1. Type of errors in grammatical cohesive devices

The students used some devices incorrectly, especially at the level of grammatical devices. References and conjunctions are the most used devices in the students' texts. Hence, most of the errors are demonstrated at the level of these two device types.

Table 03 total errors of grammatical cohesive devices

References (N=594)		Substitution (N=20)		Ellipsis (N=11)		Conjunction (N=342)	
Sup-type	frequency	Sup-type	frequency	Sup-type	frequency	Sup-type	frequency
Personal	36	Nominal	1	Nominal	0	Additive	31
Comparative	10					Adversative	3

						Causal	14
Demonstrative	17	Verbal	0	Clausal	0	Temporal	18

Note. The Author

The participants overused certain types of cohesive devices as mentioned in previous tables. As a result, the errors occur at the level of the mostly used references and conjunctions cohesion. Yet, the substitution and ellipsis cohesion are less used and when used by some students are used with fewer errors.

4.3.2. Type of errors in lexical cohesive devices

The demonstrated errors in student texts indicate their frequency in the reiteration devices.

Table 04 total errors of lexical cohesive devices

Reiteration		Collocations
Repetition	9	3
Synonyms	0	
Antonyms	3	
Hyponymy	0	

Note. The Author

The lexical cohesion is used with fewer errors at the level of collocations and reiteration. They used fewer errors. Repetition devices are the most common errors demonstrated through the texts.

Discussion of results

Based on the obtained results of the corpus of texts, the participants generated grammatical and lexical cohesive devices in their texts. The patterns of the used devices can be categorised sequentially from high to limited frequencies. The results merge into a High Frequency of Reference that indicates reliance on pronouns and demonstratives to maintain coherence. Yet, excessive pronoun use may confuse readers if antecedents are unclear. Meanwhile, the presence of ellipsis and substitution often reflects conciseness across the written texts, but their absence may point to redundancy in the text. The students' texts showed less conciseness and overuse of references and conjunctions that impacted the cohesion of the texts.

Furthermore, limited variety in lexical devices resulting from the overuse of repetition may indicate a lack of vocabulary range, while balanced use of synonyms and collocations reflects lexical richness in the linguistic variations across the texts. Effective conjunction usage

demonstrates the student's ability to establish logical relationships between the ideas; however, inappropriate conjunctions could disrupt the text's clarity. Lexical chains ensure strong chains which reveal thematic coherence and keep a consistent semantic field.

Conclusion

The effective use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices is vital for ensuring clarity, coherence, and flow in written communication. These devices strengthen the organization of ideas and further improve the readability and overall quality of the text. In academic, professional, and cross-cultural contexts, the appropriate application of these devices reflects linguistic competence and supports achieving the intended purpose of the communicated texts. By steering the readers through logical connections, stressing key points, and tailoring messages, cohesive devices foster better comprehension and retention of the communicated information through texts. Ultimately, grasping and mastering their use is an essential feature for crafting texts that are not only clear and engaging but also argumentative and significant in different communicative settings.

To address these challenges faced by EFL students at Biskra University in effectively using cohesive devices, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Incorporate dedicated lessons on grammatical and lexical cohesive devices into the Algerian EFL curriculum.
- Design more writing tasks that progressively introduce and require the use of cohesive devices.
- Provide students with sample texts that effectively demonstrate the actual use of cohesive devices.
- Organize workshops where students can collaboratively practice and review their use of cohesive devices with their classmates.
- Focus on expanding students' lexical repertoire, including synonyms, antonyms, and collocations using extended vocabulary activities.
- Leverage digital tools to support learning and practice of cohesive devices in a more online interactive atmosphere.
- Assess students' use of cohesive devices through writing assignments and reflective activities regularly.
- Teach students how to adapt their use of cohesive devices based on context, genre, and audience.

- Promote regular reading of high-quality texts across various genres, and explore authentic texts where using cohesive devices.

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