
Investigating EFL Learners' Essay Writing Problems in Using Cohesive Devices: Case Study

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Abstract :

Exploring coherent devices in essays written by Jazan University ENG 102-6 Level-2 EFL students is the goal of this study. The study adopted a descriptive analytical approach. A corpus analysis was conducted using a sample of twenty essays written by students. The research also attempts to detect and analyze cohesive device that are misused, as well as to identify the reasons behind them, look into the contributing variables, and offer practical solutions. Research questions and their results are presented and discussed in order to achieve this goal. The cohesive devices used by ENG-102-6 EFL students in their written essays were investigated using a mixed methods research design that included both quantitative and qualitative research instruments. The study also adopted the concept of cohesion proposed by Hasan and Halliday (1976) as the framework for the analysis of the essays. The cohesive devices utilized by the students were recorded using frequency counts for the quantitative component. The research findings demonstrated that the ENG 102-6 Level 2 Engineering students at Jazan University's College of Arts & Humanities' Department of Foreign Languages utilized four categories of coherent devices: Reference, along with its subcategories: three types of references: comparative, demonstrative, and personal; Nominal substitution is one subtype of substitution; furthermore, additive, adversative, causal, and temporal conjunctions are subcategories of conjunction; lexical coherence is one subtype of repetition and synonym. In light of the study's findings, the researcher suggests integrating cohesion devices into writing instruction.

Key words: University Students, essay writing, cohesive devices, errors.

1. Introduction

For language learners, writing in a foreign language can be one of the most difficult and complex activities. Many students find it quite difficult to write an adequate piece of writing because of the complexity of this skill.

As stated by Rao (2007) EFL/ESL Writing has always been considered an important skill in teaching and learning, EFL writing is useful in two respects: First, it motivates students' thinking, organizing ideas, developing their ability to summaries, analyses and criticize. Second, it strengthens students' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language.

Writing involves more than just producing words and sentences. To be able to produce a piece of writing, one should be able to write a connected series of words and sentences which are grammatically and logically linked, so that the purpose we have in mind will suit the intended readers. (Tesfaye and Tsadik: 2008). Writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary that we have been teaching our students, when our students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say, to take risks, when they write, they necessarily become very involved with the new language; the effort to express idea and the constant use of the eye, hand, and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning.

In short, students' writing skill should be evaluated in several factors i.e.: mechanics (including spelling and punctuation), vocabulary, grammar, appropriate content, diction (or word selection), rhetorical matters of various kinds (organization, cohesion, unity, appropriateness to audience, topic, and occasion); as well as sophisticated concerns such as logic and style.

Ais Hamza: 2021) writes: "Although they have learnt English for years, learners still confront different writing problems such as: punctuation, coherence, and cohesion. The problems seem to be salient when it comes to cohesion and coherence, particularly cohesion in students essay writing, or once again, cohesive devices use.

Zuhair Abdul Amir (2013): writes: "There is a consensus among those dealing with the English writing of L1 Arabic users that the use of cohesive devices in writing is one of the most difficult skills for those learners of English to develop".

Abdullah Saad Aldera: 2016). Writes: "English language students are carefully taught these mechanics of writing right from elementary to advanced levels".

Essay writing is one of the most essential abilities necessary for students to achieve academic success (Rahman, 2017) and (Jumaini Siregar, Nurlala, T. Thyrhaya Zein 2023). To create an excellent essay, it must be written as effectively as possible (Redmen & Maples, 2017). The essay is meant to be comprehended and interpreted by its readers. For this reason, students need to convey their thoughts cohesively and coherently in their writing. However, the majority of international students confront challenges when writing essays because producing a well-written essay in a second language cannot be obtained naturally. As Hinkel (2003) and Hung & Thu (2014) put it that many advanced English language learners and users still find it difficult to write coherently and cohesively.

2. Literature Review

A significant number of researches have been conducted to identify the root causes of problems with writing as well as provide strategies for EFL students to overcome these challenges in their writing.

In an effort to identify the challenges and provide solutions, several studies have looked into various learner writing challenges in various writing tasks, including essays, sentences, paragraphs, and abstracts. The three goals of this literature review are to define writing for EFL/ESL students, emphasize the value of writing to EFL students, and provide insight into some of the issues surrounding the organizational writing challenges of EFL Arab students, with a focus on cohesiveness and coherence.

2.1. Definition of Writing

Al-Atabi (2020) on the definition of writing states: "Writing is the process of using symbols, letters of the alphabet, punctuation and spaces to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form and it is a medium of human communication that involves the representation of a language with symbols. While not all languages utilize a writing system, those with systems of inscriptions can complement and extend capacities of spoken language by enabling the creation of durable forms of speech and stored over time (e.g., libraries or other public records). It has also been observed that the activity of writing itself can have knowledge-transforming effects, since it allows humans to externalize their thinking in forms that are easier to reflect on and potentially rework".

According to Linderman (2001: 10) writing is defined as a process of communication that uses a conventional graphic system to convey a message to a reader. It means that writing is process of sending the message by using letters, punctuation, words or sentences as a graphic system. Thus the process of communication can be said successful if the reader and the writer understand the language being used in written communication. There are two terms in writing: composition and essay writing which involves far more than the production of grammatical sentence: it demands creativity and originality, since it is generally intended not only to inform but also to entertain. A composition, on the other hand, is a task which involves the students in manipulating words in grammatically correct sentences and in linking those sentences to form a piece of continuous writing which successfully communicates the writer's thoughts and ideas on a certain topic.

According to Kuni Hikmah Hidayati (2018: 23) Writing is a process of communicating with others in which a writer sends his ideas and thoughts in written forms to readers. It is a process of thinking which the writer discovers, organizes, and communicates his or her thoughts to the reader (Wingersky, 1999, p. 4). Moreover, it is about conveying meaning by using words that have been chosen and put together in written or printed form (Farbrain & Whinch, 1996, p. 32). All in all, writing means sending information and expressing ideas through written forms. In short, writing is a tool of communication in written form.

2-3- Main Challenges of Writing Skills

It is crucial to look into the difficulties teachers face when teaching writing in order to understand the need for effective writing skills both now and in the future. Then Students who struggle with writing in English might lag behind in both their academic and professional careers.

Writing properly is considered as a crucial challenge for native and nonnative students. The most common difficulties occur due to incompetence in syntax, coherence and the absence of vocabulary, idea expansion, content selection, sentence subject, technicalities and organization in addition to the unsuitable use of vocabulary.

Paryshan H. Ahmed. (2019) stated: learner faces different writing problems at various stages of their learning. In general, these challenges can categorize into linguistic, psychological, cognitive and pedagogical categories

Furthermore, unsuitable structure complicates the content and comprehension of the text; they struggle with the structural components of English. Likewise, an incoherent text fails to communicate ideas which reasons lack of confidence in students even if they have mastered syntactic, lexical and grammatical command over text composition. Also learners' lack of self-confidence is affected by a strategy of teaching which does not conform to learners' learning styles and cultural backgrounds. It is discussed that poor writing skills create from two factors: both the teacher and the student. Teachers lack appropriate educational approach to teach writing, containing effective feedback to learners and providing prompt, and most critically lack of teachers' ability to motivate learners. Conversely students face several difficulties such as: effects of L1 transfer lack of reading, motivation, and practice

As a natural rule in the process of formation, learning, and development of any language, writing is always the last learned skill compared to the three remaining skills of listening, speaking, and reading. However, writing is considered as the most difficult skill for learners. In English learning as a foreign language, there is no exception. Learners often have difficulties in writing their texts even in their language. For English writing, those difficulties seem much bigger. This issue has been a widely discussed topic of linguists and foreign language researchers in the world.

Dang Thi Ngoc Anh. (2019): As compared to speaking, according to Hedge (1988), a writing activity often requires many factors such as a good ability to develop ideas and information, high level of accuracy to help readers avoid misunderstandings, the use of diversified grammatical structures, syntax, and vocabulary. All of these help to create a particular writing style in accordance with the writing theme and target readers. Also, Nunan (1989) indicated that writing is the most complex and difficult-to-learn skill for those who learn English as a foreign language because “writing is an extremely complex, cognitive activity for all which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously”. This means that, at the sentence level, the writer must consider many factors such as content, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling. At a higher level, the writer needs to have the ability to integrate information into coherent paragraphs and texts. In addition, the course of writing skills should be very time-critical and requires the writer to practice a lot. Along with this perspective, Hedge (2000) concluded: “all the time spent in communicative activities, adults devote 45% of their energies to listening, 30% to speaking, 16% to reading, and 9% to writing.” That is the reason why the majority of students feel stressed and stuck in trying to convey their message when writing articles. According to Fareed (2016), cited from Jacobs & L (1981) and Hall (1988), A text of an effective ESL writer must be cohesive, logical, clearly structured, interesting and properly organized with a wide range of vocabulary and mastery of conventions in mechanics”. Thus, learners often face many difficulties in developing effective writing skills. In terms of grammar, understanding and applying the English grammatical rules is not easy for them because verbs are usually formed differently to have subject-verb agreement according to the tenses. Besides, it is hard for them to learn how to use articles, prepositions, pronouns, and connecting devices appropriately. Syntactically, learners often find writing the correct sentence structure challenging because, in English syntax, there are so many different types of sentence structures with strict requirements on the use of conjunctions and dependent/subordinate clauses. In terms of vocabulary, learners need to have a large enough vocabulary range to be able to use them flexibly for each writing topic in order to perform the task well. However, they often have difficulty in choosing the appropriate vocabulary in context. In terms of skills, writing requires learners to organize and develop ideas logically, which is also a big challenge for them. Although they own a broad range of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, they cannot complete the task well due to the inefficient organization of the

writing papers. At TUEBA these problems seem very common, bringing about the burden for both lecturers and students.

From the point of essay writing which entitles academic writing and effective use of language, transferring knowledge in a coherent and cohesive way, students face a myriad of difficulties (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017). This can be demanding not only for an L2 writer but also for native speakers. (Al-Gharabally, 2015). If learners lack linguistic competence, they are bound to make more mistakes in grammar, syntax, spelling, and punctuation. If they are poor readers, they will have difficulty in generating ideas and supporting their views with strong evidence or examples. Belkhir and Benyelles (2017) attribute the main difficulties linked with essays to three major factors: lack of motivation, lack of sufficient reading, and L1 influence on target language writing: Being a complex activity, writing essays could put a pressure on students (Fakeye & Ohia, 2018) and consequently, lead to apprehension or anxiety before commencing to write their essays. Writing apprehension inhibits students from writing in a proficient way and accordingly, and it affects their academic success.

Research has revealed that EFL learners encounter various difficulties in essay writing. Challenges in terms of essay aspects vary from generation of ideas and arguments, to coherence to lack of resources, academic style, and organization (Qashoa, 2014), (Nyang'au, 2014), (Annab, 2016), (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). Meanwhile, in terms of language use learners face difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and spelling (Nyang'au, 2014), (Annab, 2016), (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). Other research has demonstrated that L1 influence is one of the major challenges Arab EFL learners encounter in essay writing (Adas & Bakir, 2013).

Enriketa Sogutlu, et.al (2022) writes: “studies conducted in many parts of the world, ranging from Arabic and African countries to the Philippines and Indonesia, have investigated the challenges students face in writing essays and the factors that influence the quality of their essays. Even though EFL/ESL learners come from different cultural and sociological backgrounds, they experience approximately the same problems. Some of the factors that make students find essay writing difficult are psychological factors such as lack of interest and lack of motivation, institutional factors such as teacher’s lack of methodology and inadequate writing practices, and sociocultural factors which impede students’ writing because of some taboo topics. Cognitive factors such as not grasping the essay topic and unfamiliarity with or unawareness of the writing process may also lead students to find essay writing difficult. The most common mistakes committed in language use are particularly grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, organization, coherence, and cohesion.

2-4- Cohesive Devices

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics by Matthews (1997) defines cohesion in term of syntactic unit (Sentence). A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics by David Crystal (1997) defines cohesion in terms of a grammatical unit (words). Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that the concept of cohesion is a semantic one. For them it refers to relation of meaning that exists within text, gives the text texture and defines the text as text (Abdullah Saad Aldera: 2016).

Halliday et al. (2014) classify cohesive devices into two distinct categories grammatical and lexical cohesive devices.

Zuhair (2013): Cohesion is usually thought of as one of the most crucial defining characteristics of the quality of writing and thus has been central in recent research. 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) found evidence of correlation between cohesion and writing proficiency levels, other studies, such as Scarcella (1984) and Castro (2004), found contradictory results.

Nabilah et.al (2018) writes: Notably, cohesive devices are the essential to cohesion and coherence. Cohesive devices are transitional words or expressions that boost cohesion and coherence within the text. It provides internal unity or texture so that the text is easy to comprehend by tying all of elements of any structure has and ensure that they express all of part of the text. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some discourse parts is dependent on another. Meaning that between two or more sentences should be dependent on each other.

Syed Mojtaba Marashi (2020): stated that De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:3) view coherence as one of seven 'standards of textuality', claiming that coherence 'concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text, i.e. the actual words we hear or see, are mutually connected within a sequence. The surface components depend upon each other according to grammatical forms and conventions, such that cohesion rests upon grammatical dependencies. Therefore, cohesive ties establish a sample of written text's continuity. It is the linguistic mortar that connects the written text together. These authors explain that cohesive relationships within a text are set up where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on the other. Cohesion refers to the way that a text makes sense syntactically. In the opinion of Olatunde (2002:317), cohesion is interested in relating the internal organization of language to the functions of language, and to the social situation of language.

Madiha, & Khemessi. (2020) about the cohesion pointed out: "Cohesion enables the readers or writers to understand how the different part of text is referred to, as well as how they are logically related. As Harmer (2004) stated "cohesive devices help to bind elements of a text together so that we know what is being referred to and how the phrases and sentences are related to each other. And the types of the cohesive devices are:

- a)Reference: is a device that is used to refer back to something that is mentioned before (cataphoric reference), or will be mentioned in the text (anaphoric reference)
- b)Substitution: refers to the replacement of an element in the text by one of the following items: one, ones, some, do, and so.
- c)Ellipsis: is the omitting of an element that has been referred to earlier and rarely, an element that will occur after in the text.
- d)Conjunction: is a device that makes explicit the semantic relations which exist in the text. It has four kinds: adversative, additive, temporal, and causal.
- e)Lexical cohesion: occurs when two elements relates semantically in some way. Types of lexical cohesion are reiteration (included repetition, synonym) and collocation including all items in the text that are semantically related.

Objectives of Study

There are so many research studies that were conducted on cohesion in essay writing at the university level.

The importance of this study is to assist undergraduates in producing cohesive expository writing and developing their writing skills. It proposes to explore learners' text unity difficulties in EFL essays. The

researcher aims to test consistency in expository writing by students at the University level. Based on this, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the types of cohesive devices used by Jazan University, College of Arts & Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages in essay writing?
2. How do EFL students perceive the use of Cohesive Devices in essay writing?

Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the findings of the present study will be of significance to all teachers and learners of English in general and in Saudi universities in particular. The conclusions expected will provide important feedback to the concerned teachers at Saudi universities to adopt effective methods and procedures to address the problems of coherence in their students' writings in English.

Participants

The participants of this study were 20 students at the Department of Foreign Languages, College of Arts & Humanities Jazan University. Participants chosen for investigation were ENG 102-6 Engineering First year Level-2 EFL students studying this course at the Department of foreign languages at the University of Jazan in Saudi Arabia. The study was conducted in the second semester of the scholastic year 2026/2027.

Research Gathering Tools

The current study utilized a mixed method design of both qualitative and quantitative research methodology, to analyze the participants' written products, since measurement is one of the quantitative methodology features, which will facilitate the researcher's goals in measuring the use and frequency of various types of cohesive devices in Saudi EFL undergraduate students, as well as the quality of their writing.

The participants were requested to write essays on two topics out of the three given to them. The task was not discussed with the participants beforehand, nor was they guided on how to go about it. Their spontaneous writing samples were sought in this manner. They were given a time limit of one hour and a half to write an essay in about three hundred words each, on the topic entitle:

The following topics were given to students to choose to write on: "My country"

Sample of the Study:

20 students' answer scripts from ENG-102-2-6 Engineering Level-2 First year EFL students are chosen from an essay test as a representative sample.

3.4 Instrument:

The data of this study are collected through test.

The Test:

The study was conducted utilizing writing compositions only. The students were asked to write a free composition based on some techniques they learnt in their undergraduate studies. The rationale behind the test conducted on the students is to reveal some of aspects of the students' written performance. The students are asked to write an essay on a certain topic. The task is done during a regular university lecture. This is meant to remove any sort of anxiety among the subjects. The topic is associated with the sort of activities in which students are engaged during their daily life. Such topic may enable the students to write freely and comfortably because they address things which are meaningful to them. Raimes (1983) argues that when a meaningful writing task is assigned to the students, they will put more thought and efforts into a piece of writing that communicate their ideas and opinions to the reader. Their essays are immediately collected. Then, the essays are examined and checked for possible intended errors. The writing tasks are dealt with in terms of the following procedures:

Analysis of the Coherence of Essays

The data analysis calculations from the entire current research paper are displayed in the tables below, which demonstrate the many cohesive device types that the students utilized in their written essays. Every coherent device in the students' essays has its data analysis calculated by the researcher.

Table 1. The Inappropriate Utilization of Cohesive Devices

No	Type of Cohesive Devices	Number of Inappropriate Uses
1	Reference	145
2	Substitution	131
3	Conjunction	111
4	Lexical cohesion	075
	Total	462

Table 1 indicates that there were 462 instances of students using cohesive devices incorrectly. The following errors, which are categorized as major errors, are reference 145, conjunction 111, Substitution 131, and lexical cohesive devices 75.

The Frequently Employed Reference Coherent devices

The researcher presents the frequency of reference cohesive devices utilized, including demonstrative, comparative, and pronominal references, in the following table. The following were the outcomes of the data analysis that was obtained:

Sub-types of Reference as Cohesive Devices employed	All frequencies used in total	percentage
Pronominals (<i>I, you, we, they, it, our, ourselves, themselves, them, us, yourself, your, my, he, she</i>)	75	51.72%
Demonstrative reference (<i>this, there, that, those, here</i>)	43	29.65%
Comparative reference (<i>more, better, so many</i>)	27	18.62%

The Frequently Employed Conjunction Coherent Devices

The frequency with which the students' written essays employed conjunction coherent devices is displayed in the following table. There are four different kinds of conjunction cohesion devices that are employed: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. The table that follows shows the outcomes.

Conjunction Cohesion Types Employed	All frequencies used in total	Percentage
Additive Conjunction (<i>and, or, besides (that), for example, for instance, in addition, furthermore, that is</i>)	40	36.03%
Adversative Conjunction (<i>but, on the other hand, even though, although, in fact, however</i>)	29	26.12%
Causal Conjunction (<i>so, because, therefore, because of, cause</i>)	26	23.42%
Temporal Conjunction. (<i>first, firstly, second, secondly, third, fourth, in conclusion, finally, the last</i>).	16	14.41%

The Frequently Employed Substitution Coherent Devices

The number of cohesive devices overall and the number of substitutes made by the students in their written essays were taken into consideration when analyzing the frequency of substitution cohesive devices utilized. The following table below calculates and illustrates the outcome:

Substitution Cohesive Devices Used	All frequencies used in total	Percentage
Nominal	131	100%

The Frequently Employed Lexical Cohesion

The frequency of lexical cohesiveness utilized in the students' written essays is analyzed using data analysis, and the results are shown in the table below. Synonymy and repetition are two examples of lexical cohesiveness. Following is a presentation of the data analysis results:

Lexical Cohesion Employed	Types	All frequencies used in total	Percentage
Repetition		41	54.66%
Synonym		34	45.33%

Conclusion:

The results of the research study revealed that the 1st year students at the department of foreign languages of Jazan University, College of Arts & Humanities employed four types of cohesive devices errors; they are Reference with the sub-types: personal reference, demonstrative reference, and comparative reference; Substitution with the sub-types: nominal substitution; Conjunction with the sub-categories: additive conjunction, adversative conjunction, causal conjunction and temporal conjunction; and lexical cohesion with the sub-types repetition and synonym. In reference cohesion, the use of personal reference posed the most problem for the students. They use pronouns without an explicit reference and to point by reference to an unintended item. They use singular pronouns to refer to plural pronouns and vice versa. In addition, they abruptly change pronouns in a short span of a text. Their inability in maintaining reference clarity and consistency result in ambiguity and disagreement of pronouns.

In substitution, the students did not aware to substitute of verbal and nominal group, so there were words repetition. Concerned with inappropriate used of conjunction, there are some problems appeared involve in additive, adversative, causal, and temporal conjunctions. Additive conjunction “and” which functions as clause connectors is in inappropriate disposition (in the beginning of sentence). Apart from this, adversative conjunctions such as “although” and “but” are used together in contrasting two conditions. This is error as “although” and “but” have to stand-alone.

Besides additive and adversative conjunctions, the students commit inappropriate on the use of causal conjunction. It's occurred because the students confuse on using adversative conjunction “because” and “because of”. The students put conjunction “and” and “then” together in a sentence. Both of them have different function, so cannot use them in a sentence together.

Suggestion

Referring to the results and discussions presented above, the researcher provides some suggestion regarding the findings as follows: first, to conduct other research with other aspects of writing for instance the grammar (such as tenses, and collocation), mechanics, coherence and lexical cohesion tenses, mechanics, sentence structures. Second, to know more the use of substitution and ellipsis, spoken

discourse analysis research can be further research topic. Third, the students are expected to bear in mind that the usage of proper cohesive devices can make the quality of writing better, so, it is suggested that the students should learn more and more how to engage each type of cohesive devices accurately in their essay in writing class.

English writing lecturers are expected to help students facing obstacles such as the use of cohesive devices by applying explicit teaching and increasing their performance in terms of cohesive devices in essay writing.

Other researchers can investigate the type of cohesive devices used by other EFL student writers. This can provide a more comprehensive picture of the problem under study. Moreover, future studies may investigate the micro level cohesive devices, which would shed more light on the issue addressed in the present study.

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