

Cohesive connectivity in argumentative writing by EFL students

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Abstract

In a study carried out on EFL students' translation skills, it was found that they commonly encounter problems related to concepts' structural organization in the translated text. This research aimed to examine cohesion and coherence in argumentative writing by EFL students at the University of Tabuk for the academic year 2022/2023. The theoretical framework of the study is based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory of coherence and cohesion shifts in translation. This qualitative study included 15 participants in their third-year EFL students from the Department of Languages and Translation at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia. Participants were selected purposively. Argumentative written texts were the instrument used to collect data in this study. Results showed that students encountered cohesion and coherence problems in achieving written texts' unity, particularly in assigning their concepts and implementing appropriate cohesive signals, punctuation, and spelling issues.

Keywords: Argumentative writing; cohesion; coherence; EFL; writing.

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1. Introduction

Cohesion and coherence are described distinctively in writing research (Al Amro, 2019). They are the most apparent values of textuality. Cohesion represents the mode in which the surface lexical and grammatical components of a text hold together and depict unity (Alwazna, 2021). Coherence displays how the unity of sense is maintained. A text produces sense because there is a sense of continuity in the understanding initiated by the lexes of the text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

These two terms are consistent; because the appropriate use of cohesive devices will assist, in achieving coherence and unity, which is sustained by the recurrent interface of text-presented data with previous knowledge of the world (Alaro, 2020). Therefore, coherence refers to how a text holds together meaningfully and states that the maintenance of text is internal, but achieved by inferencing. Coherence is of great significance in different fields of discourse such as science and technology, where specific texts might be poor and do not contain many cohesive devices. If text is incoherent and poor, this might be because of register restrictions, such as the density of lexes found in English. For instance, the recurrent practice of non-finite verb forms including ellipsis and synonymy, and if flawed, to some extent specific inaccuracy on the part of the writer (Munday, 2016).

Yet, such texts might still be logical by depending on professional writers' experience and their skill to achieve informed inferences (Moud & Bekkouche, 2020). From a translation perspective, such texts are specifically inspiring, because they need a grounded domain understanding from the translator's part, who might need to refer to an expert specialized in the field of grounded studies. This is done to conduct the needed inferencing as a linking function and help her/him to practice the target language (TL, hereafter) register-restricted cohesive devices to reformulate target text (TT, hereafter) coherence or unity (Nunes, 2020). The significance of cohesion and coherence in the translational setting has been defined by many scholars and from diverse viewpoints (Cronin, 2020). In a correspondence-pertinent study based on an appropriate demarcation of translation from related practices of text production, it could be proposed that coherence associated with the set of conceptual links underlying the surface text may continue to be consistent in translation (Folaron, 2020).

However, how coherence is represented in the surface text, for instance, the use of cohesive devices, might be diverse for various factors related, for example, to particular languages or text genres. Coherence in the current study is used to refer to intended sense rather than meaning (Al-Jarrah et.al, 2018) since meaning defines the perspective of a language expression for reflecting the knowledge or virtual meaning, whilst sense entitles the data that essentially is transferred by words happening in a text (Al Khotaba, 2010). They state that many languages have a lot of virtual senses, but under usual conditions, only one meaning in a text. This feature has uninterrupted inferences for translation because translators do not translate inaccessible words, but words in texts in settings, which needs them to determine the intended meaning of a specific expression in a certain text in context. This is mainly significant in cases in which the surface text might make it problematic to create the intended meaning (Läubli, et al. 2020).

It is this intended meaning that should be pretended and retained in translation, by using cohesive devices, which this study presents, may vary significantly between languages. The practice of target language cohesive devices that are corresponding to their source language (SL, hereafter) text counterparts will assist communicate the intended meaning through interaction between textual knowledge and the target language professional translator's domain information, prior knowledge, and word knowledge (Musacchio, 2019).

1.1. Literature Review

Much research has been conducted to examine the significance of cohesion and coherence in text unity, particularly argumentative texts (Munday, 2016). Daweli (2018) examined the kinds of corrective feedback that Saudi EFL students provide when they edit their peers' texts in Google Docs. Three research instruments used in this study are Google Docs, questionnaires, and interviews. The findings of the study showed that hierarchical power in a classroom setting and students' background knowledge can affect the answers of peers' and teachers' feedback. Mamduhan et al. (2019) studied the effect on accuracy and cohesion due to the effect of the improvement of metacognitive construction in English as a foreign language students' prose. The findings of the study indicated that students implemented more metacognitive techniques through writing before and after the intervention, the extent of synchronization moved somewhat, and the EFL classroom provided help to comprise and depict second language contribution in greater depth.

Wahid & Wahid (2020) examined three kinds of essays of EFL students. The study adopted Hasan-Halliday's (1976) framework of cohesion and coherence. They found that at times underuse, and at others, overuse of cohesive links resulted in a weak coherence in text created by these learners. Bilal (2021) investigated the possible writing errors committed by tertiary students. Participants comprised 3rd and 4th-year students of English at Shaqra University in Saudi Arabia. Findings indicated that students committed errors in sentences and paragraph writing. These errors involved punctuation, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, and singular plurals. It proposed that those learners should be provided enough training in writing so that they will be able to appropriately create English sentences. Having reviewed these studies, the researcher believes that there is a need to examine cohesion and coherence in translated texts by EFL students at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia as it has not been examined in any of the previous research.

1.2. Statement of Problem

This study is interested in analyzing cohesion and coherence in argumentative texts, particularly the organizational issues that EFL students face while translating texts from Arabic into English languages. Many EFL/ translation students do not understand the quality of translation performance. In a study carried out on EFL students' translation skills, it was found that they commonly encounter problems related to concepts' structural organization in translated text (Al-Harbi & Troudi, 2020; Algryani, 2020).

1.3. The Purpose of Study

The study of cohesion and coherence is conducted in the case of this research within a greater practical framework of an equivalence significant analysis based on a theoretically well-formed translation comparison and a highly sophisticated translation corpus (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Though features of cohesion and coherence might operate and adapt correspondence at the syntactic, lexical-semantic, and terminological phraseological levels (Zaretskaya, 2019), additional systematic research is needed to examine cohesion as a distinctive characteristic of the translated text level. This displays how equivalence links function there and classifies patterns in translation explanations, which might be put into practice in the implemented divisions of the field. For this research, cohesion, which is examined at the translated text level (textual level), and cohesion, which is perceived as functional at the text-in-context level, for instance, the realm of pragmatics, is reflected to be thoroughly related. This indicates that cohesion is examined by considering the underlying coherence (Scott, 2018), a phase that is basic if the study is to achieve uniform pertinent results. The purpose of the current research is to examine the organizational problems that EFL students at the Department of Languages and Translation at the University of Tabuk when they write an argumentative essay. It intends to analyze students' cohesion and coherence

difficulties in EFL essays.

1.4. Study Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1- To what extent do EFL students at the University of Tabuk perceive cohesion in argumentative writing?

RQ2- How do EFL students at the University of Tabuk perceive coherence in argumentative essays?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection

This exploratory study adopted a sequential mixed-method design (Creswell, 2012). This design involves the “procedure of first gathering qualitative data to explore a phenomenon, and then collecting quantitative data to explain relationships found in the qualitative data” (Creswell, 2012, p. 552). Data were gathered from three instruments, a written essay, a language proficiency test, and a semi-structured interview.

2.2. Participants

The sample of the study included 30 third-year EFL participated the study. Participants (males) were selected and purposively divided into control and experimental groups (high & low). All of them were native speakers of Arabic.

2.3. Analysis

The researcher used a rubric for assessing argumentative tasks to conduct the analysis procedure firmly. The rubric comprised many criteria in writing to measure cohesion and coherence density in argumentative text. These criteria are related to assessing the main idea, cohesive signals, supporting details, punctuation, and spelling.

3. Results

The following are the details of the three instruments. The findings of the analysis showed that their students used 4 types of cohesive markers in their essays including additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. Frequency of conjunctions that Saudi EFL students use. The frequencies of conjunctions were counted and tabulated as indicated in Table (1).

Table 1

The Overall Frequencies Uses of Cohesive Devices

Data	Data Size	No. of detected Conjunctions	Average of Conjunctions each student
High group	15	1256	54.2%
Low group	15	1115	45.8%

Table (1) shows that the total number of cohesive devices found in students' essays was 2,371. Results of the analysis indicated that EFL students be apt to overuse cohesive devices in their writings. The total number of cohesive devices used by Saudi EFL students included 4 types, mainly, additives, adversatives, causal, and temporal as depicted in Table (2).

Table 2
Types of Cohesive Devices Used by Saudi EFL Students

Data	Types
High Group	Additives, Adversatives, Causal, and Temporal
Low Group	Additives, Adversatives, Causal, and Temporal

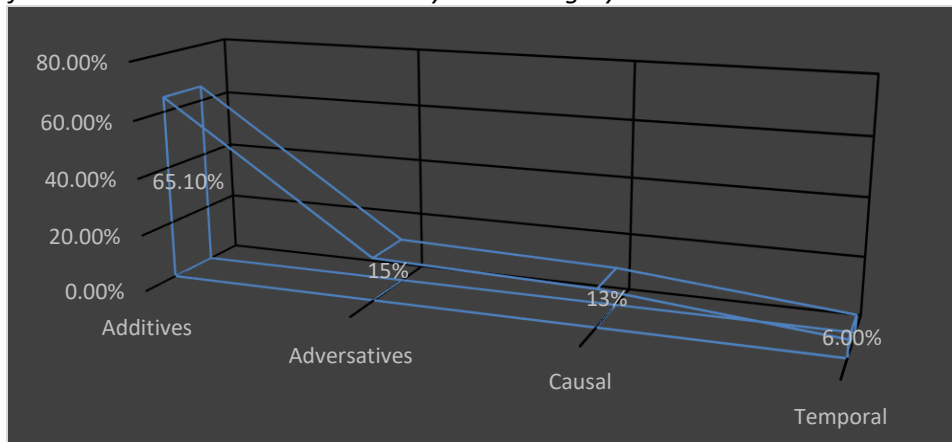
As stated in Table (2), both students' groups (high & low) used the four types of cohesive devices. Use of these types is obvious to occur amongst students due to the reason of lack of knowledge and familiarity with cohesive devices. Yet, it is remarkable to mention that there can be knowledgeable steady development in the use of cohesive devices in Saudi students' argumentative essays. Findings also show that students used cohesive devices very frequently in terms of types, which indicates a considerable variation as shown in Table (3).

Table 3
Total Number of Cohesive Devices Per-Category

Data	Types
Additives	1580
Adversatives	346
Causal	265
Temporal	180
Total	2,371

As illustrated in Table (3), the total number of additives found in students' essays was 1580 times, adversatives were second in position recording about 346 times, then causal reported 265 times, temporal were the least used cohesive devices amongst all of the other types of devices recording 180 times, making an overall total 2,371 in all the 30 essays. However, the frequency of additives in the essays was 65.1%, adversatives were 15%, and causal cohesive devices were 13%, whilst temporal cohesive devices recorded the least recording 6% as illustrated in Figure (1).

Figure 1
Frequency of Cohesive Devices in Students' Essays Per-Category



4. Discussion

Similar results have been shown in past research such as Al Shamalathm & Ghani (2020), who showed that Jordanian EFL students used different types of conjunctions that affected the cohesiveness of the writing quality of the students. The researchers assume that the possible reason behind the variation in the use of cohesive devices by Saudi EFL students may relate to the interlanguage interferences and students'

reading habits. Therefore, syllabus content and teaching methods (conventional) may be a possible source of students' lack of competence to use cohesive devices professionally. This is as well reported by Amayreh and Abdullah (2021) who found out that that grammatical cohesive devices did not create a statistically significant correlation with the writing quality score. In addition, results showed that EFL students' written compositions were not effective because of their lack of use of the different types of grammatical cohesive devices and their unfamiliarity with the real use of these devices in academic writing. Therefore, the conclusion rather displays the practice of a high number of cohesive devices in writing could be connected to reading resources as they are the only additional materials at the higher education stage.

It is worth stating that data were collected largely through collecting argumentative writing of the Saudi EFL students. Bearing in mind this point, out of four categories of cohesive devices almost one type (temporal) was recorded as the least frequently used in the essays, however, the primarily argumentative genre was implemented to form the analysis. It is very interesting to explain this occurrence, but it might be linked with the category of genre evolving the data analysis because some of the cohesive devices are genre-specific. This may be the cause of why other cohesive devices have not appeared at all. For instance, cohesive devices such as "and, also, because, so, but, or" are often implemented in a spoken form related to written form. Another cause might be the inadequate data size. That is, if they were large enough, there was an opportunity for the lasting cohesive devices to happen.

The number of cohesive devices differs from one essay to another, which varied between 180-1580 occurrences in all 30 texts. This may indicate the use of cohesive devices is not an issue of English as foreign language skills but relatedly a matter of composing method and writer's style. In addition, the mother tongue might be another cause of such use. Therefore, the existence and the nonexistence of certain cohesive devices in learners' mother tongues may result in the misuse of these devices. This can affect the cohesive connectivity and unity of the written text. Previous studies show varied reasons that lie behind the misuse and cohesive disconnectivity in the text involving the lack of awareness concerning the use of these devices (Amayreh and Abdullah, 2021). It is proposed that cohesive device frequency varies based on the linguistic background of the students.

A possible clarification for this existence may be that higher frequency reproducing attempts that Saudi English as a foreign language made for achieving cohesion and unity in their argumentative texts through implementing several cohesive devices. This indicates that Saudi EFL students depend on other linguistic connectors besides using cohesive devices to achieve text unity. Moreover, if the misuse of cohesive devices is common in students' essays, it is potentially that is teaching-induced. Such results agree with past studies' findings (Zhang, 2018) representing that misuse of cohesive devices in the written text has been found as a result of learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Although the findings of this study seem to be remarkably constant with those results of past studies, they are still unrelated to the conclusions of a few other investigations. It is, consequently, significant to state that some past research has included an inadequate number of cohesive devices in comparison to the present study as they vary in scope and objective as well. In addition, the difference in research practice of studies may also show some of the discrepancies included in this regard. Phases of learners' interlanguage such as learning practices, teaching approaches, and mother tongue language transference are possible reasons related to the contradictory conclusions of these investigations.

Many scholars have also suggested that results showed reproductions of English as a foreign language's education (Uzun, 2018). It must be observed that when arguing the conclusions of this study, the focus should be provided on understanding the nature and setting of learners' linguistic background. For instance, the total of conjunctions in each essay was measured in this research, since it was reflected within the space of this investigation. It is possible that Saudi EFL students' distinct use of cohesive devices varies significantly and may have, hence, affected the general results of the study. For instance, the device

“thus” was used only by one writer. Therefore, conclusions associated with the misuse of cohesive devices can be connected to the nature of the writing genre and students’ linguistic/cultural knowledge.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, learners’ difficulties were concerning their cohesive connectivity in the argumentative writing process mainly as they lack the skill to transfer clear and precise basic ideas, and topic sentences or not being in the right position, neither in the introductory paragraph nor in the concluding paragraph. Moreover, they were also diverse in using appropriate transition signals in their writing. As a final point, they ignored using correct spelling and punctuation.

The researcher recommended that the students should have the skill to generate a coherent paragraph to connect well in writing, i.e., through writing they must have the skill to communicate their ideas to readers. Further, students should be able to link sentences together within a paragraph by consistently organizing them. Besides, the flow of data within a paragraph should also be consistent.

Author

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