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A study of errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative texts written by Yemeni EFL learners

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the discourse errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative texts written by Yemeni EFL learners. It particularly aims at identifying the different categories and the most frequent category of errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative texts produced by the learners. For the purpose of collecting the data, the study was conducted on twenty four students of the third level in the Department of English at the Faculty of Education-Saber, Aden University, Yemen. The students were required to write an argumentative text on one of two topics given to them. Regarding the data analysis, the study utilized qualitative and quantitative procedures. The qualitative procedures were used for identifying the categories of errors whereas the quantitative ones were utilized to identify the most frequent category made in the learners' writings. The quantitative analysis made use of the statistical procedures of counting errors within each category and then calculating the percentage of each category of the errors. The results of the study indicated that the learners committed errors of reference, errors of substitution and ellipsis, and errors of conjunctions. The findings also revealed that the category of errors in the use of reference ties was the most problematic category in which the learners made the most frequent errors whereas the category of errors in the use of substitution and ellipsis was the least frequent one. Thus, these errors were distributed among the categories according to the frequency as follows: errors of reference; errors of conjunction; and errors of substitution and ellipsis, respectively.

Keywords: Argumentative writing, texts, cohesion, cohesive devices, grammatical cohesion

Introduction

An argumentative text is one of text types of a particular genre that is characterized by a degree of complexity. It involves a kind of persuasive writing through which a writer attempts to convince others about what he/she argues for or against. Due to such a purpose of argumentation, it can be described as being a complex type of writing and an activity of a cognitive load on the part of the writer. Thus, it needs the writer to deliver successful thoughts or ideas appropriately. In this regard, the writer needs to choose effective thoughts or ideas and to select effective ways of how to persuade his/her audience as well. Regarding the ways how to write argumentative texts, this requires different aspects. Writing the arguments in a cohesive way is a very fundamental requirement of these aspects. To achieve cohesion in argumentative writing, there are devices that can be used in the process of texturing. For example, grammatical cohesive devices are among the significant tools for achieving cohesive writing. These include the use of reference, substitution and ellipsis, and conjunctions as classified by Halliday and Hasan (1976) ^[10]. At any rate, EFL learners, where Yemeni learners are a case in point, find it difficult to use such types of grammatical cohesive devices for achieving cohesive argumentative writing. Thus, they make discourse errors in the use of such types of grammatical cohesion. In this regard, the present study was conducted to investigate such errors. It particularly targeted tagging such errors and identifying the most frequent category of these errors in the writings of the learners.

Literature Review

Argumentative writing is a type of writing which has its underlying fulcrums drawn from the genre theory. According to Andrew (1995 as cited in Carter, 1997: 76) ^[5], it is "an advanced

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literacy skill". Being so, it requires mastering or being equipped with higher skills of what is called as knowledge transforming but not merely telling or retelling. In this regard, knowledge-transforming "signifies that sort of writing for which no blueprint is readily available" (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996:5) ^[8]. Moreover, a skillful knowledge-transforming requires the use of a good texturing as a fundamental way of conveying or delivering the message or the ideas. Mainly, cohesion is regarded as a basic feature of text texturing. The basic role of cohesion is that it helps in text construction (Klimova and Hubackova, 2014) ^[14]. According to Connor (1984: 302) ^[6], "cohesion is one aspect of what forms textuality in a text". Thus, it is a very crucial area to be manipulated in the EFL learners' writing in general and argumentative writing in particular.

As it is known, the publication of Halliday and Hasan's (1976) ^[10] book, *Cohesion in English*, has served as a fundamental framework of research in the field of cohesion and coherence as basic features of text or discourse. In this book, Halliday and Hasan point out that cohesion is achieved through the use of specific devices known as cohesive devices which include reference ties, substitution and ellipsis, conjunctions and lexical cohesive ties. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 603) ^[11], there are some lexicogrammatical systems that help in achieving cohesion of texts. In this regard, they add that cohesion can be achieved in English through the use of four ways namely: "(i) conjunction, (ii) reference, (iii) ellipsis and (iv) lexical organization". These devices assist in linking the items of the text and relating them to each other (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Brown and Yule, 1983; Cook, 1989; Martin & Ringham, 2000; Harmer, 2004; and Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) ^[11, 10, 7, 17, 4, 13]. Based on a related area of research, Biber; Connor; and Upton (2007:5) ^[3] described cohesive devices "as the 'glue' of a text, holding the text together as a discourse rather than an accidental sequence of sentences". Regardless of any description of such cohesive devices, their main function is embodied in that they achieve cohesiveness as a necessary requirement for constructing effective texts.

Grammatical cohesive devices are among those tools that promote the process of texturing writing in general and argumentative writing in particular. These devices include some categories such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions as represented in Halliday and Hasan's (1976) Hasan ^[10] taxonomy of grammatical cohesion. However, EFL learners find it difficult to use such types of grammatical cohesive devices and thus they make errors accordingly. Related literature of research in this field has pinpointed some difficulties EFL learners encounter when writing in English. Light on some of the studies in the field pertaining to such difficulties is cast in the upcoming discussions.

Research in the area of cohesion has been stimulated from different angles and in different trends. Some studies have approached such an area using the method of performance analysis which focuses on both the correct and the erroneous use of cohesive devices whereas there are some other studies which used the approach of error analysis for investigating cohesion in the learners' writings. For the first trend of research, the studies have focused on the features of cohesion regardless of whether there are some deviations or not. As far as the second trend is concerned, research has put emphasis on the problematic and erroneous

manipulation of cohesion in writing. The present study is considered as one of the studies that deal with the erroneous use of cohesive devices in EFL learners' writings.

In the Yemeni context, cohesion of written texts has been approached by some researchers. For example, in a study of cohesion and coherence problems in the writing of non-native advanced learners of English, Shamsheer (1994) ^[21] found that Yemeni EFL learners made reference errors in the use of articles. He stated that they made errors characterized by the use of an inappropriate article. Another example is a recent study conducted by Alawdi (2015) ^[1]. With the aim of investigating the use of cohesive devices, Alawdi (2015) ^[1] conducted a study of performance analysis of ten third-level students at the Department of English, Faculty of Education-Saber, Aden University. He analyzed the students' samples of responses to the writing task given to them. Regarding the students' performance of grammatical cohesion, the results showed that the students used conjunctions more than reference ties whereas there was no indication of the use of ellipsis and substitution. In terms of erroneousness, the study revealed that the correct forms of reference and conjunctions were more than the erroneous ones. Comparing the erroneous forms of the two categories, the findings indicated that conjunctions accounted for more errors than reference ties.

Liu and Braine (2005) ^[16] investigated the cohesive features of argumentative writing produced by Chinese undergraduates. They collected their data from fifty students chosen randomly as subjects for the purpose of the study at Tsinghua University, Beijing. The students were asked to write argumentative essays. The data analysis of the students' essays revealed that the most frequent devices used are lexical devices followed by reference devices, and conjunctions respectively whereas substitution and ellipsis were excluded for being "more characteristically found in dialogue" (Halliday 2000, cited in Liue and Braine, 2005:627) ^[10, 16].

Kwan and Yunus (2014) ^[15] conducted a study on cohesive errors in writing among ESL pre-service teachers of medium and high proficiency levels as measured by a Malaysian University English Test. In the analysis of the participants' essays, they found that both groups, i.e. teachers of a high proficiency level and teachers of a medium proficiency level encountered collocation problems as the most difficult issues. Pertaining to the other categories of cohesion, the results showed that the participants who have medium proficiency level made the most frequent errors in lexical cohesion, reference, and conjunction respectively whereas those who have high proficiency level committed more errors in the use of lexical cohesion, ellipsis and reference respectively. Moreover, the findings revealed that ellipsis accounted for more errors in the writings of the high proficient teachers than the medium proficient ones.

Teaching materials have also been researched in terms of using cohesive ties within their contents. For instance, Oroji and Ghane (2014) ^[19] investigated the use of cohesive devices in English Book 3 of Iranian High School. They found that reference ties were the most frequently used in the book, followed by conjunctions, lexical cohesion, substitution, and ellipsis, respectively.

In his study of the use of conjunction in argumentative essays written by Libyan EFL students, Hamed (2014) ^[12] found that the students used conjunctions inappropriately. The findings showed that the students encountered most of

the problems in the use of adversative conjunctions, followed by additive and casual ones.

For the purpose of investigating the cohesive devices used in the cause-effect essays written by students at STKIP ST. Paulus Ruteng in Indonesia, Guna and Ngadiman (2015)^[9] analyzed thirty nine students' essays. The study pointed out that the students used cohesive devices in their writings represented by reference, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion. Pertaining to the erroneous use of cohesive devices, the results revealed that the most frequent errors were found in the use of reference ties, followed by lexical cohesion, conjunction, and substitution, respectively.

Aldera (2016)^[2] investigated cohesion in the written discourse of Arab EFL students. He conducted his study on eight students of English at the Department of English, Najran University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In his study, he found errors of using cohesive devices among other errors the students committed in their written discourse. The results showed that the highest percentage of errors in the use of cohesive devices was in the use of reference, followed by errors of ellipsis. Regarding errors of conjunctions and errors of substitution, the findings indicated that they are the least frequent categories with equal percentages in the students' samples of writings.

On the whole, research in the area of cohesion is of a multidirectional nature. To put another way, cohesion has been approached from different perspectives by different researchers. In the literature reviewed for the purpose of the present study, some concern has been directed to those studies that focus on the grammatical cohesion and the problems of using cohesive devices for achieving that. Mainly, the literature reviewed in this study has put emphasis on some of those studies that concern the erroneous use of the cohesive devices in the learners' writings in English.

Data Collection

For the purpose of collecting the data, the present study utilized the use of both qualitative and quantitative designs. Along with the general aim of investigating the errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative writing, the present study was specifically oriented towards processing qualitative and quantitative data for the purpose of answering the following research questions:

1. Which types of errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices Yemeni EFL learners make when writing argumentative texts?
2. What is the most frequent category of these errors in the learners' writings?

The data of the study were collected by the means of free composition test. Twenty four undergraduate Yemeni EFL learners were chosen randomly from the third level in the Department of English, Faculty of Education-Saber, Aden University to participate in responding to the composition test. They were required to write an argumentative essay on given topics. The participants of the study included learners of different geographical background. In other words, the participants comprised learners of rural areas, semi-urban areas, and urban areas.

As far as the writing task is concerned, learners were asked to write an argumentative text on one of the topics given to them which the researcher sees as topics that are of familiarity to them. The choice of the topics in this respect

was handled according to learners' familiarity in order that they find it easy to generate the content or the ideas for writing their texts. Thus, the learners were required to write on one of the following topics:

1. Smoking
2. Arguments for or arguments against the use of technology in our daily life.

The rationale behind selecting the argumentative text to be the type of the students' writing is that such a genre is regarded as one of the complex types of texts. According to Yang and Sun (2012: 33)^[20], an "argumentative essay has been affirmed by researchers to be the hardest model, in comparison with description, narration and exposition, in both L1 and L2 (or foreign language) writing". Because of such a complexity, it is thought that EFL learners encounter various problems in writing. Problems of using grammatical cohesive devices are regarded as important issues among different others that need to be taken into account. Due to such problems, the learners make errors in the use of such devices.

Data Analysis and Findings

Having the required data collected, some practical procedures were followed for the purpose of analyzing the data. These included: i) reviewing the learners' samples of compositions, ii) tagging errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices, iii) classifying and assigning such errors into their categories on the basis of Halliday and Hasan's (1976)^[10] taxonomy of grammatical cohesion ties, and iv) ultimately counting such errors within each category. These procedures were used in order to identify the different categories of errors in the use of such cohesive devices and the most frequent category made in the learners' argumentative compositions. However, a qualitative analysis was utilized for the purpose of identifying these errors and their categories whereas a quantitative analysis was used for the purpose of calculating the most frequent errors made in the learners' argumentative texts.

Having the learners' samples of written texts reviewed, the qualitative analysis resulted in tagging different errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices. Errors in the use of reference were among these errors as in the following extract:

People recognize that life is valuable must be avoid smoking and care for health.

Regardless of the other linguistic errors the extract above includes, it can be seen that there is an error of reference represented by omitting an anaphoric reference "he" before the word "must".

Another example of the errors in the use of reference is elicited as an error in the use of cataphoric reference as in the following extract:

When searching in the internet about smoking we are discovering that is new mad man of smokers.

In the extract above, there is an error tagged as an error of overusing cataphoric reference. The student overused the cataphoric reference "that" without any need for that. Misuse of reference was also found in the learners' samples of compositions as in the following extract:

Maybe you pay attention to the negative effects of smoking and you try to quit it. These are helpful steps, but we need actions not speech: Postpone the time of smoking, e.g. if your smoking time every day at morning, attempt to postpone it to the evening and so on. In this way, your addiction will be reduced.

In the above-cited extract, instead of using the deictic cataphoric reference “there”, the student used the demonstrative reference “these”.

At any rate, the examples above are only some cases among others found as erroneous uses of the reference ties in the learners’ samples of compositions. In general, the cases of errors in the reference ties as grammatical cohesive devices in the learners’ argumentative writings were represented as:

1. Omission of reference
2. Overuse of reference
3. Misuse or inappropriate use of reference.

In addition to the errors of reference ties, the qualitative analysis of the data revealed the existence of errors in the use of conjunctions as grammatical cohesive devices in the argumentative writings of the learners. For example, the following extract includes misuse or inappropriate use of the conjunction “but”:

The use of computer has benefits and harms but in my opinion this is based on the person who uses it.

In the sentence above, the conjunction “but” has been used without any sense of contrast between the clausal parts of the sentence. Thus, it is regarded as an error in the function of the conjunction.

Omission of conjunctions was also found as an error in the learners’ samples. For example, the extract mentioned earlier, i.e. “*People recognize that life is valuable must be avoid smoking and care for health.*” involved omission of conjunction between the words “valuable” and “must”.

Pertaining to the overuse of conjunction, the qualitative data also revealed the repetition of the conjunction “and” redundantly in the learners’ samples of writing. According to the findings of Mohammed (2015: 74) ^[18], in a study of conjunctions as cohesive devices in the writings of ESL learners, “and” as a conjunction is “avoided in the high rated texts but vigorously utilized in the low rated ones”.

Generally speaking, the qualitative data analysis revealed that errors in the use of conjunctions as grammatical cohesive devices in the learners’ argumentative writings included different cases. These cases are represented as follows:

1. Omission of conjunction
2. Overuse of conjunction
3. Misuse or inappropriate use of conjunction

As far as errors in the use of substitution and ellipsis are concerned, Yemeni EFL learners were found to commit errors in this category of grammatical cohesive devices. Though errors of such a category are least, this does not mean that they have a good mastery of such category. They may have used the avoidance strategy because of the difficulty of such a category. However, examples of errors in the use of such a category are provided as follows:

1. Smoking leads to some problems which are difficult to get rid of it.

2. The bad things of the habit are more than the good.
3. People rely on that and can not live without.

In the examples above, there is a substitution error in the first example where the student used the reference “it” as a substitution erroneously. The other two examples included ellipsis errors. In the second and the third examples, the students omitted or substituted an element at the end of the sentences by zero elements where there is a need for referential substitutions.

Based on the theory of Halliday and Hasan (1976) ^[10], the qualitative analysis of the data resulted in identifying different errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in the learners’ argumentative writings. These errors were classified as follows:

1. Errors of reference
2. Errors of conjunctions
3. Errors of substitution and ellipsis

As mentioned earlier, quantitative analysis was also used for calculating the categories of errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in the learners’ writings. Such calculations revealed that errors of reference (58%) were the most frequent category, followed by errors of conjunctions (35%) and errors of substitution and ellipsis (7%) respectively as shown in figure 1.

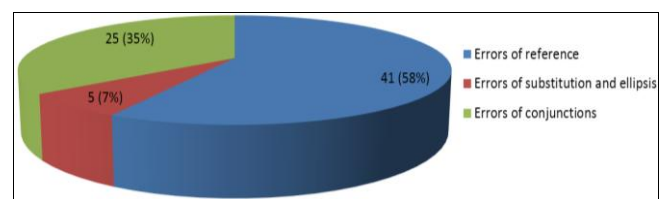


Fig 1: Number and Percentages of errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating errors in the use of grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative texts written by EFL learners in the Yemeni context. Having the data collected through asking the learners to write an argumentative essay on given topics, the qualitative and quantitative data analysis revealed that the students encounter difficulties in the use of grammatical cohesive devices. Because of such difficulties, they were found to make errors in producing cohesive argumentative texts. These errors were represented by deviations in the use of reference ties, substitutions and ellipsis, and conjunctions. They are manifested as omitting, overusing, or misusing of the cohesive devices. The results of the study revealed that the most frequent category of such errors was tagged as reference errors; followed by erroneous conjunctions; and substitutions and ellipsis, respectively. However, the lowest percentage of errors in the use of substitution and ellipsis does not mean that the students do not encounter difficulties in the use of such categories. Rather, this means either that the students perhaps utilized the avoidance strategy because of the difficulty of such categories or because that these cohesive devices, i.e. substitution and ellipsis are maybe less frequently used in written discourse than in spoken discourse. On the whole, grammatical cohesive devices should be appropriately used in order to avoid the breakdown of cohesiveness of writing.

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