

The Impact of Vocabulary Exposure on Students' Ability to Write Cohesively Using Appropriate Lexical Devices: A Discourse Analysis Study

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Abstract

Numerous studies have demonstrated that lexical cohesion devices are crucial in achieving cohesion within written texts. However, many EFL students often struggle to use these devices effectively, resulting in a lack of cohesion in their writing. A quasi-experimental design was implemented in a classroom to tackle this challenge. The study focused on vocabulary exercises to assess their impact on students' ability to produce cohesive essays that incorporate relevant lexical devices. It involved 30 EFL participants who participated in a structured intervention featuring targeted vocabulary activities designed to enhance their awareness and application of lexical cohesion. Pre-tests were conducted to evaluate the students' initial writing skills before the exercises, followed by post-tests to measure any improvements in their performance after the intervention period. Subsequently, a quantitative method was used to analyze the data, aligning perfectly with the study's primary objective of determining the intervention's effectiveness. The essays created by participants underwent careful analysis, focusing on the frequency and percentage of lexical cohesive devices utilized. The results indicated a significant enhancement in using these devices in the post-test essays compared to the pre-intervention assessments. These findings prove that the vocabulary-focused intervention had a statistically significant positive effect on students' writing performance. This highlights the vital role of lexical cohesive devices in fostering cohesion in writing and confirms the efficacy of targeted vocabulary instruction in improving EFL students' writing skills. Such insights are invaluable for educators aiming to enhance academic writing among EFL learners, reinforcing the ongoing need to prioritize the teaching of cohesive writing strategies within language curricula.

Keywords: Quasi-Experiment, Vocabulary Instruction, EFL Students, Lexical Cohesion, Academic Writing

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Writing is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills for learners (Rao, 2019). This complexity arises from the inherent difficulties in generating, organizing, and cohesively articulating ideas (Kılıç et al., 2016). Nevertheless, academic writing plays a crucial role in enhancing students' abilities to structure their thoughts, communicate effectively, and provide evidence to support their arguments (Mork & Oldham, 2018). Additionally, it enables them to demonstrate their understanding of a subject while expressing it clearly and concisely (Rose & McClafferty, 2019). Mastery of writing is vital in academic environments, as proficient writing skills significantly impact academic success (Flowerdew, 2016). However, success in writing is not solely dependent on one's natural aptitude; it also requires the effective use of cohesive devices (Kashiha, 2022). Ultimately, the ability to write well is an essential competency that empowers students to engage critically with content, articulate their thoughts clearly, and achieve academic success.

As Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) noted, producing a well-crafted English composition can be challenging. This difficulty intensifies when students write in a second language (Aminovna, 2022). Among the various hurdles in writing, many students find the concept of cohesion particularly difficult (Kashiha, 2022). Halliday (1985) highlights the relationship between coherence and cohesion, pointing out that a text operates within a specific context. Thus, cohesion is essential for establishing internal connections within the text and aligning those with external expectations shaped by the situational and cultural context. This alignment aids readers in navigating the content more effectively, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding and connection with the broader narrative.

It is important to note that cohesion, a fundamental aspect of writing (Rahmawati et al., 2019), is classified into grammatical and lexical categories (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). This concept involves the interconnectedness of a text's lexical and grammatical elements, which fosters a sense of unity (Alwazna, 2021). Therefore, integrating meaning at both lexical and grammatical levels is essential for achieving textual cohesion. This, in turn, ensures that the sentences within the discourse are logical and complete, serving as a prerequisite for well-structured and comprehensive communication.

Lexical cohesion, the focus of this study, refers to vocabulary-based connections that are not grammatical (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It can be established through direct word repetition, word families, synonyms, antonyms, words from the same semantic field, lexical chains, lists, and substitutions (Episiasi et al., 2022). Research by Islami et al. (2022) showed that EFL learners often struggle with lexical cohesive devices. Similarly, Ong (2011) noted that second language learners encounter various challenges related to lexical cohesion, including unnecessary additions, omissions, excessive word repetition, and improper usage of cohesive links. Khalil (2019) recognized that many non-native English speakers overuse the exact words in their writing due to a lack of lexical expertise. Therefore, creating instructional materials to improve students' understanding and application of lexical cohesion within their written work is essential.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Writing an essay can be challenging for many EFL students, as it requires a strong grasp of various linguistic structures (Sidabutar, 2021). It also necessitates the ability to connect sentences using language elements to improve cohesion (Redman & Maples, 2017). While cohesion is vital for understanding, it poses a significant hurdle for language learners in their writing (Abu-Ayyash, 2021). Unfortunately, Iraqi EFL students often face difficulties in composition, particularly in academic writing (Nasser, 2018). Evidence suggests that students in Iraqi universities struggle to effectively use lexical cohesive devices in their written work (Khudhair, 2023). As a result, it is crucial to prioritize developing and enhancing writing skills among Iraqi students to ensure they can write cohesively in English.

A study conducted by Pangaribuan and Manik (2018) revealed that vocabulary significantly influences writing proficiency. Aajami (2018) further emphasizes that understanding the precise meanings of words is essential for enhancing students' writing skills. Consequently, this research will employ a quasi-experimental design within a classroom setting. It will focus on vocabulary exercises to assess their impact on students' abilities to write essays cohesively, utilizing relevant lexical devices. The participants will consist of undergraduates from Al-Iraqia University. Their writing proficiency will be evaluated before and after the intervention to determine the effects of emphasizing vocabulary exercises on their cohesion in writing through appropriate lexical devices. The study will be anchored in Tanskanen's (2006) lexical cohesion model, which categorizes various lexical cohesive devices into two groups: reiteration and collocation.

1.3. Research Question

The current study attempts to answer the question of how focusing on vocabulary exercises affects students' use of lexical cohesive devices in their writing.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study holds substantial significance as it contributes to a deeper understanding of the vital role that lexical cohesive devices play in improving writing quality. By engaging students in vocabulary exercises, we can foster the development of their writing skills through the effective use of cohesive devices across various contexts. The findings of this research will particularly benefit EFL students by assisting them in mastering essential writing techniques. Strong writing abilities are closely associated with higher academic performance compared to those who possess less developed skills.

2. Literature Review

Proficiency in writing is more important than it may seem at first glance, and it is a skill that every language learner must actively develop (Q-Admin, 2021). Writing is often considered the most challenging language skill among English language learners, as it involves several intricate components (Rao, 2019). Coherence and cohesion are vital for producing high-quality writing. Coherence ensures that the text is understandable, while cohesion links the various parts of the essay (Mubarak, 2019). A well-crafted piece of writing should exhibit cohesion by employing cohesive devices that connect all sections of the text (Episiasi et al., 2022). However, Fitriati and Yonata (2017) noted that students often struggle to create cohesive texts due to a lack of effective use of cohesive devices, essential for establishing connections throughout their sentences.

The concept of cohesion encompasses two primary types: grammatical and lexical cohesion (Pristiwati et al., 2024). This research focuses on lexical cohesion, addressing the specific challenges that Iraqi students encounter when employing lexical cohesive devices in their writing (Hammed et al., 2022). The model utilized in this study is based on Tanskanen's model (2006), which draws from earlier models proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) and Morris and Hirst (1991). She posits that her model provides a robust foundation for understanding the significance of lexical cohesion in discourse (Tanskanen, 2006). This model categorizes lexical cohesion into two main components: reiteration and collocation. Reiteration includes simple repetition, complex repetition, substitution, equivalence, generalization, specification, co-specification, and contrast, while collocation consists of ordered sets, activity-related collocations, and elaborative collocations.

Reiteration involves repeating the previous item in an identical or slightly modified form (Sumani & Kartikasari, 2022). This category encompasses simple repetition, where an item is restated in an identical form or with a minor grammatical change, and complex repetition, which involves more substantial changes in either the grammatical functions or the lexical morphemes of the repeated items. Equivalence refers to synonymy, while generalization and specification relate to broader and more specific items, respectively. Co-specification denotes the shared general item between two items, and contrast indicates opposing meanings between items (Tanskanen, 2006). Understanding these concepts is not only fascinating but also essential for various linguistic analyses and applications.

On the other hand, collocation signifies the relationship between words that frequently appear together in the same context (Latifah & Musfiroh, 2022). This category consists of ordered sets, which include items like colours, numbers, months, and days of the week. These ordered sets play a significant role in understanding the structure and patterns of language. Activity-related collocation focuses on essential relationships between actions, people, places, and things, while elaborative collocation encompasses pairs of items that expand on the same topic in ways that are difficult to define more specifically (Tanskanen, 2006). By utilizing these devices effectively, writers improve the flow of their arguments and narratives, resulting in a more refined and accessible expression.

It is widely acknowledged that vocabulary is fundamental to learning English, especially in enhancing writing skills (Ratnaningsih & Clara, 2021). Therefore, it is essential for writers to possess a broad vocabulary and to select words that effectively align with their writing goals (Qasem et al., 2021). Vocabulary encompasses all the knowledge related to the meanings and usage of words, and mastering it is crucial for students to employ words effectively in their writing (Jamhuri, 2021). Vocabulary mastery refers to the proficient use of words and their meanings in communication (Yuliawati, 2018). As a result, students should be encouraged to continually expand their vocabularies to improve the quality of their writing. Countless studies have emphasized the significance of vocabulary in enhancing writing skills (Qasem et al., 2021; Aksoy, 2021; Boudribila, 2019; Azro et al., 2018). In this experimental study, the researchers will examine the effect of vocabulary instruction on students' use of lexical cohesive devices in their writing.

Iraqi researchers have conducted several studies on writers' use of cohesive devices. However, finding an Iraqi study addressing students needing assistance with lexical cohesion and emphasizing vocabulary instruction to enhance their use of lexical cohesive devices has proven challenging. Khudhair (2023) conducted a study to identify the categories of lexical cohesive devices students use less or more frequently when writing essays. The study employed a mixed-method approach to quantitatively and qualitatively describe the results of the data analysis. It was revealed that students primarily utilize repetition as a form of reiteration in their essays, and various patterns of collocation were observed, with the "Verb + noun" pattern exhibiting lower frequency. This indicates that students may benefit from support in using collocation as a cohesive device in their writing. With different objectives but the same theoretical background and methods, Hussein and Lutfi (2020) explored the use of grammatical and lexical devices in students' narrative essays, employing qualitative and quantitative data analysis procedures. They found that students tend to utilize grammatical devices more than lexical devices. While previous studies have focused on frequency, this experimental study, based on Tanskanen (2006) as a theoretical framework rather than Halliday and Hassan (1976), aims to examine how vocabulary instruction affects students' use of these devices in their writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

A research design serves as a strategic framework for tackling the research question through the collection of empirical data. A well-structured research design ensures that the methodologies align with the research objectives and that suitable analytical techniques are employed for data analysis (McCombes, 2021). Thus, the design of the study is crucial, as it determines how data will be gathered and analyzed. There are two main categories of study designs: descriptive and analytical studies (Abbas, 2021). Descriptive studies focus on systematically gathering information to characterize a phenomenon, situation, or population. Specifically, they address the what, when, where, and how questions pertinent to the research problem.

rather than exploring the why (Voxco, 2021). In contrast, analytical studies investigate the relationships between different variables, aiming to answer the questions of why and how. These can be further classified as either experimental or observational, each possessing distinctive characteristics (What Are Analytical Study Designs? | AJE, n.d.). This article utilizes an analytical study design, specifically in the form of a quasi-experimental study.

3.2. Participants of the Study

Research across various disciplines often takes place within real-world contexts, aiming to understand and address challenges that affect individuals and communities. As a result, researchers frequently engage with and collect data from a diverse array of participants, including individuals from government, industry, and civil society (Knight, 2023). This study will employ a designed experiment involving a group of 30 participants. For this research, all third-year students in the College of Arts at Al-Iraqia University during the academic year 2024-2025 will be selected for participation. The objective is to gather accurate and comprehensive data regarding the impact of vocabulary exercises on students' use of lexical cohesive devices in their writing.

3.3. Data Collection

To gather data on how students manage lexical cohesion in their written work, the 30 EFL students will participate in a pre-test focused on narrative essay writing. This assessment will allow researchers to identify and categorize the types of lexical cohesive devices employed. The writing topic will be proposed by the researchers and supervised by the instructor, who plays a crucial role in the targeted stage. Once the test is completed, the instructor will promptly collect the students' papers. Following the pre-test, the group will engage in a 10-week intervention consisting of weekly sessions. The instructional materials will comprise intermediate-level vocabulary exercises that emphasize various aspects of lexical cohesion. After the intervention period, the group will take a post-test that mirrors the pre-test. This will enable researchers to evaluate the extent to which the intervention influences the students' use of lexical cohesive devices in their writing.

3.4. Validity and Reliability of the Tests

Within the Department of English in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Koya University, a dedicated team of three staff members will be responsible for evaluating the writing tests. Their modifications, thoughtful feedback, and constructive suggestions provided during the assessment process will be carefully considered. The team is committed to ensuring that their evaluations accurately reflect the validity of the tests. To further enhance the accuracy and credibility of the assessment, a pilot sample of 15 students will be randomly selected from Al-Iraqiya University. This step aims to thoroughly examine the reliability of the test results and contribute to the overall integrity of the evaluation process.

3.5. Data Analysis

The test papers of the selected students will be thoroughly and comprehensively examined to assess how lexical cohesion is addressed in their essays. Each lexical cohesive device will be counted across all the students' writings. The analysis will consider the total occurrences of each device in the essays of all thirty students. The resulting percentages will be crucial for interpreting the data obtained from this analysis. Tables will be created for each lexical cohesive device identified in the students' work, presenting the devices in terms of both frequencies and percentages. These descriptive statistics will be utilized to compare the use of lexical cohesive devices in students' essays before and after the intervention. This comparison aims to assess how the intervention impacts the students' use of lexical cohesive devices in their writing.

4. Findings

The researchers conducted a thorough analysis of the pretest and posttest results, which revealed a significant increase in the use of lexical cohesive devices in the posttest compared to the pretest, indicating that many students have successfully incorporated a variety of these devices into their essays. However, it is essential to note that there was considerable variation in both the frequency and percentage of usage among students. To further illustrate these findings, the following tables provide a comprehensive analysis of the frequency and percentage of each type of lexical cohesive device employed by students in their writing before and after the intervention.

Table 1 clearly outlines the distribution of various types of reiteration, including simple repetition, complex repetition, substitution, equivalence, generalization, specification, co-specification, and contrast. This organized format effectively provides the frequency of each type along with the percentage of total occurrences. By displaying this information in numerical and percentage formats, the table helps readers understand the significance of these devices in relation to the research findings, ultimately enhancing the overall discourse in this field of study.

Table 1. The Frequency of Using Lexical Cohesion in Terms of Reiteration in Essay Writing

	Reiteration	Test	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
1.	Simple Repetition	Pre-test	16	23%
		Post-test	53	77%
		Total	69	100%
2.	Complex Repetition	Pre-test	0	0%
		Post-test	6	100%
		Total	6	100%
3.	Substitution	Pre-test	35	29%
		Post-test	84	71%

	Total		119	100%
4.	Equivalence	Pre-test	0	0%
		Post-test	33	100%
		Total	33	100%
5.	Generalization	Pre-test	6	50%
		Post-test	6	50%
		Total	12	100%
6.	Specification	Pre-test	10	46%
		Post-test	12	54%
		Total	22	100%
7.	Co-specification	Pre-test	0	0%
		Post-test	3	100%
		Total	3	100%
8.	Contrast	Pre-test	0	0%
		Post-test	2	100%
		Total	2	100%

Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the distribution of various types of collocations, including ordered sets, activity-related collocations, and elaborative collocations, along with their frequency and corresponding percentage representation. By presenting this information in both numerical and percentage formats, the table aids readers in grasping the significance of these devices in relation to the research findings, thereby enriching the overall discourse within this area of study.

Table 2. The Frequency of Using Lexical Cohesion in Terms of Collocation in Essay Writing

	Collocation	Test	Frequency(N)	Percentage (%)
1.	Ordered set	Pre-test	24	48%
		Post-test	26	52%
		Total	50	100%
2.	Activity-related collocation	Pre-test	2	18%
		Post-test	9	82%
		Total	11	100%
3.	Elaborative collocation	Pre-test	1	20%
		Post-test	4	80%
		Total	5	100%

5. Discussion

The analysis of the pretest data indicated that most students primarily relied on four types of lexical cohesive devices associated with reiteration: simple repetition, substitution, generalization, and specification. Notably, it was found that they did not utilize more sophisticated forms of repetition, such as equivalence, co-specification, or contrast. The findings concerning collocation revealed that the majority of students effectively employed lexical cohesive devices, demonstrating a significant proficiency in ordered sets, activity-related collocations, and elaborative collocations.

The post-test data analysis highlighted a marked improvement in the students' use of lexical cohesive devices. It became evident that the intervention had encouraged most participants to not only continue using the devices they had previously employed but also to incorporate a wider array of lexical cohesive devices related to reiteration and collocation, which had been lacking in their earlier writing. By examining the frequency and percentage of usage across each subcategory, we can see that many students have developed proficiency in utilizing various lexical cohesive devices in their essays.

A thorough analysis of the study's descriptive statistics provides compelling evidence of significant improvement in the students' use of lexical cohesive devices from the pretest to the post-test. This outcome underscores the notable impact of the intervention on participants' performance, affirming the effectiveness of our treatment strategy in enhancing their understanding and skills related to cohesive writing. Ultimately, these results underscore the measurable gains in students' writing abilities and highlight the transformative potential of targeted vocabulary exercises within educational contexts.

6. Conclusion

The absence of lexical cohesion in writing is a challenge that affects learners' academic proficiency. This issue arises from various factors, including disjointed ideas resulting from the inadequate or improper use of reiteration and collocation—two crucial lexical cohesive devices that connect thoughts and concepts within a text. Consequently, to address this concern, learners often prioritize mastering the use of cohesive devices. In this context, this research was conducted to assess the impact of vocabulary exercises on the lexical cohesion apparent in students' essay writing. It involved a carefully designed experiment with a group of 30 participants, where pre-tests and post-tests were administered before and after the intervention. The study employed a quantitative methodology to facilitate robust data collection and analysis, aligning with the study's objective.

Through this approach, the essays produced by the students were meticulously analyzed, revealing a significant improvement in the use of lexical cohesive devices in the post-test compared to the initial assessments. These findings indicate that the intervention had a statistically significant effect on the participants' performance, thereby validating the effectiveness of the treatment in enhancing their knowledge and skills.

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