

## Cohesion and textual coherence in students' essays in Colleges of Education in Ghana: A case study



Research article



**Cecilia Sekwo**

Department of Languages, Presbyterian College of Education, Ghana

Email: [ceciliasekwo@yahoo.com](mailto:ceciliasekwo@yahoo.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3778-9060>

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### Abstract

The challenges that confront ESL students in their use of cohesive devices are pervasive. The study employed the sequential exploratory mixed research approach data collecting tool. The research employed the use of questionnaires to collect factual data from the tutors. Also, semi-structured interviews and observation were used as data collection tools. The target population of the study comprised 120 level 200 students of EPCE, Bimbilla. Sixty essays were analyzed using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion model and augmented with an observation of sub-categories of the devices. The findings of this study showed that the causes of the problems were intralingual limitations, interlingual sources, interference, and developmental errors. Based on the findings, the study suggests that the problems could be minimized with the use of awareness creation strategies, coupled with assistive devices, embedded teaching, and tutors adhering to students' errors and providing comprehensive feedback to them.



### Public Interest Statement

The coherence of a text is determined by a range of components. However, ESL writers have difficulty in employing these components effectively in their essays. This is evident in the research findings. For instance, Ahmed (2010), investigated cohesion and coherence problems that Egyptian student teachers of English encountered in their EFL essay writing. The results in relation to the students' coherence problems in their English writing revealed their difficulty in writing the introduction, the thesis statement, the topic sentence, concluding sentences; difficulty in the transition of ideas and sequence of ideas stemming from lack of topic-specific background knowledge and more seriously, a lot of background information which affected the content of their essays.

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### Introduction

A number of studies have shown that cohesive devices are important indicators of text comprehensibility such that an increase in text cohesion generally leads to greater comprehension of a text. The existence of these devices in a text create interrelationship among them. These interrelationships enable the reader to draw inferences which are key in text comprehension (Crossley et. al, 2014). Evidently, cohesion and coherence as the two textual elements play the most significant indispensable roles in text comprehension. While cohesion reduces the processing load on the reader by providing surface indicators, coherence reduces memory load on the reader through consistency. It is against this background that the two concepts are imperative in text construction. This is the case especially in ESL contexts in which there is no direct exposure to English.

Research in the field of cohesion and coherence in English texts have been increasingly done since the publication of cohesion in English (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Some of the authorities who contributed to this field of knowledge like Hinkel (2001); Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008); Paltridge (2004) revealed a lot of challenges related to cohesion and coherence. These challenges are bottlenecks in text composition and there is an urgent need for them to be identified for immediate rectification. The authors highlighted some of the cohesive and coherence problems in ESL writing to include the fact that ESL students construct less fluent and less detailed explanatory texts. According to them, ESL writers find it difficult to compose elaborative normative articulate essays. Thus, they lack ideas to write elaborately on a particular text-type, especially expository text.

Again, Leki et al (2008) added that ESL writers do not just write sloppily but also rely more on personal opinions and include less fact-based evidence in argumentation and exposition. This deficiency is a violation of the norms governing the use of writing skills for specific purposes. Expository as texts-type requires the writer to employ facts

in the write-up to achieve the communicative effect. Not just that, this type of writing intends to educate the audience so it should entail the charisma for that purpose. Likewise, Hinkel (2001) and Leki (2007) noted how ESL writers over or underestimate the amount of reader's background knowledge and the need for textual clarity, explicitness, and specificity. The ability to determine the level of prior knowledge readers possess and bring to text processing is a necessary requirement that the writer needs in text composition.

Background information is an indispensable element that hints the reader about the purpose of the text. Hence, it must be written clearly with the intended purpose explicitly stated. Research findings however have shown that ESL writers provide lengthy background information in their write-ups. This challenge affects both the content and organization of the text thereby resulting in the incoherent text (Paltridge, 2004).

## Literature Review

### Cohesion as a measure of text coherence

It is believed that the two textual devices create relations of identity or comparison. While coherence is embedded in a text and is not signaled by linguistic markers at the text surface, cohesion is an explicit linguistic strategy that enhances the recognition of conceptual continuity and the logical flow of ideas in texts Louwerse & Graesser, (2007). The influence of cohesive devices on coherent text construction has been examined in a number of empirical and theoretical studies. Some of these studies Akindele (2011); Jafarpur (1991); Malah, Tan and Md Rashid (2017); Liu and Braine (2005); Crossley, Kyle & McNamara, (2016); Yang & Sun, (2012) contributed in support of the theoretical framework of Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of cohesion. The authors suggest that there is a strong relationship between cohesion and coherence such that the attainment of cohesion is a measure of writing quality. The other school of thought Bryan (1991); Pathan (2012); Zhang (2000); Carrell (1982); Almaden (2006); Ralf (2018) & Bryan (1991) took a divergent view. This group maintains that there is no correspondence between cohesion and coherence. In other words, they believe the use of cohesive devices is insignificant to determine text coherence. This section presents these contrary views on the attainment of cohesion as a measure of text quality. Those that suggest cohesion as a measure of coherence are presented first, followed by those who posit that cohesion does not necessarily lead to coherence.

Akindele (2011) analyzed cohesive devices in two academic papers that examined both grammatical and lexical cohesive devices. The entire cohesive device was highlighted and identified thoroughly. The textual relationship was created based on Halliday and Hasan's cohesive theory. The results showed that cohesive text is determined by grammatical and lexical cohesive devices. The results also revealed the

importance of the appropriate deployment of the cohesive devices to form a consistent whole. The variety of cohesive devices found in his research were grammatically and lexically attached to discourse because of the cohesion provided by the linguistic means through which the text operated as a single unit. Jafarpur (1991) carried out a study to find out the interaction of cohesive ties with text quality. The study revealed that the quality of essays written in English by Iranian undergraduates correlated with the number of cohesive ties and cohesive types used in the essays.

### **Causes of student's inability to write cohesive text.**

This section presents the reasons for students' choppy writing. The challenges that confront ESL students in their use of cohesive devices are pervasive. There have been researches and empirical findings on the causes of ESL writing problems. This section outlines some of these researches that have been carried out to find the reasons why essays of students in the second language context record extensive blemishes. Uba (2015) analyzed an essay of a Nigerian postgraduate student in the United Kingdom. The findings displayed a lot of errors attributed to intralingual and interlingual sources. It was also reported that the research subject could to some extent, monitor his misappropriation in the target language, but in some cases, he needed feedback to make progress. Likewise, Richards (1971) indicated the following as causes of ESL students writing problems. Intralingual limitations, interlingual sources, and developmental errors.

### **Intralingual limitations**

Inferring from the existing literature above, the students' writing lapses are ascribed to ignorance of rule restrictions. Apparently, the students have ignored the fact that there are rules governing the use of every linguistic unit and once such rules are broken or ignored, the quality of writing is compromised. For example, a student's writing failed to achieve cohesion because he has failed to employ the rules of subordination and coordination in writing.

Example:

The women cause the problems.

The women should be arrested.

The women should be punished.

The deployment of reference and as grammatical cohesive devices are lacking in the above sentences. All the sentences share the same subject. The repetition that is created by the student makes the text wordy and boring. The text could be economized using cohesive ties.

**Interference**

This cause is as a result of the use of elements from one language while speaking another. Too much interference from the writer's first language to the target language lowers the proficiency level of the written piece. Thus, the writer's linguistic competence is derailed. The dialogue below illustrates how Ghanaian English flooded the text.

- Kwopia: Togkwo, where are you going?  
Are we not going to do the work?*
- Togkwo: I'm coming. (When he was really going away)  
I want to clear the weeds from the water path.*

**Developmental errors**

Some of the errors occurred as a result of the learners' inability to monitor the rules governing the use of the language they are learning. Developmental source of the learners' errors usually occurs on the basis of their limited experience to process the target language. Uba (2015) examined a Nigerian postgraduate student's essay in the United Kingdom. The findings highlighted errors involving intralingual and interlingual sources. It was also reported that the participant could at times monitor his errors in the target language, but in some cases, he needed a constructive feedback to make progress. This is an indication that ESL learners are inexperienced in some aspects of the English language. There are certain errors the learners cannot monitor unless they are assisted. The issues raised in the existing literature on the causes of the ELS learners are clear indications that there are a lot of gaps to be bridged to enable ESL writers to communicate competently through the writing mode. It serves as a trigger for teachers in ESL context to reinforce their instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of the ESL writer. This is the surest way to ensure their progress in the writing task.

**Methodology**

The sequential explanatory approach, which is a qualitative approach to mixed-method research designs, was adopted in the current study. According to Hesse-Biber (2010), qualitative approaches to mixed methods research may employ both qualitative and quantitative studies for many reasons. These reasons include collecting more data about the target sample, answering different questions, gaining more understanding of qualitative results by combining quantitative findings, and validating the qualitative analysis and interpretation. The semi-structured interview guide for the twenty students was basically on their ability to construct cohesive and coherent essays. The interview took the face to face trend where the researcher outlined specific issues and topics to be covered. She then decided on the sequences and wording in the course of

the interview. The researcher employed this data collection instrument because it enabled the wording of questions to be flexible, so the interviewer could probe for more specific answers, and questions could be repeated for clarification.

The design used for the study was a mixed research approach. Creswell (2014) noted that mixed methods research is an approach of inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. This study used a questionnaire to collect factual data from the tutors. Best & Kahn (2006), argue that questionnaire is the best tool for collecting factual information. This is because of its precision. Questionnaire requires direct questions for direct responses. The target population comprised 120 level 200 students of EPCE, Bimbilla. Convenient sampling was used to develop a sample of the research under discussion. The respondents were chosen based on their convenience and availability. This non-probability sampling technique was employed because of the qualitative and exploratory nature of the current research.

## Findings/Results

### Causes of the students' inability to write cohesive and coherent essays

The challenges that confront ESL students in their use of cohesive devices are pervasive. Whatever is in existence has a source. A lot of researches have been carried out to find the reasons why essays of students in the second language context record extensive blemishes.

**Table showing tutors responses on their own practices and experience in the classroom**

Practice	Number of tutors and their percentages					
	Yes/Good	Percentage	No/Poor	Percentage	Total	
Tutors 'evaluation of their students' essays in terms of cohesion and coherence	4	80%	1	20%	5	100%
Time allocation for the teaching of writing	1	20%	4	80%	5	100%
Tutors opinion on whether their students were motivated to write academically in English	3	60%	2	40%	5	100%

The most difficult area in teaching writing in English is correcting composition	3	60%	2	40%	5	100%
Teaching cohesion and coherence in writing with improving students' reading ability	2	40%	3	60%	5	100%
Stress different lexical cohesive devices	3	60%	2	40%	5	100%
Method of teaching cohesion is awareness raising	1	20%	4	80%	5	100%
Make comments on cohesion and coherence errors when correcting students' compositions	4	80%	1	20%	5	100%
Relationship of writing to other skills.	5	100%	0	00%	5	100%

Uba (2015) analyzed the essay of a Nigerian postgraduate student in the United Kingdom. The findings displayed a lot of errors attributed to intralingual and interlingual sources. It was also reported that the research subject could to some extent, monitor his misappropriation in the target language, but in some cases, he needed feedback to make progress. Likewise, Richards (1971) indicated the following as causes of ESL students writing problems. Intralingual limitations, interlingual sources, and developmental errors.

## Discussion

### Intralingual limitations

The students' writing lapses are ascribed to ignorance of rule restrictions. Apparently, the students have ignored the fact that there are rules governing the use of every linguistic unit and once such rules are broken or ignored, the quality of writing is compromised. For example, a student's writing failed to achieve cohesion because he has failed to employ the rules of subordination and coordination in writing. Example 1 supports this. Example 1: Student:

*The market women cause the problems.*

*The market women should be arrested.*

*The market women should be fine.*

The deployment of reference and conjunction as grammatical cohesive devices is lacking in the above sentences. All the sentences share the same subject. The repetition that is created by the student makes the text wordy and boring. The text could be economized using cohesive ties.

### Interference

This cause is a result of the use of elements from one language while speaking another as noted earlier. This deficiency was also recognized as one of the reasons where the research participants could not write coherently. It was realized that most of the sentences were direct translation from the Ghanaian language into the target language. There are syntactic variations between the two languages. The target language would not accommodate the features of the Ghanaian language most often, for the appropriate deployment of the cohesive elements. These interferences from the students' first language to the target language lowered the proficiency level of their written piece. Thus, their linguistic competence was derailed. An extract from the students' essays confirms the findings.

Example 2: Student:

*At times they throw the waste materials at the river month.*

*Some of the waste material can block water path.*

*It can be prevent or solved by building of public toilet  
to prevent people from shit or poo around community*

### Developmental errors

Some of the errors that occurred in the students' essays were as a result of the learners' inability to monitor the rules governing the use of the English language. They bridged and compromised a lot of rules during the deployment of the cohesive device that made their essays incoherent. The students demonstrated limited experience to process the English language. An excerpt from their text provides clear evidence.

Example 3: Student: (Text analysis)

*If the place is filthy and it does not attract tourist,  
which government cannot get money to build schools and hospitals*

Example 3 is a collection of subordinate clauses. The student has not provided an independent clause to help him deploy the cohesive devices appropriately. This is attributed to his or her inexperience in processing the language. As many as 80% of the tutors in Table 1 claimed that they comment on students' cohesion and coherent

problems during the evaluation of their essays. The role of feedback is to help students to learn from their errors. The issue is, if the feedback served its intended purpose, why then all these conundrums? It then follows that the feedback provided by the tutors does not reach the students. This was attributed to the insufficient time provided for the teaching of writing.

### **Conclusion**

This part of the study has confirmed the earlier studies carried out by (Akindele, 2011; Jafarpur, 1991; Malah et al, 2017; Liu & Braine, 2005; Crossley et.al, (2016 and Yang &, Sun (2012). Their findings demonstrated that cohesive text results in text coherence. If the devices are correctly used. There was correspondence in the text quality and the use of cohesive devices only in essays that the devices were appropriately used. Thirty-five essays had the correspondence with scores between 18 to 35 while 25 participants scored below average (14 to 17 out of 35).

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends that teachers could adhere to students' errors and provide constructive feedback to help them learn from their errors.

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