

The Effects of Explicit Instruction of Grammatical Cohesive Devices on Intermediate Iranian Learners' Writing

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Abstract

Cohesive devices are necessary elements in writing since they link different clauses, sentences and paragraphs to make the thread of meaning the writer is trying to communicate obvious. These devices seem to be problematic for English language learners so this study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of explicit teaching of cohesive devices on Iranian EFL learners' use of these features and the extent to which it can improve the learners' writing quality. For this purpose from among 86 intermediate two homogenous groups were formed. The experimental group had the advantage of attending a course on grammatical cohesive devices and a pretest and a post test were administered at the beginning and at the end of the course. By comparing the results of the tests it was found that the instruction could promote the learners' use of cohesive devices, it could help the learners develop more cohesive writings but the learners' writing quality didn't improve by the instruction.

Keywords: cohesive devices and writing skill

1. Introduction

Writing is generally regarded as difficult demanding skill. It is a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge. As Wall (as cited in Pilus, 1993) states "it ranges from mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic convention and various mysterious factors in between" which all add to its complex characteristic.

As writing is a complex process even in one's first language, EFL/ESL learners face greater difficulties learning this skill. Many teachers of English have noted learning writing skill seems to be more demanding than learning any other language skills.

A lot of research has been done to find out different factors that affect writing skill and cause problems for language learners. Angelova's study (as cited in Congjun, 2005) has illustrated these factors affecting the process and product of language learners' writing as language proficiency, L1 writing competence, use of cohesive devices, meta-cognitive knowledge about writing task, writing strategies and writers personal characteristics.

Within the factors influencing writing tasks cohesion and coherence seem to be the most problematic area for EFL learners (Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh, 2007).

Cohesion is regarded as one of the important factors that have to be considered in writing because it links different parts of the text. Text stands as a text by means of cohesion but without cohesion sentences would be fragmented and result in a number of unrelated sentences. In other words cohesion distinguishes a text from non-text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976)

Cohesion is related to linking idea as well as connecting phrases and sentences. Cohesion is the relationships established between sentences and paragraphs via the units in the surface structure of the text. It is part of the system of language which has potentials for meaning enhancement in texts. It enables reader to establish relevance between what was said, what is being said and what will be said through an appropriate use of cohesive devices.

A well organized paper uses techniques to build cohesion and coherence between and within paragraphs to orient and guide the reader through the paper, connecting ideas, building details, and strengthening the argument. Instruction of cohesion is very important for language learners because when students write compositions as course requirements, they need to establish clear relations between sentences and connect the statements together which shows the importance of teaching and using cohesive devices in writing. But to what extent teaching is effective in learning these missing?

2. Literature review

Attention to cohesion and coherences was drawn by Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work on cohesion in English. They noted that cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in discourse is dependant of that of another.

After Halliday and Hasan's (1976) study on cohesion and coherence, this issue became one of the interesting subjects for the researchers who worked on language skills and a lot of studies were conducted on role of cohesive devices in reading and writing skill.

Native speakers usually have no problem with learning and using cohesive ties but as Bacha and Hanania (1980) mentioned in their study on use of cohesive devices in writing, non-native speakers of English have difficulties in this area.

There is much debate on reasons of this problem that EFL/ESL learners encounter, some claiming that it is due to the culture/language-specific discourse patters and different rhetorical systems that different languages possess (Kaplan, 1967 & Chia-Yin, n.d.) and some arguing that it stems from lack of knowledge of these links (Bacha & Hanania, 1980).

Zamel (1983) found the problem in instruction methods the teachers of English use and suggested that using different strategies is required for teaching these links and Lee (2002) found instruction of cohesive devices effective for improving English learners' writing skill.

Tangkiengsirisin (2010) employed the quantitative approach to explain linguistic changes or phenomena that occurred in student writing, particularly after the delivery of feedback. The results of the study emphasized on providing the learners with feedback on their writing with focus on their use of cohesion alongside instruction and found it effective in promoting cohesion in EFL learners' writing skill.

Dealing with cohesion and coherence in writing causes much more difficulty in EFL context due to the learners' lack of exposure to language in use. Shokrpour and Fallahzadeh's (2007) concerned with EFL writing issues at the university level, tried to point out the major difficulties with which students at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences face when writing their reports. They, found grammar, syntax, punctuation, cohesive devices and coherence the most problematic areas in Iranian EFL learners' writing, with cohesive devices being the maximum problem. This shows the importance of finding ways to help learners overcome their problem with cohesive devices.

Majdeddin (2010) conducted a study to determine if training courses in writing could cause a change in the learners' use of cohesion in their writing. To narrow down her research, the lexical cohesion in addition to only one aspect of grammatical cohesion was taken into consideration. She

found overt instruction as an effective way for improving use of lexical cohesive devices in Iranian EFL learners' writing.

There were also some studies about relationship between cohesive devices and the overall quality of writing. Johnson (1992) claimed that there is no relationship between the amount of cohesive devices in writing and its quality. This issue has also been investigated by Meisou (2000) and no relationship was established. However Liu and Braine (2005) by analyzing 50 argumentative writings of Chinese students found that frequency of cohesive devices was correlated with quality of their writings.

Research findings in this area seem contradictory besides there is no single study conducted to analyze the effectiveness of instruction of cohesive ties on Iranian EFL learners with having grammatical cohesive devices in focus. It seems that more investigation into this issue is needed. The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which instruction of grammatical cohesive devices can improve learner's use of cohesive devices and overall quality of their writing and their success in PET (preliminary English Test) writing tasks.

Research questions

The present study aimed at answering to the following research questions:

1. Will the instruction of cohesive devices improve EFL learners' use of cohesive devices?
2. Will the instruction improve the learners' writing scores in PET?

Null hypotheses

Based on the above- mentioned research questions, the following two null hypotheses were formulated:

1. The instruction of cohesive devices has no effect on improving the learners' use of these features.
2. The instruction has no effect on promoting the learners' writing scores.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study were non-native English students at Alale English School in Mahallat. From among 86 students who passed the proficiency test for entering PET (Preliminary English Test) level, 24 high school girls were randomly selected. These students took English courses for 3 years and were at intermediate level. They were of the same nationality and cultural background.

3.2 Materials

The concept of grammatical cohesive devices in Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work was used to develop teaching materials. Cohesive ties fall into five major categories according to them. They are reference made up of personal pronouns, demonstratives, and comparative signals; conjunction whose subcategories are additive, adversative, cause, and temporal; lexical cohesion which consists of reiteration and collocation, ellipses wherein parts of the sentence are left out and substitution wherein words are substituted for other structures.

However to make conjunction part more specific and classified, conjunctions were introduced in terms of transitional words. They can be simple conjunctions, like and and but, or they can be more complex. Here is a chart of transitional devices accompanied by a simplified definition of their function retrieved from gustavus.edu:

Table 1. Transitional words.

Transition	Function
Addition	again, also, and, and then, besides, equally important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still, too
Comparison	also, in the same way, likewise, similarly
Contrast	although, and yet, at the same time, but at the same time, despite that, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, instead, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, otherwise, regardless, still, though, yet
Concession	granted, naturally, of course
Emphasis	certainly, indeed, in fact, of course
Example/illustration	after all, as an illustration, even, for example, for instance, in conclusion, indeed, in fact, in other words, in short, it is true, of course, namely, specifically, that is, to illustrate, thus, truly
Summary	all in all, altogether, as has been said, finally, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to put it differently, to summarize
Time sequence	after a while, afterward, again, also, and then, as long as, at last, at length, at that time, before, besides, earlier, eventually, finally, formerly, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, in the past, last, lately, meanwhile, moreover, next, now, presently, second, shortly, simultaneously, since, so far, soon, still, subsequently, then, thereafter, too, until, until now, when
Place/direction	above, below, father on, nearby, to the right
Relationships	therefore, so, consequently, for this reason, since

The teacher (researcher) provided 15 mini-lessons on grammatical cohesive devices. Every lesson was supported by different activities as classroom work and regular writing tasks as assignments. ESOL Online website was used in preparing some parts of the lesson plan.

The topics for classroom tasks and tests were usually of narrative type since it seems that learners require less back ground knowledge and reasoning ability in producing narrative texts. Narration demands less reasoning capability and the writer have enough knowledge about what s/he wants to write.

3.3 Instruments

The institute usually holds an entrance exam for the students who wish to enter PET level. The test comprised reading, listening, writing, speaking and grammar and vocabulary. This test was used as the proficiency test and its reliability was estimated at .71.

Two writing tasks (composition) were administered before and after the instruction (both topics are in from of topics in the writing section of PET). The topics of these compositions were nearly the same. The purpose of choosing nearly the same topics was to make sure the type of the text and topic will not affect the learners' use of grammatical cohesive devices. The topics were not exactly the same to minimize the practice effect. The students were asked to keep the length of their composition at around 100 words (based on PET requirements) in order to eliminate the effect of the length of text on the number of cohesive devices.

3.4 Inter-raters

To assess the quality of the writings two skilful teachers who had attended training courses for scoring PET writing tests were asked to participate in the study. They were not the teachers of students. The raters evaluated learners' writings in post-test and pre-test on the basis of requirements of PET and gave scores to writings out of 5.

As it usually happens in checking PET writing tasks, there are comments on the candidates' writing. These comments usually point out the students' strength or weakness in vocabulary and structure (complex sentences with different structure) and their ability to make a text which is well organized and easy to be comprehended by the reader.

By checking PET requirements of writing part and analysis of different raters' comment on writings the most common comments were found and a chart was developed to make analysis of raters' comment easier. The items in the chart were about learners' weakness in vocabulary, structure, using transitional words and phrases, complexity of sentences, ease of comprehension and having repetition. The raters were asked to tick the chart and write down if they had a point which is not mentioned in the chart.

3.5 Procedures

From among 86 students who could pass the proficiency (PET entrance exam) 24 students were randomly selected. Two homogenous groups were formed on the basis of their scores. Both experimental and control group had 12 students.

The participants were asked to write a composition on the given topic. The testing session was proctored by the teacher and they were not allowed to use a dictionary.

After the writing test both groups had their regular courses in the institute but the experimental group attended in a 15 session course on cohesive devices too. In the first session of instruction the learners were provided with two versions of the same text, one with cohesive devices and one without, in order to give them insight into the importance of cohesive devices in writing. The objectives and requirements of the course were clarified for the students. Therefore they found out what they were expected to do during the course. Then on the basis of the lesson plan provided the instruction took place. The teacher provided the learners with feedback on their writing tasks.

At the end of the course both control and experimental group were asked to write a composition again. The testing session was proctored by the teacher and they were not allowed to use a dictionary.

3.6 Data analysis

The pre-instruction writing was used as the pre-test and the post-instruction writing was the post test. Since this study sought the grammatical cohesion in the writing of the participants, the frequencies of the grammatical cohesive devices were counted carefully. The resulting frequencies were used as the pre-test and post-test data. Student t-tests were run for data analysis.

The obtained scores from students' writing task were compared using Student t-test in order to check whether the instruction could improve the learners' writing score.

The inter-raters comments on learners' writing too and these comments were used for more detailed analysis of texts.

4. Results

A Student t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the instruction on participants' use of grammatical cohesive ties in PET writing tasks.

Table 2 displays the results for this analysis. There was a statistically significant increase in the use of cohesive devices from pre-test ($M = 15.91$, $SD = 1.62$) to post-test ($M = 9.08$, $SD = 1.62$, $t(22) = 2.07$, $p < .05$ (two-tailed)). So t -observed was bigger than t -critical.

Table 2. Frequency of Cohesive Devices in Learners' Writing.

Groups	Mean (pre-test)	SD	Mean (post-test)	SD	t
Experimental	9.08	1.62	15.91	1.62	11.9
Control	8.92	1.38	9.08	1.16	

$p < .05$, two-tailed

A Student t -test was also conducted to evaluate the effect of the instruction on participants' success in PET writing tasks.

As it can be seen in Table 3 there was not a significant increase in the learners' quality of writing from pre-test ($M = 3.4$, $SD = .44$) to post-test ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .79$, $t(22) = 2.07$, $p < .05$ (two-tailed)). So t -observed was less than t -critical.

Table 3. Learners' Writing Scores.

Groups	Mean (pre-test)	SD	Mean (post-test)	SD	t
Experimental	2.91	.62	3.4	.44	1.67
Control	2.92	.99	2.92	.79	

$p < .05$, two-tailed

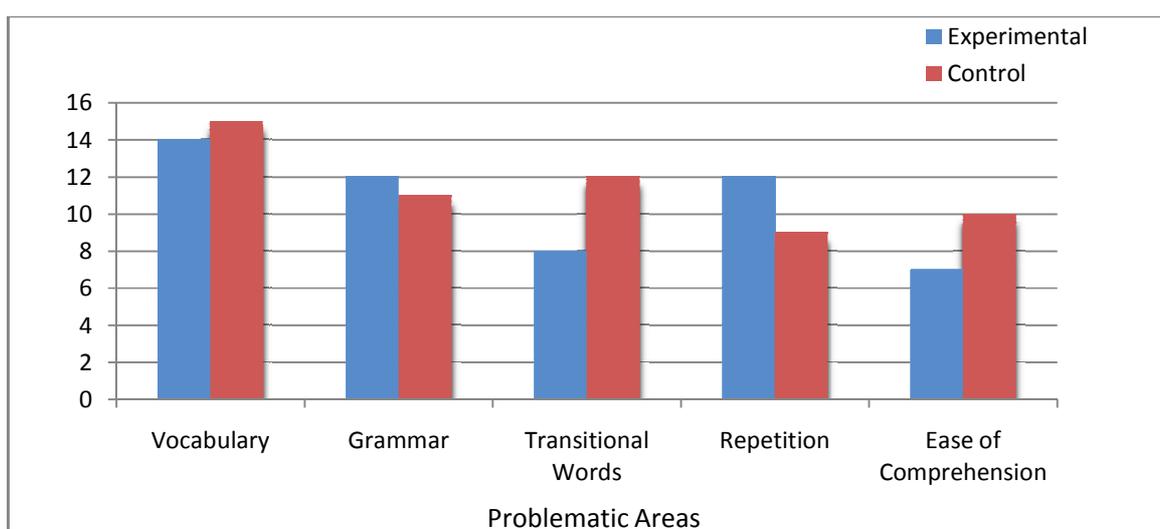


Figure 1. Raters comment on learners' problematic area.

Openly accessible at <http://www.european-science.com>

Figure 1 shows the raters' comment on students' weakness in post-test. As it is seen in the experimental group had fewer problems in using transitions and their writings were easier to comprehend but they had more repetition.

Cohesive devices must lead to less repetition which is in contrary with the results of writings analysis. This made the researcher to take a more detailed analysis of repeated items in learners' writing. It was found that the repetition in pre-tests and post-tests of control and pre-test of experimental group were mainly about nouns and verbs but in the post-test of experimental group some conjunctions were repeated more.

5. Conclusion

Focusing on grammatical cohesive devices, this study aimed at examining the effectiveness of explicit instruction on the Iranian intermediate learners' use of cohesive devices and the extent to which the course can improve the learners' success in PET writing tasks.

Twenty four intermediate learners were selected after passing proficiency test for entering PET level. They were divided into 2 groups, experimental and control. After taking a pre-test, the experimental group had attended a 15 session course and then a post-test was administered. The frequency of cohesive devices was calculated and the writings were assessed on the basis of PET requirements.

By analyzing the obtained data from frequency of the cohesive devices in two groups' writing, as it is presented in Table 2, improvement in use of these features was obvious. This can support Majdeddin (2010) idea about the effectiveness of instruction on increasing use of cohesive ties in writing. Tangkiengsirisin (2010) also reached at the same conclusion.

There is no doubt that explicit instruction could promote the number of cohesive devices in learners' writing but as it is seen Figure 1 the instruction lead to more repetition in writings. The repetition was mainly because of overusing some conjunctions. Although the presented materials in the course contained different examples of conjunctions but the learners were not able to use different kinds of them while writing. So it can be concluded that the course has to longer and learners need more exposure to be able to use different variety of conjunctions.

Comparing writing scores of two groups revealed that instruction couldn't improve the learners overall writing quality. This finding supports Johnson's (1992) idea about the relationship between the amount of cohesive devices and quality of learners' writings. No significant relationship was found in that study. This issue has also been confirmed in Merisuo's (2000) study. The results show no significant improvement in experimental group's writing but the raters comment shows some differences between experimental and control group. The raters marked the experimental groups' writing as having more complex sentences and using more transitional words that consequently leads to more cohesion in their writing. The students used more conjunctions and made more complex sentences. They also used more transitional words which lead to a better flow of idea. So we can claim that instruction was effective in developing more cohesive writings by learners but it couldn't improve the overall quality of the writings because cohesion is not the only factor that influences the quality of writing. Shokrpour and Fallahzade's (2007) investigation on learners' problem showed that Iranian learners have problem in grammar, syntax, punctuation too. This has always been detected by the raters. As it is seen in Figure 1 the raters found learners writing poor in vocabulary and grammar. So for promoting writing quality improving students' knowledge in other fields are required as well.

The findings of the present study suggests writing teachers to have instruction of cohesive devices alongside improving learners' knowledge in vocabulary, grammar and other filed that may affect quality of writing in their writing courses.

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