GRAMMATICAL COHESIVE FEATURES IN INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of grammatical cohesion in the argumentative essays written by Indonesian English as a Foreign Language students. Cohesion, a crucial component of textual coherence, ensures that discourse elements are logically connected, thereby enhancing the readability and comprehensibility of written texts. By analyzing a corpus of 7 students' essays, this research identifies the frequency and types of cohesive devices employed while at the same time observing the coherence built through the use of these devices using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion conceptual framework. The findings demonstrate prevalent patterns where the reference devices were used more frequently than conjunctive devices. It suggests that the lack of understanding of grammatical cohesion can lead to potential challenges for learners in utilizing cohesive mechanisms effectively.

Keywords: grammatical cohesion, cohesive devices, coherence, argumentative essay, EFL students

Introduction

In writing, writers should carefully consider language aspects beyond mechanical and technical conventions to achieve the qualities of good writing. However, it is not as easy as it sounds. It is demanding and even more challenging for L2 writers who have to walk the extra mile to create good written products in their non-native language. As Nunan (1989) states, the challenges to developing an intelligible piece of writing are even bigger for L2 learners. It takes time and a lot of practice for them to be able to produce effective writing in the language they are learning (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011).

A good piece of writing conveys clear ideas, focuses on communicating the intended messages, uses appropriate words, flows logically, and is free from grammatical and technical errors. It exhibits some qualities, including clarity, cohesion and coherence. It discusses one central subject where each sentence and paragraph is connected in a meaningful and logical manner, contributing to coherence. In that case, Figueiredo (2010) suggests that L2 writers should have inclusive language knowledge that goes beyond linguistic structures but also involves understanding the social context where the language is used.

Among the features of good quality writing, cohesion and coherence are two critical elements that contribute to the clarity and readability of a text. Although closely associated, they address different aspects of how ideas are connected and presented in the text. Linguists have given a great deal of attention to cohesion and coherence in

written discourse since Halliday and Hasan introduced their work 'Cohesion in English' in 1976 (Connor, 1984; Liu & Braine, 2005; Yang & Sun, 2012; Park, 2013; Bui, 2022; Tabari & Johnson, 2023). Their book was an attempt to answer the absence of comprehensive knowledge in text construction, the range of meanings of a text, spoken and written, which is inherently and directly tied to the semantic context in which the text is situated.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) state that cohesion happens when one linguistic element in the discourse depends on another for its semantic interpretation. It focuses on features on the textual surface and is created through grammatical and lexical elements. They identify five categories that contribute to the coherence of a text, reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The first four provide structural relationships between different text parts, which are classified into grammatical cohesion. Meanwhile, lexical cohesion devices include reiteration and collocation. Together, they help create textual properties (Alarcon & Morales, 2011) and secure the logical connection between sentences.

Appropriate use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices, both in terms of type and number, facilitates the effectiveness of the text. Conversely, failing to use cohesive devices appropriately can make the text difficult to understand and follow, undermining its coherence. It would lead to potential issues such as loss of clarity, disconnected ideas, lack of emphasis and incoherent narrative or argument.

Coherence, on the other hand, occurs at the paragraph level and is achieved when the whole text is in one unified meaning. This unity is achieved when all parts of the text revolve around one main idea. Unlike cohesion, which solely depends on linguistic elements inside the text, coherence is impacted by external and internal textual factors as well. The external factors, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976) in Alarcon and Morales (2011), involve the background knowledge and experience of the readers and the "context of the situation" (p. 115). Even though it is argued that as long as readers can infer the meaning from the available semantic prompts, even the lack of cohesiveness between sentences, coherence can still be achieved (Alarcon & Morales, 2011). However, it could ignite problems when the readers only possess limited capability in understanding the relation between sentences.

Not only do the learners need to understand the essential features of written text, but they also have to be familiar with different genres in written discourse (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011). In their academic journey, essay writing is an inevitable task that learners frequently must complete. They are expected to know and be familiar with the functions and structures of different genres of essays. Among several genres of essay, an argumentative essay is the most ubiquitous one they will have to write (Schneer, 2014). Schneer adds that the ability to connect the students to concepts, issues, and events from the world outside the classroom is why educators find it so appealing. Hyland (1990) simply defines it as the type of essay used to convince the reader of a point of view.

Dastjerdi and Samian (2011) argue that compared to narrative essays, writing argumentative essays is more "conceptually and structurally demanding" and complicated (p. 67). In order to achieve the purposive aims, an argumentative essay requires thorough research, clear structuring, logical reasoning, persuasive appeal, and audience awareness (Connor, 1990). It then has a direct bearing on how ideas are presented and integrated to create a coherent, compelling and persuasive result. When

composing their essays, the writers need to establish clear relations between sentences, which can be created using various cohesive features.

Despite the many studies on cohesive devices in argumentative essays, the findings have been contradicted and inconsistent. Hence, this study aims to specifically examine the grammatical cohesion in Indonesian students' argumentative essays. This study works around the following questions.

1. How frequently are grammatical cohesive devices used in Indonesian EFL students' argumentative essays?
2. How is the coherence in students' essays developed through the use of grammatical cohesive devices?

Method

Participants

This study intended to explore the coherence of students' argumentative essays through the use of grammatical cohesive devices. The data were taken from argumentative essays written by seven Indonesian EFL students majoring in English Education at one university in the easternmost part of Indonesia. The small number of participants was due to the limited number of students in this major and the small number of students with appropriate knowledge of English writing.

Data Collection Procedure

The students were assigned to write their arguments on one controversial issue in Indonesia in the form of an argumentative essay. They have been introduced to this type of essay and have learned from some samples prior to the writing; therefore, they are familiar with the structures. The essays must have at least five paragraphs, with one introductory paragraph, three bodies where each discusses different arguments, and one concluding paragraph. Supporting evidence, literature and theories were demanded to strengthen their standpoint on the issue. The essays should be written within 90 minutes.

Data Analysis Procedure

In order to assess the coherence of the essays, this study concentrated on the grammatical cohesive features adopted from Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion system. For practical consideration, the essays were analyzed following the theoretical framework of Halliday (1994), where substitution and ellipsis were excluded from the discussion because of their infrequent use in formal writing and are found more frequently in spoken discourse as well as Yang and Sun (2012) for the classification.

1. Reference: Personal pronoun, demonstrative pronoun, demonstrative noun phrase and comparative reference.
2. Conjunction: Additive, causative, temporal and adversative

Furthermore, the intersentence cohesion was the main subject of discussion here because "it represents the variable aspect of cohesion, distinguishing one text from another" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 9). However, this did not completely dismiss all relations within a sentence when the structural relations strikingly influence the meaning and flow of ideas

Result and Discussion

Grammatical cohesion refers to the way that a grammatical element is enclosed across sentences. It is established by the use of grammatical features in the text showing the semantic relation between sentences. The type and frequency of cohesive devices found in students' argumentative essays were analyzed using Yang and Sun's (2012) cohesive framework, which they adopted from Halliday and Hasan (1976). Table 1 demonstrates the number and percentage of two main types of cohesive devices identified in the essays. It can be seen that reference device was used more than the conjunction.

Table 1. Grammatical Cohesive Devices

	Frequency	%
Reference	140	61
Conjunction	89	39
Total	229	100

Compared to the other grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative essays, the higher frequency of reference is also consistent with previous studies (Zhang, 2000; Liu & Braine, 2005; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Abdurrahman, 2013). A detailed analysis of each cohesive device is provided for a more thorough explanation.

Reference Devices

Table 2 illustrates the types, frequencies, and examples of reference devices in students' essays. The table shows that the students employed a variety of references; however, although all types of the identified references were found in the essays, the personal pronoun was preferred way more than the others. Reference refers to where the identity of an item can be retrieved from within or outside the text. It is a set of grammatical tools used to indicate whether something is being repeated from another place or if it has not appeared yet in the text (Yang & Sun, 2012, p. 35). It generally involves the link between words and pronouns that refer to that word.

Table 2. Reference Devices

Reference Device	Freq.	%
Personal pronoun	107	42
Demonstrative pronoun	11	4
Demonstrative noun phrase	20	8
Comparative reference	2	1

Students used personal pronouns much more frequently than other types, as shown in Table 2. This is compatible with the findings of Afrianto (2017), who found that personal pronouns were used mostly in three investigate essays in his study. The most employed pronouns in this study were the words 'they' followed by 'their', 'we', 'I', and 'he'.

Example 1: It's their own decision how they want to be.
Example 2: We could not ignore that biology also influences how we interact with the world

Example 3:   … he will be treated by other individuals, which he does not ought to acknowledge

It is in line with Liu and Braine (2005), where pronouns 'they' received more significant usage in personal pronouns, which they believed teachers might have played a vital influence behind this occurrence. Since the essay's topic was somewhat controversial, the students opted for the word 'they', which implied a sense of excluding themselves out. On the other hand, it differs from that of Dastjerdi and Samian (2011), who found second person singular 'you' has the highest number of uses, followed by 'I' and 'we'. They argue this is probably because the students were more comfortable showing their subjectivity through first and second-person pronouns. Furthermore, these findings highlighted the need of further explanation of the importance of third-person pronouns for the objectivity and trustworthiness of standpoint in argumentative essays.

Demonstrative pronouns and demonstrative noun phrases are mainly were in singular form, 'this' followed by plural form 'these' as shown in examples 3 and 4.

Example 4:   It isn't great to meddled with things like this as typical society will be mindful of …
Example 5:   This expansion doesn't always strengthen individual identity … and the relevance of expanding these categories.

The most likely motive for great use of demonstratives 'this' and 'these' must be the students' tendency to refer to things that are closer to them (Zhang, 2000; Liu & Braine, 2005). This is in the same way as they tried to attach themselves as individuals who are directly involved.

Conjunction Devices

The use of conjunction is another way by which language adds to the texture of a text (Paltridge, 2006). Conjunction works at varying levels of relationships in a text, ranging from the simplest between words and clauses to between sentences, all contributing to the coherence of the discourse. It expresses the logical-semantic relationship between the chunks of ideas and facilitates individuals involved in a text to produce and interpret meanings.

Table 3. Conjunction Devices

Reference Device	Freq.	%
Additive	48	28
Causative	15	6
Temporal	7	3
Adversative	19	8

As illustrated in Table 2, additive conjunctions constituted the highest usage of all conjunction devices, followed by adversative which was in reverse with that of Alarcon and Morales (2011). They found that adversative was slightly more employed than additive devices in their corpus, which they argued was in line with the nature of argumentative texts in establishing counterarguments. Yet, it is worth keeping in mind

that the primary purpose of argumentative texts is to convince the readers on a view that is best emphasized with data and evidence. That is when additive conjunctions come to be really helpful in establishing inclusive opinions.

Example 6:   <u>However</u>, the counter perspective highlights that this can <u>also</u> confuse and disrupt social stability.

Example 7:   <u>So</u>, <u>it can be concluded</u> that this issue in Indonesia has indeed given rise to many debates

Example 8:   There are <u>also</u> rights to freedom and equality, <u>but</u> it is important to remember that there are restrictions on freedom …

They further suggested that additives strengthen claims by creating a strong connection with the premises that support them. Some students used more varied additive words than others; for example, some used the words 'and', 'also', 'furthermore', 'in addition', while some used repetitive additive such as 'and'. Adverse ideas were mostly linked using the words 'but' and there was one 'however' in all essays. Similar findings were found by Yang and Sun (2012), who discovered the monotonous use of cohesive device choices. Students in their study were prone to select only a limited number of conjunctive items. Temporal devices are thus subject to the same issue in which the students were restricted to repetitive words, such as 'so'.

While the correlation between the quantity of cohesive devices and the writing quality was outside the scope of discussion, it is worth mentioning briefly for further research addressing this issue. Findings in this issue are under debate because of the contradictory outcomes from different studies. For instance, Yang and Sun (2012) argued that a text would be more coherent and comprehensible when it employs cohesive devices more frequently and appropriately. However, some other research has offered a different range of findings, from positive to no significant correlation between the number of cohesive devices and the quality of the text (Zhang, 2000; Liu & Braine, 2005; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011).

Again, since the present study did not evaluate the quality of the students' essays, the coherence will be reviewed and discussed collectively. Coherence in the investigated essays was formed mainly through reference and conjunction cohesive devices. However, it is important to notice from these findings that while cohesive devices contribute to coherence, that does not imply that the more they are used, the more coherent a text will be. Instead, coherence depends more on how cohesive devices are used to connect ideas. Inappropriate selection and placement of cohesive devices might obscure the text's meaning and cause a misunderstanding.

Each essay here used roughly the same number of words but varied in type. Some essays in this study were easy to follow due to their logical and well-organized ideas. In contrast, some messages in the others are not systematically arranged, making it quite challenging to comprehend their line of reasoning. It is a matter of coherence. According to Alarcon and Morales (2011), a text is coherent when a reader understands how each subsequent unit of the text contributes to the development of the text's overall meaning. Therefore, writers should keep the potential readers in mind when creating their texts to ensure their message and reasoning are easy for them to comprehend and assimilate.

Furthermore, although argumentative is believed to be the most complicated type of essay to write (Richards & Schmidt, 1992; Gleason, 1999), this study provides a contrasting view. Having learned and written other types of essays, the students considered argumentative essays as the most exciting type of essay to write. They claimed that writing something based on their personal views is more accessible, even though it obliges them to search for supporting theories and evidence. Nevertheless, they had much fun in the argumentative essay writing process, rather than explaining a case conceptually and theoretically, as in narrative and expository essays.

Conclusion

Grammatical cohesion refers to the various ways in which grammar is used to link ideas within a text, ensuring that it flows smoothly and logically. The analysis of grammatical cohesion in students' argumentative essays underscores its pivotal role in constructing coherent and compelling arguments. This study reveals that while the students are capable of using various cohesive devices, their application is often inconsistent, leading to varying degrees of text coherence. In order to develop a native-like competence at producing texts, argumentative essays in particular, language learners need to comprehend the functions and be able to employ cohesive devices appropriately.

These findings highlight the need for focused pedagogical interventions aimed at enhancing students' awareness and proficiency in using cohesive devices. Incorporating targeted exercises that emphasize the practical application of grammatical cohesion can significantly improve the coherence and quality of students' writing. Furthermore, providing explicit feedback on cohesion in their essays can help learners develop a more nuanced understanding of how to link ideas effectively.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The relatively limited number of the investigated sample, the variety of cohesive features in the examination, and the absence of external factors influencing coherence are some limitations that should be addressed in further investigations.

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