



Bridging Theory and Practice: Cohesion and Coherence in Sudanese MA Students' Academic Writing

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Abstract

Academic writing plays a vital role in achieving academic success at the postgraduate level, requiring students to express ideas clearly, maintain coherence, and follow the conventions of their academic discipline. This research examines how effectively Sudanese MA students use cohesive devices and discourse markers, drawing on data from an online diagnostic assessment conducted at Sudan University of Science and Technology. Among the 69 participants (41 males and 28 females), findings reveal that while students generally understand cohesion on a theoretical level, many encounter difficulties when applying it in extended written texts. These difficulties often undermine the clarity and flow of their academic writing. To bridge the gap between knowledge and practice, the study suggests implementing genre-based writing pedagogy, regular formative feedback, and peer review activities to support students in using cohesion more effectively and accurately.

Introduction

Academic writing, particularly in English as a second language, demands logical organization, clarity of expression, and cohesive structuring—skills that are especially critical for Sudanese MA students navigating advanced academic discourse. Effective writing hinges not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the appropriate use of cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and the maintenance of textual coherence (Hyland, 2005). These elements work together to ensure that ideas flow logically and persuasively across extended written texts. This study explores Sudanese MA students' proficiency in applying cohesive elements, with the goal of identifying usage patterns that influence overall discourse quality and communicative effectiveness.

Research Problem

Despite receiving formal instruction in academic writing, Sudanese MA students often face challenges in applying cohesive devices and discourse markers effectively. This difficulty frequently results in fragmented, disjointed writing that lacks the coherence required for advanced academic communication. The gap between theoretical knowledge and practical execution suggests a need for closer examination of students' actual writing practices. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate:

- To what extent do Sudanese MA students effectively use cohesive devices and discourse markers in their academic writing?

Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the proficiency of Sudanese MA students in applying cohesive devices and maintaining coherence in their academic writing.
2. To identify the most common challenges that hinder students' ability to produce well-structured and logically connected academic discourse.
3. To provide pedagogically informed recommendations for improving genre-specific academic writing instruction, with a focus on cohesion and coherence strategies.

Literature Review

Academic writing is not plain writing. Writing effectively needs careful consideration of syntax, language, punctuation, and critical thinking to ensure readers grasp the content. Academic writing requires sufficient clarity and cohesion to convey meaning, rather than sophisticated grammar or vocabulary. According to Al Fadda (2012), academic writing involves selecting, analyzing, and synthesizing words, ideas, and opinions to create a unique point of view (p.124).

Cohesion and coherence in academic writing

Poudel (2018) defines cohesion and coherence as making meaning of the language of a text (p. 4). Cohesion and coherence are crucial for grasping the meaning of a message. According to Poudel (2018), a well-written academic paper requires a combination of cohesive devices and coherence traits to be understandable. It's important to understand the terms used in the following paragraphs.

Cohesion

Cohesion unites sentences and phrases, allowing readers to understand the meaning. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) define cohesiveness as the connection of surface text components or words within a sequence (p. 25). The author argues that cohesion relies on grammatical dependencies, which occur earlier in the text and provide meaning and order, creating a sense of unity. Halliday and Hasan (1976) define cohesion as the relationship between meaning and language in a document (p. 4).

Coherence

Coherence is a complicated concept as seen by various linguists. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), coherence refers to a text's overall semantic connections. The reader interprets text as semantic relationships between lexical elements and sentences to comprehend the purpose of information. Coherence is not evaluated as linguistic techniques, but rather as a connection to understanding the entire text.

Van Dijk (1977) explored coherence as a semantic performance in written speech. According to Hyland (2006), coherence refers to a text's relevance and accessibility in terms of concepts, ideas, and theories (p. 311). Hinkel (2004) defines coherence as "the organization of discourse with all elements present and fitting logically" (p20).

Chin, Koizumi, and Reid (2012) define academic writing as "all writing created for the purpose of study" (p. 5). The University of Sydney (2019) defines academic writing as formal, objective, and technical, providing accurate information (parr1).

Formal writing involves the use of non-conversational language, contractions, and informal terminology. The writing style is objective and technical, with vocabulary relevant to the topic. Personal opinions are not permitted.

In contrast, Zamel (1982) presents a distinct perspective on academic writing.

"A process of exploring one's thoughts and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are" (p 195); it's Academic writing requires collaboration between professors and students to acquire and apply social writing standards. According to Oshima and Hogue (2007), academic writing differs from creative writing due to its higher level of language expression (Abdessamad, 2015, p. 5).

According to Ntereke and Ramoroka (2015), academic writing should begin in the first year of university and continue through the third year with consistent practice and support. This includes mastering the features of writing and introducing academic papers. The authors suggest that English teachers in the final two years of high school can engage students in writing projects that demand analysis, synthesis, research, and critical thinking, preparing them for university-level writing. The writers emphasize the need of explicitly teaching students reading skills as a means to achieve academic success.

According to Dantas-Lunn and Ferreira (2015), students in higher education should begin academic writing at the university level. Teachers and students prioritize developing speaking skills over writing, leading to neglect of the latter. They underestimate the necessity of developing this talent in today's world.

According to Hyland (2007), improving writing skills is important for all aspects of life, from higher education to professional experience. This will assist pupils in developing their arguments and persuading others through reasoning. Without this skill, students may struggle to persuade others and succeed in their academic and professional endeavors.

Academic writing helps individuals improve critical thinking skills and effectively deliver essential information. According to Listyani (2018), academic writing allows students to practice and consolidate their knowledge, reducing the likelihood of being misled by false material. According to Ganobcsick (2006), academic writing promotes academic and intellectual development for all pupils (p. 11).

Ntereke and Ramoroka (2015) recommend that first-year university students learn essay writing skills such as argument and exposition, summarizing, paraphrasing, paragraph writing, integrating sources, writing a reference list, identifying academic writing elements such as topic analysis, writing an outline, understanding the writing process stages, and using hedging language. Ntereke and Ramoroka (2015) define hedging as the use of linguistic strategies to indicate certainty, uncertainty, politeness, and indirectness. Examples of such words are "see," "tend," "indicate," "believe," "suggest," and "possibly," which are used to avoid potential controversies surrounding assertions.

According to Gugin (2014), teaching ESL/EFL students how to compose a paragraph is the first step towards improving their academic writing, regardless of their level of higher education. The author proposes focusing eight weeks on writing paragraphs in seven modes: narration, description, exemplification, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, and persuasion. The focus is on the principles of paragraph organization, including topic sentences, supporting sentences, ending sentences, unity, and coherence, with emphasis on logical relationships and transition markers. He proposes starting the second part of the semester with five paragraph essays on narrative, process, and cause-and-effect. He concentrated on organization, thesis statements, and transitional indicators.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative test analysis and qualitative faculty feedback to assess student writing proficiency.

Participants

A total of 69 MA students (41 male and 28 female) at Sudan University of Science and Technology participated in an online diagnostic questionnaire designed to test their understanding and application of cohesion and coherence strategies in academic writing.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using a combination of assessment tools designed to evaluate both theoretical knowledge and practical application of cohesion and coherence in academic writing. First, multiple-choice items were employed to measure students' ability to recognize cohesive devices within written texts. Second, short-answer questions were included to assess their capacity to apply coherence strategies in constructing logical and well-connected responses. Finally, structured faculty surveys were conducted to collect qualitative insights regarding students' overall writing performance, with a focus on clarity, organization, and use of discourse markers.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative responses from faculty were coded thematically to identify patterns and perceptions regarding student writing performance.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Accuracy in Identifying Cohesive Devices

Question	Number of Students	Correct Answers	Percentage Correct (%)	Interpretation
Identify cohesive device	69	64	92.75%	Strong understanding
Use of discourse markers	69	59	85.51%	Moderate proficiency
Applying cohesion in writing	69	53	76.81%	Needs improvement

Analysis and Discussion

The data show that 92.75% of the students correctly identified cohesive devices, indicating a strong theoretical foundation in linguistic cohesion. Similarly, 85.51% correctly used discourse markers in isolated test items, showing moderate but promising proficiency. However, only 76.81% successfully applied cohesive strategies in extended writing tasks, suggesting a persistent gap between knowledge and execution. Many students lacked awareness of paragraph-level coherence and failed to maintain a logical progression of ideas across paragraphs.

This discrepancy emphasizes the need for task-based practice, genre modeling, and individualized feedback to reinforce cohesion in academic writing. It also reflects the challenge of transferring theoretical knowledge into extended discourse production.

Table 2: Identification and Use of Discourse Markers

Question	Number of Students	Correct Answers	Percentage Correct (%)	Interpretation
Contrastive discourse marker (e.g., "however")	69	58	84.06%	Strong recognition
Contextual use of discourse markers	69	67	97.10%	Excellent understanding
Structural placement in writing	69	54	78.26%	Requires improvement

Students displayed high recognition of discourse markers in multiple contexts, with 97.10% success in contextual usage, suggesting they understand the functional role of these markers. However, performance dropped to 78.26% when students were required to integrate these markers in structured

writing tasks. This decline reflects difficulty in maintaining paragraph transitions and logical sequencing of ideas—skills essential to overall coherence in academic texts.

Common problems identified by faculty included abrupt topic shifts, lack of appropriate transition phrases between sections, and overuse or misplacement of certain discourse markers. These issues suggest that while students are theoretically competent, they need more structured guidance in organizing content across multi-paragraph academic compositions.

Limitations of the Study

1. Sample Composition – While the sample size was increased to 69 participants, the study remains focused on a single institution, limiting the ability to generalize findings to all Sudanese MA students.
2. Cross-Sectional Assessment – The one-time diagnostic test captures a snapshot of student performance without tracking development over time.
3. Subjectivity in Faculty Feedback – Although qualitative faculty responses enrich the data, they may reflect individual teaching styles or expectations. Triangulation with student reflections or external evaluators could enhance reliability.
4. Focus Narrowed to Cohesion/Coherence – This study does not account for other critical components of academic writing such as critical argumentation, citation practices, and academic voice.

Implications for Future Research

1. Institutional Comparison – Studies across various universities and regions in Sudan would offer broader insights into national-level academic writing practices.
2. Longitudinal Study Design – A follow-up over two or more semesters could assess the effectiveness of writing interventions on students' development.
3. Sociolinguistic and Cultural Considerations – Future studies should explore how cultural norms and L1 rhetorical structures influence cohesion and coherence in English writing.
4. Digital Writing Tools – Examining the impact of AI writing assistants (e.g., Grammarly, ChatGPT) and online feedback platforms on student writing fluency and structure.

Conclusion

This study provides a robust analysis of Sudanese MA students' proficiency in using cohesive devices and maintaining coherence in academic writing. With a participant pool of 69 students, findings reveal strong theoretical understanding but evident challenges in practical application, especially in extended, structured discourse. Students' ability to recognize discourse markers is high, but their integration into logical, organized writing remains a developmental area.

The study recommends genre-based instruction, formative feedback cycles, and peer review strategies as means of bridging the gap between knowledge and application. Expanding future research to include longitudinal tracking, broader samples, and technological interventions will help refine academic writing pedagogy and ultimately support postgraduate students in meeting international academic standards.

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