

GRAMMATICAL COHESION IN SHS STUDENTS' RESEARCH INTRODUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Of the four language macro language skills, writing is considered the hardest to master (Berowa, 2017). For ESL (English as Second Language) users, writing needs a good command of the target language and strategic rhetorical techniques like the use of cohesive devices (Hyland, 2003). Using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion taxonomy, 15 research introductions from Senior High School students were investigated using a mixed-method approach. This study identified the grammatical cohesive devices (GCDs) found in the research introductions its implications to the students' challenges in establishing and maintaining cohesion in their writing. Results revealed that reference, conjunction, and substitution devices appeared in the analysis of the corpus, but reference devices comprised the majority of the GCDs. The excerpts taken from the corpus and the rigid content analysis found traces of overusing it by using certain devices repeatedly, misusing it because of the wrong application of certain cohesive devices, and underusing as when needed, these GCDs are not present in the sentence. This inappropriate use of devices can reduce the quality of students' writing. Hence, further research is needed to identify the best teaching practices to improve students' cohesion in writing

Keywords: cohesion, grammatical cohesive devices, research introductions, writing, challenges

INTRODUCTION

Writing is perceived as one of the hardest to master among the four language skills: listening, reading, and speaking (Berowa, 2017). Writing requires a good command of the language, strategic communicative techniques, and structural accuracy of words to be used. For these reasons, this skill is thought to be very difficult. Nonetheless, writing tests memory, cognitive ability, and the power to deliver one's thoughts and ideas (Nickerson et al., 2014). This difficulty is experienced by both native and non-native speakers, but more for the latter. Filipinos, being ESL users, find it problematic to write compositions since they not only need to have many stored vocabularies but must also train themselves with a proper arrangement of discourse ideas.

Learners are always required to write since they start schooling. They begin with simple traces,

words, phrases, sentences, letters, paragraphs, later essays, and then longer forms of creative writing. Despite practicing this skill for the longest time, writing remains to be one of the most crucial skills in learning a second language. Observing the 11 years students spent in primary education, the researcher marvels whether cohesion and coherence are established among students' writing outputs.

In the Philippine Senior High curriculum, writing is a much-needed skill. Senior high school students have already begun to venture into more formal writing (i.e., argumentative essays, concept papers, and research reports). They must write research papers because they take subjects under which these are the primary requirement (i.e., Practical Research 1, Practical Research 2, and Inquiries, Investigations, and Immersion). Aside from these subjects, they also have specialized



courses requiring probes (i.e., business plans, concept papers, and critiques). All these academic papers must be written in the students' second language—English. Huttner-Koros (2015) have reported that English is highly used in the academic domain because of two reasons: a) it is good preparation for future careers, and b) some necessary words often do not exist in other languages.

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Given all these Senior High schools (SHS) subjects and the required papers to produce, the researcher wondered whether the experience has improved students' proficiency in writing. Crossley and McNamara (2010) state that cohesion and coherence play significant roles in achieving quality writing. They are even the features tested in IELTS or TOEFL tests in academic English (EAP Foundation, 2021). Cohesion and coherence can be achieved using an outline before starting writing, asking a friend for feedback, and consistent

exposure to writing activities and readings (George Mason University, 2021). Hyland (2006) stresses that more than 90 percent of journal articles are written in English, and this number is higher among the most cited and prestigious publications. All spectra of English skills are as essential as writing. However, producing academic reports and technical papers in English has become one of the most relevant standards in higher education (Cho & Shin, 2014). Academic writing is essential to be mastered, especially by SHS students. Ahmed (2010) states that learning proper writing helps students obtain the skills needed to understand what they study. It will also assist them in exploring what they genuinely want to express in their own words.

The researcher is a Writing teacher in the SHS particularly the English for Academic and Professional Purposes (EAPP), Reading and Writing (RW), Practical Research 1 and 2 (PR1 and PR2), and Inquiries, Investigations, and Immersion (3Is). These subjects require a final research report about a topic relevant to the student's specialization. The outputs follow the Germanic research format, which the school has slightly modified as its standard template. In technical writing, the details of research matter and how the sentences come together to form a unified whole. Most of the time, in the researcher's experience, this sense of a unified whole is not 100 percent achieved.

It is undeniable that there are many international studies outside of the Philippines concerned with cohesive devices. However, those examined students' essays are most of the time descriptive (Rahman, 2013; Nazilah, 2018; Saud, 2015), persuasive (Al Shekaili, 2011), expository (Nilopa et al., 2017), or argumentative (Afrianto, 2017). Aside from these essay types, English textbooks (Cho & Shin, 2014) and international corpora of each country (Yin, 2015) are also used as data sources in studying GCDs. Interestingly, there are also published articles from various prestigious universities locally, such as those by Berowa (2017), and Manarpilis (2017). All these international and local studies attest to the importance of cohesion in writing.

In the SHS curriculum, Research Writing is a total game-changer. Activities are highly research-based, and at least to the researcher's

knowledge, requiring students to produce essays as class activity is less practiced, specifically in the past two years this subject was conducted as class activities that have relied mostly on modules. This study investigates the grammatical cohesive devices in SHS students' research introductions. Stapa and other authors (2014) define an introduction as a text that introduces other long pieces of text in a document. Caulfield (2020) also states that the primary goal of a research introduction is to present the topic and persuade readers why the study warrants their attention. Hence, a research introduction is an essential part of a research report, and its difficulties must be addressed (Javed, 2019 & Maznun et al., 2017). Moreover, a research introduction is an academic writing genre since it was written to be assessed by an academic audience (Mei, 2006). As enumerated earlier, a gap exists in available literature between cohesion in essays and research reports. There are many investigations for essays, news articles, and textbooks, but fewer are found in research outputs. Accordingly, this study aimed to bridge that gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explored the grammatical cohesive devices present among Senior High School students' research introductions. Correspondingly, it aimed to fulfill the following specific objectives:

1. Examine the grammatical cohesive devices (GCDs) used by students in their Research introductions; and
2. Determine the implications of the identified GCDs about student challenges in establishing and maintaining cohesion in writing Research introductions.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative research elements to answer the research questions. Mixed-methods research is distinguished by the fact that it mixes quantitative and qualitative methodologies by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative

data into a single research project (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). This probe specifically utilized the convergent design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed.

Descriptive statistics and content analysis were applied to answer the study's two main questions. The corpus is completed from two different research subjects. The students took both during S.Y. 2020-2021. PR2 was offered in the first semester, while 3Is in the second. Both subjects were utilized even if they were from different semesters because, during the former, the researcher had only one section of PR2. During the latter, she was given two sections. The corpus used in this project has 15 research introductions since four were taken from PR2 (one section) and 11 from 3Is (two sections).

The corpus of 15 research introductions has 6,917 words, each introduction having 370 to 590 words. RQ1 was answered using descriptive statistics (frequency count and percentage) through MS Excel while RQ2 is through content analysis following Paz's (2020) four stages: pre-analysis, formal analysis stage 1 (description), formal analysis stage 2 (interpretation and explanation), and post-analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The GCDs were manually identified, isolated, counted, categorized, and tabulated to their respective types. The frequency of occurrences and percent distribution were computed in MS Excel to determine the most dominant GCD in the corpus. Here are the results of the study:

1. Grammatical Cohesive Devices used by the Students in Their Research Introductions

The first question was answered using descriptive statistics where frequency counts and percent distributions were determined. After careful encoding and computing using MS Excel, and analyzing of the data gathered, it is found that references with 70.58% dominate over conjunctions (second) and substitution (third) with 28.29 and 1.13, respectively. No ellipsis device is

found in the corpus since they only occur in oral discourse and not in written (Alarcon & Morales, 2011; Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

1.1. Reference Devices Used by the Students in Their Research Introductions

Of the four reference devices, the definite articles, “the,” “a,” and “an” are leading with 57.33% frequency of occurrences. The definite article, “the” is the most used reference as it appears 410 times. Personal pronouns follow with 19.74%. The “their, it, they, its,” and “them” are the frequently appearing personals. Next comes the demonstratives with a very close 19.34%. From the findings, the only five demonstratives that have emerged are “this, that, these, there,” and “those.” The least used are the comparatives—other, such, more, others, most, and as...as—with only 3.59%.

References topped the GCDs used in students’ research introductions. The same result is found in the works by Al Shekaili (2011), Berowa (2017), Cho and Shin (2014), Nazilah (2018), Nilopa, and others (2017), Rahman (2013), and Saud (2015). Empirical evidence shows that some CDs are more preferred than others (Ghasemi, 2013). In this case, reference devices are the most preferred type (Berowa, 2017).

1.2. Substitution Devices Used by the Students in their Research Introductions

Findings revealed that nominal substitution is used more than its verbal and clausal counterparts. The nominal substitution using the words, one (8) and ones (1) has the most occurrence with a total of 9 or 56.25%. Verbal substitution using the word “have” is second with 4 or 25%, and clausal substitution with the word, “not” is third with 3 or 18.75%. Since the corpus is a genre of academic writing, it can be expected that students will be more formal in their compositions. However, it can be duly noted that informality has become something of a modern slogan, according to Hyland and Jiang (2017). Their study examined the view that academic writing has followed suit as informality has permeated a wide variety of written and spoken spheres of conversation. This could

explain the occurrence of substitution devices in the research introductions as the words “one” and “have” appeared in their writing.

Substitution, as a type, performs a minimal role compared to other GCDs found (see Table 5). Substitutions are scarcely found in written compositions because of the L1’s influence. The first language may be used to repeat words over, and so when they write in L2, they do the same (Hessamy & Hamed, 2013). Yang and Sun (2012) and Alarcon and Morales (2011) agreed that ellipsis and substitution are rarely found in a formal written discourse which explains why they are not present in research introductions. These texts are genres of academic writing, so they are formal. Moreover, as a classroom lesson, substitution is hardly found in English subjects—another reason why students are unfamiliar with them.

1.3. Conjunction Devices Used by the Students in Their Research Introductions

Next to references, conjunctions are a big chunk in students’ writing. Of the four, additive conjunctions have the highest occurrences with a total of 70.90%. The devices, “and, also, or, moreover,” and “especially” are among the five highest occurrences—however, the difference in the number of times the word, “and” is used is very obvious. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, “and” is the most used conjunction in research introductions. Causals follow the additives with 12.19%. Students’ favorite causals include “because, due to, therefore, hence,” and “in response”. Next are temporals with 8.96% and adversatives with 7.96%, completing the conjunctions in the corpus. Of the 15 introductions that have been analyzed, it is surprising that only 44 are familiar to the students.

Ghasemi (2013) states that some devices are more preferred than others. Rahman (2013) emphasizes that some are overused while others are neglected. In Manarpilis’ (2017) study, he uses the word, “ignored” to describe the nonexistence of other GCDs. This is related to the earlier assumptions that students’ lack of competence, limited knowledge (Ampa & Basri, 2019; Ghasemi, 2013; Rahman, 2013), lack of awareness, and

unfamiliarity with GCDs (Afrianto, 2017) may have prevented them from using other available devices. When students are unfamiliar with other GCDs, the devices in their writing are not various (Afrianto, 2017), and expect them to use only what they know (Ampa & Basri, 2019).

1.4. Distribution of GCDs per Research Introduction

GCDs have an average appearance of 20.54% in the students' research introductions. It is interesting to discover that GCDs consume this much percentage in the presented texts. GCDs are dominated by function words (i.e., conjunctions, prepositions, articles) which help connect meanings and make sense of the content words. Based on the numbers above, the researcher may conclude that content words (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) make up around 70-80% of texts. According to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), cohesion together with coherence consists of 25% of texts. Although not standard in every writing, IELTS notes that one does not get extra marks for excessive cohesive devices. The organization has also emphasized that it is still imperative that the devices are used accurately and appropriately in writing. Comparing the 20.54% as the overall average of the cohesive devices found in the introductions and the 25% by IELTS, the researcher believes that the students' writing is almost at par with the international standards.

2. Implications of the Identified GC Devices about the Students' Challenges in Establishing or Maintaining Cohesion in Writing Research Introductions

The current study demonstrates that writing as a skill should be approached quite differently. The DepEd-SHS sector should develop alternate techniques for teaching cohesive devices to provide their students with the information necessary to compose cohesive academic texts.

The study found three inappropriate use of devices that impede students from establishing and maintaining cohesion in their research introductions: Overuse of GCDs; Underuse of GCDs; and Misuse of GCDs.

2.1. Overuse of GCDs

It has been mentioned that references and conjunctions are excessively used while substitution and ellipsis were ignored. Although it has been already explained that substitutions and ellipsis are rarely found in formal written discourse or academic writing under which research introductions are part, it is evident that conjunctions and references are overly used. Here are the excerpts where overuse of cohesive devices has been observed.

Afrianto (2017) concludes that students are unfamiliar with other GCDs. The excessive use of these devices makes the text hard to understand (Rahman, 2013), and they appear to lack connectedness (Faradhibah & Nur, 2017). As observed, this redundancy contributed to a reduced quality of their writing.

Cohesion researchers believe that this is because of students' lack of competence and limited knowledge of L2 (Ampa & Basri, 2019; Ghasemi, 2013; Rahman, 2013), limited vocabulary (Rahman, 2013), and unfamiliarity with GCDs (Afrianto, 2017). Students know how to use cohesive devices, and apply them in their writing (Ampa & Basri, 2019; Berowa, 2017; Rahman, 2013). There are so many available devices that can be used, yet the students preferred to use some over others repeatedly. As proven by Table 11, this phenomenon still happens despite being exposed to reading and writing skills for many years (Berowa, 2017; Rahman, 2013).

2.2. Misuse of GCDs

The content analysis has arrived at the following findings: *The students find it challenging to recognize a contrast over additional information.* Misuse is most evident in the use of the adversative conjunction, "however". Depending on the case, it could be replaced by "despite that",

“despite this”, “therefore,” or “nonetheless”. The difficulty is also apparent in the students’ use of “on the other hand”, negating conjunction instead of the additive, “in addition to that.” Moreover, there is also a case when the adversative, “but” should be an additive “and.” *The students are unfamiliar with the proper functions of temporal conjunctions.* As observed in the table above, the temporal, “then” makes the sentence ambiguous, “since” is misused, “lastly” should be removed, and “at last” is highly literary. *The students show minimal confusion with causal and additive conjunctions as fewer cases of misuse are found.* The causal, “for this reason” and “thus” should either be rephrased or removed. Similarly, the additive “moreover” should be changed.

In Afrianto’s (2017) work, he also found misuse in additive, adversative, and temporal conjunctions, which are similar to the findings of this study. The erroneous use revealed students’ unfamiliarity, confusion, and difficulty using conjunctions even after a decade of exposure to writing English (Berowa, 2017). The prior study in English is insufficient, so the outputs do not match the standard.

Another possible cause is mother tongue interference (Botunac & Tivic, 2020; Faradhibah & Nur, 2017; Guna & Ngadiman, 2015; Manarpilis, 2017). This happens when students write as if they are talking. They struggle to process their ideas and eventually forget the use of connectors. They write freely and continuously without minding whether they use cohesive devices accurately (Manarpilis, 2017).

These instances could indicate an urgent need for the students to be taught how to think and write in English. By looking at the samples, it was realized that the students were not exposed to sufficient training in writing English as they are not capacitated enough to the appropriate use of cohesive devices. Although it is a lesson in Reading and Writing, a core subject in SHS, it is still not enough. It is taught together with coherence, organization, language use, and mechanics under “Identifying the Properties of a Well-Written Text.” Looking at the curriculum guide, it could be tackled within a week together with the previously mentioned lessons. Based on the samples analyzed in this study and the number

of misused GCDs found, one week for a cohesive device discussion is insufficient.

2.3. Underuse of GCDs

Each introduction has its respective topics and purposes. If there is an overuse of cohesive devices, there are also underused ones. This happens when a necessary device is missing in the sentence. If there is too much for others, there are also missing cases in some. Then, the content analysis revealed that underused GCDs are very much evident in additive conjunctions. Most of the excerpts lacked either one of the following additives: “in fact, moreover, also, in addition,” and “similarly”. The findings in the corpus proved the possible mother tongue interference in the earlier conclusion (Botunac & Tivic, 2020; Faradhibah & Nur, 2017; Guna & Ngadiman, 2015; Manarpilis, 2017). The students write continuously without applying the appropriate additive conjunctions when adding new information. By looking at the samples, they directly translated what was in their mind to their writing without the proper connectors. However, there are also traces of underuse found in the adversative “however,” definite reference “the,” and personal reference “its,” but they appeared only once or twice as compared to the additive conjunctions discussed above. Additionally, referring to Table 10, the distribution of GCDs per introduction, nine out of 15 excerpts were at par with the 25% recommended GCDs by IELTS. These nine range from 20 to 24% of averaged GCDs close to 25%. While the GCDs found in the remaining six range from 17 to 18% on average. This can be a clear sign that some of the introductions underused GCDs.

CONCLUSIONS

The common grammatical cohesive devices used by students are reference devices, particularly definite articles, personals, demonstratives, and comparatives. The students also use additive, temporal, causal, and adversative. The other GCDs used by the students are nominal, verbal, and clausal substitutions. Based on the analysis of the corpus, the introductions have overused GCDs in the form of causal and temporal conjunctions as well as the

comparative and personal reference devices. The misused conjunctions disclose that the students find it challenging to recognize contrasts from additional information, be unfamiliar with the proper use of temporal conjunctions; and have minimal confusion over causal and additive conjunctions. Lastly, underused reference devices are also found in the students' work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions enumerated above, the following recommendations are proposed. Further research is needed to identify the best teaching practices to improve students' cohesion in writing. This is based on the evidence that students are familiar with references, but the other devices were ignored. The dominant devices used were "the, a, this, that, their, it, and, and also." As observed, these are simple terms that frequently occurred in their writing. The researcher suggests that teachers expose students to authentic English texts containing plenty and varying types of cohesive devices. These texts must be written by native English speakers themselves—the kinds that students can examine and analyze to further their knowledge on cohesive devices. Noting that the average GCDs computed did not reach the 25% mark suggested by IELTS, it is recommended that curriculum makers reconsider reevaluating the curriculum. Teaching cohesion should be done extensively and not for a limited time only, as seen in the Reading and Writing curriculum guide. The numbers signify that the learning competencies enumerated in the subject are no longer responsive to the needs of the learners. As well, it is suggested that English teachers provide several reading materials and task them to reading long hours so overuse of specific GCDs will be avoided. Overuse is always attributed to limited vocabulary and partial knowledge of the target language. Hence, tasking the students to speak and read a lot in the target language might help them discover other GCDs they may use in their writing. The students urgently need to be taught how to think in English instead of Filipino so mother tongue interference would be avoided. Hence, new teaching methods that will successfully achieve this objective are suggested. In cases of underuse, teachers must provide

students with the necessary constructive feedback. It should be done every time students are given writing tasks. The teacher is also recommended to focus on the word and sentence levels and the general organization and mechanics of their students' writing outputs. This is imperative, so the students are informed of where else they can improve. Moreover, since inappropriate use of cohesive devices are found. It is suggested that teachers review grammar lessons first before giving their students a writing task.

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