THE EFFECT OF IMPLEMENTING COHESIVE TIES BY SAUDI PREP-YEAR PRE INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS ON THEIR WRITTEN TEXTS

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Abstract

This study aims to measure Saudi prep-year pre-intermediate students' writing proficiency (represented in writing scores) in relation to their knowledge of implementing cohesive devices in writing a texture. An experiment is conducted with two research tools to test students' writing proficiency and those students' capability of implementing cohesive ties. All participants were randomly selected from the preparatory year in the Deanery of Academic Services in Taibah University in Medinah, KSA. A closer examination of the data demonstrated that the more students are aware of cohesive ties and how to be used, the higher their English writing scores are and the closer they are from writing texture rather than texts.

Keywords: Writing proficiency, cohesive ties, texture, text

Introduction

Writing has always been a challenging task for EFL learners as it requires them not only to be aware of English structure but also to get more information about the properties of English text. It is an important means of communication, especially in academic communities. Students keep written records of lectures, do written homework, and write summaries and reports. So, as we assess those EFL students on the basis of their writing mastery, we have to consider that writing has two perspectives: the structural and the communicative. Widdowson distinguishes between writing as usage and writing as use. He defines the first as "… the use of the visual medium to manifest the graphological and the grammatical system of the language", and defines the second as "the use of sentences to build discourse" (2001). Contrary to most of the Arab non-native teachers' concern when rating EFL students' writing, Chiang (1999, 2003) confirms that native speakers' judgments of the quality of EFL students' writing relies more on discourse

features like cohesion and coherence. Grammatical weaknesses are not considered unless they hinder their understanding of the writer's intended meaning. However, the majority of ESL/EFL students feel that "their only sense of security comes from what they have learned about grammar" (Leki 1996: 34). Therefore, one of the main objetives of this study is to shift EFL teachers' attention away from teaching low level text writing and raise their awareness of the importance of focusing on cohesion functions in writing texture.

Literature Review

      Although much has been written about cohesion, the basic definitions and categories need to be reviewed because of their pertinence to my point. The simplest definition of cohesion is that it "refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as a text" (Halliday and Hasan 4). Cohesion connects a string of sentences to form a text rather than a series of unrelated statements. Accordingly, a number of studies have been conducted on using cohesive ties to enhance ESL/EFL students' writing proficiency. Generally, the examination of cohesive ties in ELT has been carried out using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of categories and subcategories of cohesive ties. These are summarized as follows:

1. Reference: Pronouns; Demonstratives; Comparatives
2. Substitution: Nominal Substitution; Verbal Substitution; Clausal Substitution
3. Ellipsis: Nominal Ellipsis; Verbal Ellipsis; Clausal Ellipsis
4. Conjunction: Additive; Adversative; Clausal; Temporal; Continuative
5. Lexical Cohesion: Reiteration; Collocation

      Based on my own experience, it seems that most language teachers consider that the mere appearance of cohesive devices in texts should contribute to the quality of the text. In addition, it has been noted that traditionally in English, ESL writing research teachers primarily focus on low level features in student writing rather than discourse features in their teaching of writing (Lee, 1998). On the one hand, Crowhurst (1983) and McCulley (1985) state that the use of certain linguistic devices (e.g., cohesive ties) is related to differences in the quality of student persuasive writing. On the other hand, Grake & Kaplan (1996) and Ferris & Hedgecock (1998), in their study, consider that EFL students tend to focus on word and sentence levels rather than the whole discourse such as the organization of texts. Their study also suggests that non-native subjects have more trouble linking up parts of sentences, linking sentences with other sentences, and linking paragraphs with other paragraphs. Thus, it seems that studying the relationship between students' cohesive knowledge and their errors in using cohesive devices in their writing has pedagogical significance. This paper

examines how far implementing cohesive ties by Saudi prep-year pre-intermediate students in Taibah University in Medinah, KSA leads to better results of students' written text. More specifically, the study addresses the following hypothesis:

1. The more knowledge students have about cohesive ties, the higher quality their English writing is.
2. The more appropriately the student uses cohesive devices, the higher writing score he gets.

A number of language researchers, particularly ESL/EFL teachers, adopted Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy and framework of cohesion to conduct empirical studies examining whether the use of cohesive ties in students' writing correlates with coherence or the overall writing quality (e.g. Witte and Faigley, 1981; Tierney and Mosenthal, 1983; Connor, 1984). Most of them have found that there is no significant relationship between the quantity of cohesive devices used and the quality of writing. Zhang (2000), being skeptical about these studies, employs richer research methods to reexamine the same research question by investigating cohesive devices in the writing of Chinese undergraduate EFL students in two PRC universities. In spite of the noticeably large sample size of his study (n=107), and his sophisticated research methodology, his findings seem to be hardly new as he found that there is no statistically significant relationship between the frequency of cohesive ties used and the quality of writing.

However, in his paper published in CELEA Journal Guiju (2005) conducted an experiment using 85 students from second-year non-English major in Guandong University of Foreign Studies to test the correlation between cohesive knowledge and the quality of writing of college students. He found that there was a statistically significant difference between the high-score and low-score compositions in the use of cohesive devices.

In his study, Khalil (2002) analyzed cohesion in 20 compositions written by Arab EFL college students in terms of Halliday and Hasan's model. Moreover, the relationship of cohesion to coherence is investigated. The analysis of cohesion showed that Arab students overused reiteration of the same lexical item as a cohesive device, but underused other lexical and grammatical cohesive devices. The correlation of coherence score with the number of cohesive ties was quite low (0.18).

Ezza (2004) thinks that EFL students' writing problems, especially those relevant to cohesion and coherence, might be caused by employing outdated approaches and resources for teaching writing, especially in the Arab world. Consequently, he applied a content analysis to existing writing courses in three Arab Universities and reached the conclusion that English Departments adopted approaches and materials characteristic of the 1940s

and 1950s. Thus, he recommends incorporating the new developments of the linguistic and writing theories into the writing syllabus.

Affected by Halliday and Hasan's indication that cohesion is in effect a linguistic property in relation to textual features, ACHILI (2007) thinks that ESL/EFL novice learners tend to rely heavily on cohesive devices, as a consequence of their teachers' emphasis, to link their ideas while they neglect other discourse features. She conducted an experiment that included two groups, control and experimental, from the second year students of English at the Department of Foreign Languages in University of Mentouri, Constantine. A pre-test and post-test were administered and the results confirmed that the proposed method of teaching coherence helped the experimental group improve, especially in the areas with which the participants were found to have most problems.

Method
Setting of the study

The present study was conducted in Medinah in the western region of Saudi Arabia. Despite being small, it has two governmental universities of which one is for Islamic studies only. Consequently, all the participants in this study were chosen from the other university which is Taibah University. In order to have a representative sample of students, the participants were chosen from the 'Preparatory Year' in which about 5000 male and female students study in order for them to join the different faculties of the university next year. However, the sample represents male students only, about 3000 students, as the researcher has no access to the female section owing to social and cultural aspects.

Material

This study was conducted utilizing writing compositions and a cohesive knowledge test. In the former, students were asked to write a 350-word composition about a given argumentative topic, whereas the latter included ten questions about reference, substitution, Ellipsis, and conjunctions. Both tests were conducted during a two-hour class session under the supervision of the researcher.

Two rubrics were used to grade the overall quality of the compositions. One rubric was used for general evaluation; it is an adapted version of the rubric used by the Testing Unit, ELC, DAS, Taibah University. The other rubric focuses on cohesion; it is adapted from "Placement Rubric Guide" published on www.avantassessment.com. It is evaluated by Avant's Valid-certified Raters. The mean of the two scores based on both rubrics was taken as the final composition score of each

student.   Instruments used included both quantitative analysis (t-test and Pearson Correlation Coefficient) and qualitative analysis (error analysis).

Participants

The original pool of participants for this study consists of 60 male Saudi pre-intermediate students who are native speakers of Arabic. They are enrolled in prep-year, Deanery of Academic Services, Taibah University. Prep-year is the first year in Saudi universities, where English is one of the subjects studied to enhance students English proficiency and prepare them for their university academic studies. Some participants were eliminated for 1) writing less than 300 words in their compositions, or 2) failing to answer three or more questions in the cohesive knowledge test. Consequently, 6 participants were excluded from the study, yielding a final sample consisting of 54 participants.

Procedures

Students were asked to write a 350-word composition in one-hour session. Then, students were asked to answer a ten-question test about cohesive ties in 30 minutes. Both the compositions and the test were conducted under the supervision of the researcher. While giving instructions to the students, their attention was drawn to the importance of using cohesive ties appropriately to compose coherent texts. Each student's composition was corrected twice; first, based on a holistic writing rubric, and second, based on an analytical writing rubric that focuses on using cohesive ties appropriately. Final scores were divided into two groups at a cut off score (8.99). A 't-test' was conducted to test the effect of implementing cohesive ties (independent variable) on students' scores (dependent variable). For the purpose of qualitative analysis, an 'error analysis' was conducted for the compositions and correlated with students' scores of compositions.

Results

The data collected in the present study was of two types i.e. quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data of the scores of students' compositions and cohesive knowledge test were analysed in terms of means and frequency, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and percentages. For analysing the qualitative part of the data, on the other hand, an error analysis method was used. The analysis of the scores of students' compositions and the tests of their cohesive knowledge by means of descriptive statistics is shown as follows:

Table 1. The scores of the subjects' writing and cohesive knowledge

	Mean	N	St. Dev.	St. Error Mean	r
Writing scores	8.107	54	1.353	0.184	0.891
Cohesive Knowledge	6.438	54	1. 569	0.213	

St. Dev. = Standard Deviation   N = Number of students   r =Correlation Coefficient

In table 1, the mean of the students' writing compositions is 8.107 and its standard deviation is 1.353. The mean of the students' scores of cohesive knowledge test is 6.438 and its standard deviation is 1.569. The value of the correlation coefficient (r = 0.891) indicates a significant difference.

Table 2. T-test for cohesive knowledge between higher group and lower group

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	St. Error
Equal variance assumed	10.086	14	0.000	0.334

Sig. = Significance   Significance level set at (0.05)   St. Error = Standard Error

The above table shows that the result is very significant since Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05, t = 10.086, df = 14, which indicates a significant difference that there was a correlation between higher group and lower group. It suggests that the compositions have been decreased by inadequate knowledge of cohesion.

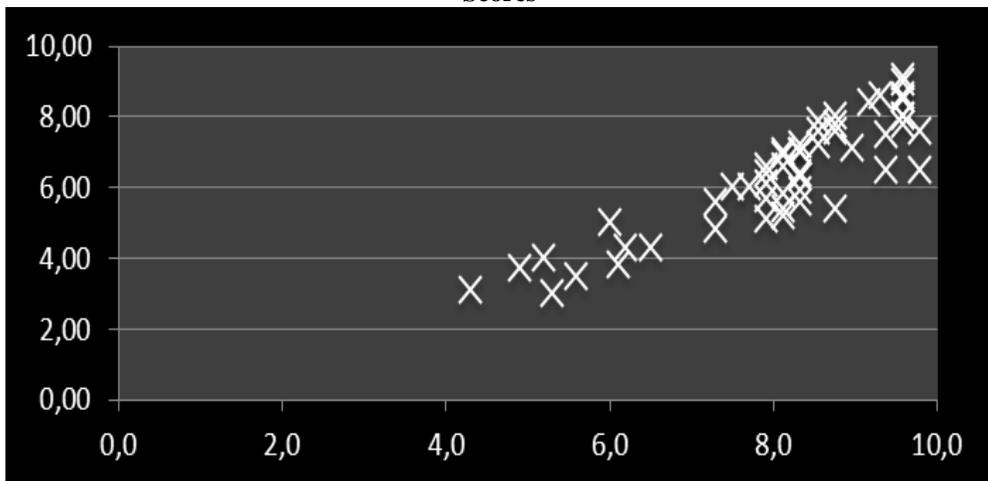**Figure 1. The Relationship Between Compositions Scores & Cohesive knowledge Test Scores**

Figure 1 shows a scattered plot for the scores of the compositions and the scores of the cohesive knowledge test. The crosses cluster seems to be tight and slopes to the right. There is therefore a close association; as the independent variable (cohesive knowledge) increases, so does the dependent variable (compositions scores).
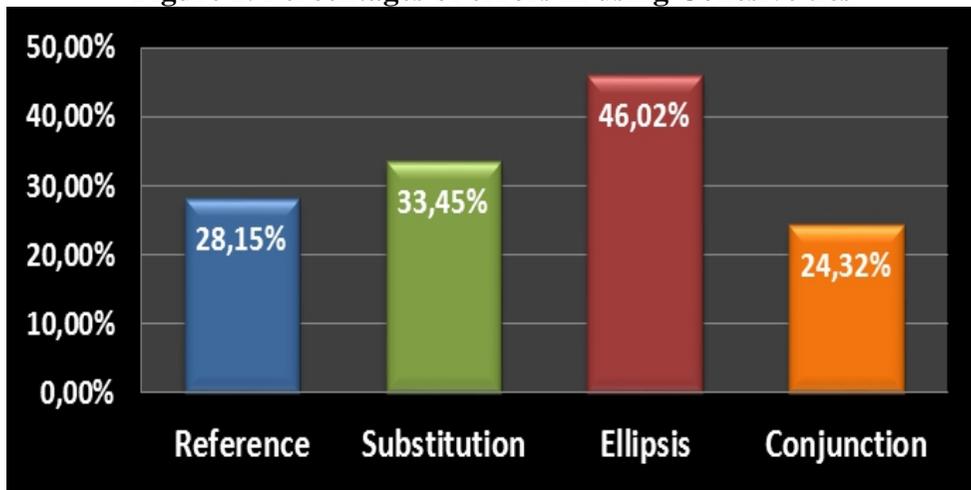
Figure 2. Percentages of errors in using Cohesive ties

Figure 2 reflects the percentage of errors students made in using cohesive devices. Each percentage was calculated in relation to the total number of errors in using each cohesive tie. The most errors made were in using ellipsis (46.02%) whereas the least errors made were in using conjunctions (24.32%). Although the percentage of reference errors (28.15%) is higher than that of conjunctions, it is still lower that the percentage of substitution errors (33.45%).

Discussion
Hypotheses and Findings

The results of the study proved that the first hypothesis is true; there is a strong positive relationship between having background about cohesive ties and the quality of English writing of Saudi prep-year pre-intermediate students in Taibah University (Figure 1). More validity is given to the first hypothesis through the data shown in (Table 1) which reflects a significant difference between the two variables. Although this goes with what Guiju (2005) proves in his study, it contradicts Khalil's findings in the low correlation of coherence score with number of cohesive ties used by EFL Arab learners.

The second hypothesis proves to be more valid as there is a very significant result Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05, t = 10.086 (Table 2) which indicates a significant difference between higher group and lower group. It seems that the group of students who scored higher (cut off score = 8.99) wrote more cohesive compositions as a result of the more appropriate use of cohesive devices. This also implies that the less cohesive knowledge the EFL student has, the lower the quality of composition is. Thus, from the statistical point of view, the cohesive knowledge has a highly significant relationship with

the quality of writing. The students who had better background about using cohesive ties appropriately could write more coherent well-organized texts; they had greater variety in choice of vocabulary, lower level of repetition, better use of conjunctions, and more correct use of reference. This finding also matches Guiju's results and Crowhurst and McCulley's opinion that the use of certain linguistic devices (e.g., cohesive ties) is related to differences in the quality of student persuasive writing.

Moreover, the error analysis shows that the lower group tends more to use references without an explicit referent (e.g. * *I think unemployment and pollution are the most serious problems that affect our society. It causes them to be frustrated and demotivated.…*). A second apparent reference error appeared when a pronoun has more than one antecedent. The third most repeated reference error is being confused about the use of definite and indefinite articles (e.g. * *The pollution is one of the …*). One of the possible reasons for this is L1 interference, as there are no indefinite articles and more than one definite article in Arabic. As for using conjunctions, the overuse of additives, especially 'and' and 'also', made weaker students' compositions look redundant and misleading (e.g. * *…. we can stop using nuclear weapons in the Middle East and give penalties to the countries also take special procedures to ensure safty .….*). Some adversatives such as 'at the same time' were misused for additives without showing any sign of contrast (e.g. * *I like green houses. At the same time we save energy*). Fewer errors were found when temporal and causative conjunctions were used; this might refer to the close usage of these conjunctions in Arabic. This leads to ACHILLI's research which confirms that teaching coherence using specially designed methods helps students improve, especially in the areas with which the participants were found to have most problems.

Ellipsis and substitution devices, though represented in (Figure 2) as the highest two percentages, are the least devices used by the students; it seems that this is because "Substitution and Ellipsis are more characteristically found in dialogues" (Halliday, 1994). The high percentages of errors relevant to Ellipsis and Substitution devices reflect students' weak background about these two devices (e.g. *…. *I asked my freind "Who is your best friend?" he said "My father is the best friend."*). In addition, Students tend to omit necessary nominal substitution items (e.g. **However there are very good opportunities but you just take.*) or use reference items such as 'it' and 'them' to the place of substitution items such as 'that' and 'those'. Ellipsis and Substitution errors, albeit few in number, shouldn't be marginalized simply because they occur less frequently. Lexical cohesion was not tackled in the error analysis as lexical choice and collocation are difficult for EFL students at this stage; they need high competence of English language and a lot of practice.

Implications of the study

The results positively confirm the research question; this leads to important pedagogical implications. Teachers should provide students at least with the most popular uses of cohesive devices in order to teach writing more efficiently. Popular cohesive ties are those mostly needed for beginner writers such as conjunctions, reference and ellipsis. Moreover, integrating reading with writing could help students learn about cohesion through discourse analysis. This confirms what ACHILI (2007) proves; teachers need to teach cohesion and coherence using special methods to improve their writing proficiency.

The rubrics used for correcting writing tests, especially in placement tests, should measure and reflect students' knowledge of cohesive ties. Such a procedure might help in selecting more appropriate writing material to be included in English course books utilized by college students. This goes with the recommendation Ezza (2004) made about incorporating the new developments of the linguistic and writing theories into the writing syllabus.

Limitations of the study

The internal validity of the study might be affected by L1 interference. Some students, though having good cohesive knowledge, might have applied their knowledge of cohesive devices in L1 to L2 (negative transfer). This might be the reason behind some repeated errors especially those related to reference and additives. Another limitation that refers to the Saudi culture could be the impossibility of using female subjects in the study as no male teachers are allowed to teach or deal with female students in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

The study attempts to address one major issue, namely "the ability of Saudi EFL pre-intermediate students to implement cohesive ties and the effect of this on the quality of their writing". Based on the findings mentioned above, it quite clearly shows that students who have better cohesive knowledge and who are more trained on using cohesive ties appropriately write better well-organized coherent texts.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: WRITING TEST

What do you think the most serious problem in the world is? Why?

Write 350 words explaining what you think, and give specific examples and reasons.

……………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………

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Appendix 2: Writing Rubric 1 (General Writing Proficiency)				
Areas	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
Content	There are 350 words that compose coherent topic-related sentences. Main idea stands out and is supported by detailed information. All supportive facts are reported accurately.	There are 330 words that compose almost coherent topic-related sentences. Main idea is clear, but the supporting information is general. Almost all supportive facts are reported accurately.	There are 310 words that mostly compose coherent topic-related sentences. Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is a need for more supporting information. Most supportive facts are reported accurately	There are 300 words that compose incoherent topic-related sentences. The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information. No facts are reported or most are inaccurately reported.
Vocabulary	All the vocabulary items used in the writing are used correctly. The choice and placement of the words seems accurate, natural, and not forced.	Most of the vocabulary items used in the writing are used correctly. Occasionally the words are used inaccurately or seem overdone.	Some of the vocabulary items used in the writing are used correctly. Words used communicate clearly, but the writing lacks variety, punch, or flair.	Limited vocabulary is used, which does not communicate strongly or capture the reader's interest.

Grammar	All the writing has no grammatical errors.	The writing has very few grammatical errors.	The writing has some grammatical errors.	Most of the writing is grammatically incorrect.
Punctuation	All the writing is punctuated correctly.	The writing has very few punctuation errors.	The writing has some punctuation errors.	Most of the writing is punctuated incorrectly.
Spelling	All the words in the writing are spelled correctly.	Most of the words in the writing are spelled correctly.	Some of the words of the writing are spelled correctly.	Few of the words used in the writing are spelled correctly.

Content	*Vocabulary*	*Grammar*	*Punctuation*	*Spelling*	*Total*
(1-4)	**(1-4)**	**(1-4)**	**(1-4)**	**(1-4)**	**20 (MAX 20)**
					Total ÷ 2
					___ /10

This is a modified version of the writing rubric used by the Testing Unit, ELC, DAS, Taibah University.

Appendix 3: Writing Rubric 2 (Cohesive & Coherent Writing)

Discourse Level

5 **Multiple Paragraph/ Entended Discourse**	Language production is mostly at the extended paragraph level with evidence of a variety of cohesive devices and organizational patterns. Advanced evidence of cohesion is evident by use of a variety of connecting or cohesive devices. Vocabulary is clear, specific and natural. Language is smooth and natural in delivery and without noticeable errors. Logical sequence of paragraphs; transition sentences and cohesion markers are used effectively.
4 **Paragraph Structure**	Language production is mostly at the structured paragraph level with occasional linked or connected paragraphs. Extended evidence of cohesion is evident by use of multiple connecting or cohesive devices as well as the use of extended vocabulary and advanced accuracy. some transition sentences and cohesion markers are used but could be more effective.
3 **Connected Sentences**	Language production is mostly at the linked or connected sentences level with some occasional paragraph structure. Some evidence of cohesion is evident by use of simple connecting ot cohesive devices. Insufficient transitions and cohesion markers; minimal use of sentence combining or linking transitions to show relationships between ideas.
2 **String/Extended Sentences**	Language production is mostly at the string-of-sentence level with occasional connected sentences. No transition sentences or cohesion markers are used; lack of sentences that show relationships between ideas

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1 **Simple Sentences**	Language production is mostly at the formulaic sentence or simple sentence level. No transition sentences or cohesion markers are used at all.

Total
(MAX 5)
Total X 2
___ /10

This is an adapted version from "Placement Rubric Guide"
www.avantassessment.com; it is evaluated by Avant's Valid-certified Raters.

Appendix 4: Cohesive Knowledge Test

A) Use a conjunction to join each two sentences:

1. **I went to the Al-Ansar club. I played tennis.**
    …………………………………………………………………

2. **Hady came late to the university. He didn't attend the lecture.**
    …………………………………………………………………

3. **Ramy phoned me early to go with him to the party. I couldn't get ready on time.**
    …………………………………………………………………

4. **The water will boil. Put the raw eggs.**
    …………………………………………………………………

B) What does each underlined word refer to?

5. **I used to have the key. But I lost <u>it</u>.**   …………

6. **Wash and core three apples. Put <u>them</u> into a fireproof dish.**   …………

7. **There are nice shirts in this shop. I'll take <u>one</u>.**   …………

8. **I think Shady will attend the meeting. <u>I hope so</u>.**   …………

C) What words are elided in the following sentences?

9. **Turn right. Go forward. Stop here.**
    ……………………………………

10. **Samy: Who gave you this bag?**
    Ramy: Daddy.
    ……………………………………