
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cohesion and Errors in Essay Writing by Libyan EFL Students: A Study in the English Department, Omar Al-Mukhtar University

Machalla M.A Megaiab

Lecturer, Ph.D in Linguistics, Department of English Language, Tobruk University, Tobruk City, Libya

Corresponding Author: Machalla M.A Megaiab, **E-mail:** Drmachalla@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the misuse of the cohesion features in persuasive essays written by second-year students in the Department of English Language at Omar Al-Mukhtar University for the academic year 2022-2023. The study is guided by Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion theory. It utilized a qualitative descriptive method to study the cohesion and errors in essay writing by Libyan EFL students. The data is obtained from the participants by writing a persuasive essay that discusses one of the two topics provided. The findings of this study are three types of errors in the use of cohesion features, namely: reference features, lexical cohesion and conjunctions. The analysis also found several errors related to the structure and content of the essay, namely: the absence of thesis statement, the use of inappropriate punctuation marks, the absence of appropriate transition signals, the inconsistency of ideas, errors using parts of speech and diction that are inappropriate.

KEYWORDS

Persuasive essays, Libyan EFL, types of errors

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 02 September 2023

PUBLISHED: 23 September 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijls.2023.3.3.1

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the language skills that must be mastered by both second and foreign language learners in order to convey written messages appropriately through that language. Rao (2019) asserted that among the four language skills of English, writing is considered the most complex skill for English language learners to acquire because of its complexity in grammatical structure, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation. Furthermore, there is no one to one relationship between the spelling and pronunciation system. Therefore, English language learners find it difficult to acquire writing skills.

"With writing, however, things are different. When facing a white sheet of paper (or screen!), most of us feel a sense of resistance, almost as if whatever we put down had to be perfect the first time round. We focus on getting it right rather than getting it done. And this can become an insurmountable barrier for many" (Aliotta, 2018, p.42).

As one of the productive skills, teaching writing really needs special attention because it is related to the content or intent to be conveyed. To be able to produce good writing, the learner needs knowledge that can be used to compose related writing. This knowledge includes, among others, how to organize ideas in writing, use of language, diction, mechanics of writing and knowledge of written topics.

With regard to knowledge of how to organize ideas in writing, language learners are required to be able to convey their ideas in a coherent discourse. Therefore, Brown (2007) asserts that in writing, the learner of a language must consider several things, including how to come up with ideas, organizing them sequentially, and how to use discourse markers and rhetoric to produce coherent writing (coherent text).

To produce coherent and related (coherent) writing, language learners should have knowledge of cohesion. Cohesion is a semantic relationship among elements in a text. Connor (1996) defines cohesion as the use of linguistic tools to indicate the relationship between sentences and paragraphs in the text. In other words, cohesion is useful for making writing coherent and meaningful based on its context.

There are two groups of cohesion features in English (Halliday and Hasan, 1984). First is lexical cohesion, which includes repetition, synonyms, hyponyms, and antonyms. Second, grammatical cohesion, which includes substitution, ellipsis, reference, and connection. These features of cohesion will make writing organized precisely and coherently.

Essays are one of the most demanding types of writing, the elaboration of ideas from the topic of discussion in a coherent manner. One of the important types of essay that uses cohesion features is the persuasive essay. The persuasive essay requires the use of appropriate features of cohesion, especially the conjunctive (transitions) so that the arguments presented are logically structured and related to one another. By using the right features of cohesion, the writer of the essay will be able to express his\her ideas or arguments more logically and flow.

At the university level, persuasive essays are a practical means for students to think and argue critically and logically based on actual facts or knowledge. For example, in the 2002-2023 curriculum of study programs at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, persuasive essays are taught in the second year; the purpose of teaching this essay is to form critical and logical thinking patterns of students towards the phenomena that occur in society as well as train them to be able to convey their arguments against these phenomena in a comprehensive manner through writing.

However, based on the results of observations of persuasive essays written by second-year students in the 2022-2023 academic year, most students still have not produced a coherent essay. The ideas described in the essay are still not structured in a sequence and logical manner. In these essays, it is illustrated that students still have difficulty in using cohesion features, so the features used are still very limited. Those results in the organization of their ideas or arguments are being less coherent.

Based on information from the teaching staff for the Writing II course for the 2022/2023 academic year, in teaching persuasive essays, students are also introduced to the appropriate features of cohesion used in this type of essay. Therefore, the teaching staff assumes that at the end of the second year, students already have sufficient capability to write a coherent, persuasive essay because one of the final assignments in Writing II is writing a persuasive essay. However, the researcher also assumes that errors in using the cohesion feature in persuasive essays are still possible in the final project.

Based on the assumptions and observations that have been made, the researcher will conduct a qualitative descriptive study on the errors in the use of cohesion features in persuasive essays for second year students of the English Study Program for the academic year 2022/2023. Therefore, a literature review regarding the features of cohesion and persuasive essays will be discussed in the next paragraph.

2. Literature review

Aldera (2016) investigated the use of cohesion in written discourse by college students in their writing. The students were asked to write a free composition based on some techniques they learnt in their undergraduate studies. He found out that Arab learners' proficiency in English was low. Most of them can hardly write acceptable English, even at the sentence level. On the other hand, those who could do that found themselves at a loss when they were asked to write a discourse. And when they write any composition, they simply heap up their sentences in a jumbled way.

Al-Ahdal, Arif and Alqasham (2021) conducted a study to investigate coherence and cohesion in Saudi EFL learners' essay writing. The number of participants included in the study was 50 EFL students. After data was collected, all five methods related to that study were used by students to achieve coherence, but the achievement of the students was generally low. The results indicated that students were not competent to use the five methods to achieve coherence in their written tasks (repetition, transitional terms, pronouns, synonyms and parallel structures). The findings further indicated that EFL learners can practice writing via consistent activities in order to develop their writing competence rather than relying exclusively on proper orthography and grammar. In addition, it was important to integrate reading into writing in order to enhance the sense of continuity for students.

Connor (1996) defines cohesion as linguistic tools to signify the relationship between sentences and between sections in a text/discourse. This definition is based on the explanation of Halliday and Hasan (1984) that cohesion occurs when the interpretation or embodiment of several elements in discourse are mutually exclusive and depend on each other where the cohesion is in the text and makes the text coherent. Cohesion is determined by lexical and grammatical relationships. The existence

of cohesion in writing or text is indicated by the presence of cohesion features. What is meant by cohesion features are words or phrases that indicate continuity between sentences and between parts in a text.

Connor (1996) divided cohesion features into five categories, namely referential, ellipsis, substitution, lexical, and conjunctive. The examples of these features are described by Connor (1996) as follows:

1. Reference → "John makes good meals. Last night, he cooked spaghetti."
2. Substitution → "I want an ice cream cone. Do you want one?"
3. Ellipsis → "Would you like to hear another verse? I know twelve (verses) more."
4. Lexical cohesion → "There is a boy climbing that tree."
 - a. The boy is going to fall if he doesn't take care.
 - b. The child is going to fall...
 - c. The idiot's going to fall...
5. Conjunction → "For the whole day, he climbed up the steep mountainside, almost without stopping. And in all this time, he met no one."

The categorization of these features is based on the classification of cohesion features described by Halliday and Hasan (1984). They divided the features of cohesion into five categories, namely:

1. Reference

Reference is the most commonly used cohesion feature. This feature is used to show there is cohesion in the text through the use of personal references, demonstrative references, and comparative references.

2. Ellipsis

Ellipses specifically refer to words or phrases that are omitted because they have been mentioned in the phrase earlier in the sentence itself or in the previous sentence. This omission has no effect on the meaning in sentences that undergo an ellipsis process. There are three types of ellipsis, namely:

(1) nominal ellipsis, (2) verbal ellipsis, and (3) clause ellipsis.

3. Substitution

Substitution is a relationship at the lexical grammatical level (or the level of grammar and vocabulary) as well as the linguistic form (pattern) where a word is used to replace words or phrases in a sentence. There are three types of substitution, namely: (a) nominal substitution,

(b) verbal substitution, and (c) clause substitution.

4. Conjunction

Conjunctions make the text cohesive through the use of connecting words and numeration to link sentences and paragraphs in a text. There are five types of conjunctions, namely: (a) additive conjunctions, (b) adversative conjunctions, (3) causal conjunctions, (4) temporal conjunctions, and (5) other continuous conjunctions.

5. Lexical cohesion

Lexical cohesion is a cohesive effect obtained through the choice of vocabulary in the text. There are two types of lexical cohesion, namely: (a) lexical reiteration or lexical repetition and (b) lexical collocation. These features of cohesion become one idea in written text or essay so that the ideas are arranged in a coherent, well-organized, and related to each other so that a written text is formed as well as a coherent essay. One of the important types of essays that use cohesion features is the persuasive essay. Therefore, the next sub-topic will discuss persuasive essays. An essay is defined as a single writing consisting of several paragraphs (Oshima and Hogue, 2008). Through essays, the writer expresses his opinion and point of view, which aims to describe, analyze, or discuss a topic. Based on this purpose, an essay is divided into different types (genres).

One of the types of essays is a persuasive essay. According to Oshima and Hogue (2008), a persuasive essay is an essay that provides space for the author to provide arguments that support and/or reject a topic. This argument must be accompanied by logical reasons and support the author's opinion. A persuasive essay aims to persuade the reader to give a positive response to the author's argument or point of view. So that the reader supports the author's opinion, the arguments in the essay must be accompanied by supporting reasons and facts.

Like other types of essays, persuasive essays must have at least three paragraphs, namely the opening paragraph, the body paragraph, and the closing/conclusion paragraph (Oshima and Hogue, 2008: 171–173). The opening paragraph attracts the readers' attention as well as introduces the topic of the essay. This paragraph consists of only one paragraph and contains a thesis statement about the contents of the essay in detail. The core statement has three purposes. First, reveal the topic of the essay. Second, it covers the subtopics of the essay topic. Third, mention the mode of organizing ideas about the essay topic. Meanwhile, the body paragraph consists of one or more paragraphs. Each paragraph contains the main idea of each subtopic, where each paragraph describes the author's argument against the essay topic. The conclusion paragraph consists of only one paragraph, which has three objectives, namely (1) marks the end of the essay; (2) confirming the position/point of view of the writer on the topic of the essay; and (3) conclude the author's argument.

3. Research methods

This research is a qualitative descriptive study where the researcher acts as a key instrument in collecting data on the use of cohesion features in persuasive essays for second-year students in the Department of English Language at Omar Al-Mukhtar University for the academic year 2022-2023. Ary et al. (2010: 424) assert that qualitative research is a method that describes and analyzes phenomena that occur holistically, in detail, according to facts, and without manipulation. Furthermore, Fraenkel & Wallen (2008: 422) describe that in qualitative research, researchers act as key instruments that go directly to the field to better understand the observed phenomena from the participant's point of view.

The participants of the research are 20 students in the second year of the 2022/2023 academic year. The reason for including them is that they are taking an Academic Writing II course where the persuasive essay is introduced. Persuasive essays that were written by students became the research instrument as well as the data source for this research. The essay topics developed by students into persuasive essays are:

1. Is social media bad for children? Should it, therefore, be banned
2. Mobile phones make our life convenient and fast, but do not forget that they are dangerous. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

The collected data will be analyzed in two stages. First, Code giving. According to Dornyei (2007: 250), the code is a label for each data obtained in qualitative research so that the data is more organized, which can make more effective analysis. Also, coding can provide an overview of what is happening in the data and allows researchers to be able to find patterns for phenomena that exist in the data.

In this study, coding will be carried out based on the types of cohesion features described by Halliday and Hasan (1984), namely references, substitutions, ellipsis, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion.

Second, by analysis. In this stage, the coded data will be analyzed based on the theory of cohesion features. The researcher will look for patterns of errors in the use of cohesion features in student persuasive essays and then draw conclusions based on the findings.

4. Results and discussion

From the twenty persuasive essays, 13 students chose to develop the first topic; "Is social media bad for children? Should it therefore be banned? Meanwhile, 7 other students chose to develop the second topic; "Mobile phones make our life convenient and fast, but do not forget that they are dangerous. To what extent do you agree or disagree?"

From 20 persuasive essays, the researcher found errors in the use of three cohesion figures, namely references, lexical cohesion, and conjunctions. First, there are errors in the use of references in the 20 essays; there are 10 essays that have errors in the use of references. The following example paragraphs describe errors in the use of references.

Children are in the stage of maturity and **he\she** wants to watch everything and **he\she** wants to imitate it. Also because not all social media sites have things to watch. **he\she** can not differentiate between good and bad things. Therefore, I am against that **he\she** can use social media as **it** is not always good. Only some **them** use social media in the right way, which **it** pleases God.

First, the paragraph above indicates that the use of the pronoun "he\she" is not appropriate to replace children because the word refers to a plural noun while the pronoun "he\she" is used for a singular noun. Meanwhile, the pronoun "it" does not clearly refer to certain nouns or statements in the paragraph.

Second, the use of lexical cohesion errors. There is one essay that has errors in the use of lexical cohesion. This error is related to the use of the opposite word that is not right, where the word convenient cannot be juxtaposed with the word inconvenient based on the context of the sentence. The paragraph below indicates the use of the opposite of this word incorrectly.

*I agree with mobile phones make life **convenient** and fast because we can use mobile phones in any place and any time and without mobile phones life is **unconvenient** such as communication with family or friends or anyone. In my opinion mobile phone help me in everything such as my university life when I am not understand, I go to YouTube.*

Third, the use of conjunction errors. The majority of persuasive essays in this study have errors in the use of the conjunction feature. The ideas conveyed in essays generally overlap because they do not use the right conjunction features. The paragraph below indicates that the ideas are not arranged in sequence with the help of conjunction features. In other words, the paragraph below does not use the conjunction feature correctly and appropriately because the conjunctions "or" "that" and "and" are used inappropriate for the sentence where the conjunction is located.

*As we know social media **that** it is not good for children **and** makes them fail in their study and their life **or** their parents should not give them mobile phones under 18 years. It is bad habit they should do some sports **or** activity like sport. It is useful **or** reading books. Sometimes social media it is important **and** to teach the children English language is good thing because when they grow up, they will be able to teach what they learn before from the social media **but** spending enough time will broaden the way they think and increase the amount of knowledge they need **and** their career will be successful.*

Beside the error in the use of cohesion features in persuasive essays, the researcher found that the majority of essays had thesis statements for the essays, but each paragraph did not have the main body of the essay. This can be seen in the following example paragraph:

There is an increase for using social media. Children might not be adequately developing their social skills. This can lead to more children being socially awkward, shy or intimidated by social situations that they might not know how to engage with other children or adults. Developing social skills need practice and if technology is available. There are fewer opportunities for kids to develop these skills. Self expression on children can learn how to share their thoughts online which is a powerful tool that can build confidence.

The paragraph above does not have the main body of the essay. Although the first sentence refers to the thesis statement, there are no other sentences that support this idea. As a result, it can be said that this paragraph lacks the main body of the essay.

The researcher also found that out of 20 essays, almost half of them did not have consistency of ideas in each paragraph, so the contents of the paragraphs were not coherent. This can be seen in the following example paragraph:

We spend a lot of time on mobile phones. We can spend our time on something useful as well as helpful for example, for revising or getting a job on advs but in some other cases especially with those who do not have mobile phones, their life is inconvenient as they will need to get a job to pay for their daily cost for example if they want to buy a car or a house of course they need money for that as money became now very essential in our life, so getting a job is important for everybody to help him\her to deal with every situation in our life.

Besides not having the main body, the paragraph above also has ideas that are not related to each other. The first sentence focuses on how to spend time on mobile phones, while the rest of the sentences talk about how to get a job and cover your daily costs. In addition, the researcher also found that most of the essays paid less attention to the use of proper punctuation, so the resulting sentences become piled up without unity. This can be seen in the following example paragraph:

Social media plays a crucial role in our daily life yes as with adults but when it comes with children the subject here is completely different children do not have enough experience as well as they do not know the danger behind it. They may spend the whole day without paying any attention to their homeworks health or even their food In addition that their relation with others will be decreased and won't interact with things around them as their focus here will only be on playing games online with friends or chatting with foreigners who may abuse them one day and all of these things happen and their parents do not know anything at all as a results children will be very addicted to check some pages or know more about things which is in fact unimportant.

The underlined sentences in the paragraph above were found that they are missing punctuation marks like commas and full stops, which should be used to simplify the sentence so that there is no accumulation of ideas that make the paragraphs incoherent.

In addition to the problems with the main body of the essay, consistency of ideas, and the use of punctuation marks, the researcher also found that 2 out of 20 essays organized their ideas without using transitional words that matched the type of essay. This can be seen in the following two paragraphs examples:

I believe that mobile phones are the best choice to distract our children if we are busy as they ruin their life. Mobiles do more than good causing anxiety and accidents. One of the risks of mobile phones is the lack of sleep with children. for better sleep, children are advised to have at least eight hours sleeping before they get up in the morning. Even better, keep all devices out of the room. Parents must be strong role models and also keep their devices out of the bedroom.

Mobile phones make our life convenient and fast. In my opinion, from personal experience while I am studying, it is confusing or disturbing me. By another hand, the mobile phones are necessary and cannot live without it. It is essential things for me especially in these days for many situations for example, if I call my mom to tell her something important or if I am late for coming home. Finally, the mobile phone is like evil and peace. It is useful for directions if we want to use it as a map for directions, and dangerous from other hand, useful for its easily communicating with people together as you say who live in a small village but dangerous from the healthy side they lead to variation on the body and damage become on many people and in addition as something causes death. It is depending on how you use it.

Furthermore, the most dominant errors that emerged from 20 persuasive essays were errors using part of speech and diction that did not fit the context. The following two paragraphs indicate an error in the use of word forms and diction.

Children in their child are not conscience enough to make them own social media because the means of communication are used badly in our time. Children can not differ between good and bad. I totally object to that idea. Therefore, I am against children's use of social networking sites.

Social media can negatively effect children's developing social skills. Relationships children might get used to being alone and loss the desire to engage with their parents or even friends outside of the internet often the the virtual reality of their devices is more appealing than the physical reality.

From the two paragraphs above, it is found that the words "child", "conscience", and "differ" do not match the parts of speech based on the context. The words "childhood" as a noun and "conscious" as an adjective while "differentiate" as a verb become more appropriate to use for the context in the paragraph. Meanwhile, the words "effect" and "loss" are not the right words for this context. Supposedly, the word "affect" should replace "effect" and the word "lose" replaces the word "loss".

Overall, the errors that arise in the use of parts of speech and word choice are caused by the students' second language style, which is still very much affected by English grammar.

5. Conclusion

From the data analysis, it was found that there are three types of errors in the use of cohesion features in persuasive essays with second-year students. First, Errors using the reference features. Those errors are caused by the use of pronouns that are not appropriate, or they are not clear what nouns or statements refer to. For example, the use of the pronouns "he, she" does not clearly refer to any plural noun in any of the analyzed texts. Second, the errors of using the lexical cohesion features. Those errors are related to the use of inappropriate opposites where the word "convenient" cannot be juxtaposed with the word "inconvenient" based on the context of the sentence. And third, Errors using the conjunction features. The ideas conveyed in essays generally overlap because they do not use the right conjunction features.

In addition, based on the structure and content of the essay, it can be concluded that the errors that occurred in the essays include: (1) The majority of essays have only the main idea for the essay, but each paragraph does not have the main body of the essay; (2) Almost half of the 20 essays do not have consistency of ideas in each paragraph so that the contents of the paragraphs are incoherent. Most essays lack attention to the use of proper punctuation so that the resulting sentences become stacked without a unified idea; (3) Two of the 20 essays organize their ideas without using transitional words that match the type of essay; and (4) Errors in using part of speech and diction that do not fit the context. Errors that arise in the use of parts of speech and word choice are caused by the students' second language style, which is still very much affected by English grammar.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

Reference

- [1] Al-Ahdal, A & Alqasham, F. (2021). Coherence and Cohesion in Saudi EFL Learners' Essay Writing: A Study at a Tertiary-level Institution. *Asian EFL Journal*. 28 (1). 8-25.
- [2] Aldera, A. S. (2016). Cohesion in Written Discourse: A Case Study of Arab EFL Students. *Arab World English Journal*, 7 (2). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol7no2.22>
- [3] Aliotta, M. (2018). *Mastering Academic Writing in the Sciences: A Step by Step Guide*. CRC Press.
- [4] Ary, D, Jacobs, L.C., Sorensen, C, & Razavieh, A. (2010). *Introduction to Research in Education*. (8th ed.). California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- [5] Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. (3rd ed). New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- [6] Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research Method in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8] Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2008). *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education (7th ed.)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [9] Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. (1984). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- [10] Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. (2008). *Writing Academic English. (4th ed.)*. New York: Addison Wesley Publishing Company.
- [11] Rao, P.S. (2019). Teaching of Writing Skills to Foreign or Second Language Learners of English. *ELT Vibes: International E-Journal for Research in ELT*.5(2). 136-152.