

REPORT ON A STUDY OF REFERENCE COHESION IN TEXTS OF NIGERIAN ESL STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Grace J. Malgwi

American University of Nigeria, Yola

ABSTRACT: *The paper reports a study that investigated the use of reference cohesion in two essay types written by Nigerian ESL students. The sample consisted of 174 first year students of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) programme. A set of pictures was used to elicit the first essay, and a topic prompt was used to elicit the second. Each study sample wrote two essays. The data was analysed using a model of analysis adopted from Halliday and Hasan (1976). The study revealed a deployment of reference cohesion consistent with Standard English in one essay type and an inconsistency in the other. It was argued that limited knowledge of the passive form and the reading audience contributed to improper deployment of reference cohesion. Implications for teaching were discussed.*

KEYWORDS: reference cohesion, English as a Second Language (ESL), text elicitation tasks (TET), cohesive devices, exophoric ties

INTRODUCTION

Most English Language teachers at the secondary and tertiary levels have at one time or another experienced the frustration of reading essays written by English as a Second Language (ESL) students and failing to make sense of the writing even after identifying and correcting syntactic, morphological and general errors of mechanical accuracy. The root of the problem it was observed was the lack of connectedness of the sentences – a lack of cohesion. Liu (2000) affirms this observation when she says it is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of a text that lacks cohesion no matter how capable the reader may be. Lee (2002) observes that ESL writers do not attend to issues of cohesion unless explicitly instructed.

The near absence of cohesive features in written texts is a problem that plagues many ESL learners (Lui, 2000). In a study that investigated the use of cohesive devices by Nigerian ESL learners, Olateju, (2006) reveals a lack of competence in the use of cohesive devices despite the fact that the subjects had been exposed to intensive teaching of English for six years in the secondary school. The lack of cohesion in writing is one problem ESL teachers cannot ignore (Mojica, 2006). This paper reports a study conducted to investigate the use of reference cohesion by Nigerian students.

REFERENCE COHESION IN ENGLISH

Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 30] explain reference cohesion as “the relation between an element of the text and something else by reference to which it is interpreted in the given instance”. This, they explain, is achieved by the use of items that cannot be interpreted

semantically in their own right because they depend on something else in the text for their interpretation. Thus the cohesion lies in the continuity of reference, where the same thing enters into the discourse a second time. The presence of a reference item signals the retrieval of the identity of the referred element somewhere else within the discourse. A distinction is made between the text of the discourse and the situation of the discourse. The text of the discourse refers to actual linguistic elements used in creating the discourse while situation of the discourse refers to non-textual information of the discourse. When referential meaning is found within the text, it is Endophoric. On the other hand, when referential meaning is found in the situation of the discourse, it is Exophoric. An essential character of reference, whether endophoric or exophoric is that there is a presupposition that must be satisfied. Halliday and Hasan discuss three types of references – personal, demonstrative and comparative. Personal reference items refer to something by specifying its function or role in the discourse by the use of *I, me, we, us, you, him, her, his, they, it, etc.* Demonstrative reference is a form of reference that identifies the referent by locating it on a scale of proximity of near (*this, these, here*) and far (*that, those, there*). Comparative reference is an indirect reference by means of identity or similarity.

The Study

The study attempted to:

- a. Identify the linguistic items used by the study sample to achieve reference cohesion.
- b. Compare, qualitatively, the reference cohesive elements employed by the study sample in a narrative text to those employed in an expository text.
- c. Explore some implications of the findings to ESL writing pedagogy.

The sample for the study consisted of 174 first year students studying for the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). They have been taught English, and have been taught other subjects in the curriculum in English Language for six years in post primary institutions. Two text elicitation tasks (TET) were used to generate the data analysed. The first TET (TET 1) required the sample to write a story from a set of pictures. The instrument consisted of seven pictures which tell the story of how two brothers used the inheritance left to each of them by their father. The second TET (TET 2) required the study sample to write an essay explaining the causes of the high price of foodstuff in the Nigerian market and suggest ways of improving the situation. The data obtained from these two elicitation tasks were analyzed for reference cohesion using a framework adopted from Halliday and Hasan (1976). The reference cohesive item in each sentence was identified and classified into one of the three sub- categories of reference cohesion. The presupposed item was also identified. A qualitative comparison of the characteristic use of reference in the texts generated by the two elicitation tasks was done.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two of the three subcategories of reference cohesion identified by Halliday and Hasan,(1976) personal reference and demonstrative reference, were found to be characteristic of the study data. The personal reference items consist mainly of personal and possessive pronouns while

the demonstrative reference item, is mainly the definite article “the”. In TET 1 data, the personal reference items used belong to the entity known as “other roles” referred to as third person in the person system of English. For example,

1. Once upon a time, there lived two brothers Musa and Audu. Both them are brothers from one father. After when they come back from the city, they found their father death. So Musa decided to leave the village and go to another place. And his brother Musa stayed at home and said that he will become a farmer. He took his farming tools everyday and went to his farm to farm.

In (1) the use and function of these personal reference items in sentences in the corpus were found to be consistent with acceptable English usage (Halliday & Hasan, (1976); Hatch, (1992).

In TET 2, on the other hand, the reference items used refer to persons whose roles are defined in the communication process, what Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 45) call “speech roles” or “first and second persons”. For example,

2. I suggest that we Nigerians should consider the people living in rural...
3. In these situations, we call on the government ...
4. Because government will not help the people in Nigeria that is why the price of foodstuff has risen. And because many of us have nothing to do...

In (2) and (3) an exophoric use of the pronoun “we” was found to characterize data from TET 2. This use may be suggestive of a tendency by the subjects to situate themselves as active participants in the events in the discourse. This is further seen in example (4).

Comparing the use of reference in TET 1 and TET2 texts, the high appropriacy in the deployment of the personal reference items in texts elicited by TET 1 might be due to the set of pictures used to elicit the essays. Shapiro and Hudson (1991) contend that cohesive devices will be made more sophisticated when the task of narration is made easier by external aids such as picture prompts. It may be argued that the inappropriate deployment of the pronoun “we” in the TET 2 texts is constrained by the inability of the subjects to vary their tense forms from the active form to a passive form in which “the subject is a passive participant” as required by the discourse (Huddleston, 1988, p. 170). Another reason could be residual tendency towards context dependency. The reason is that exophoric pronouns derive their meanings from the context of situation while anaphoric pronouns derive their meaning within the text. Another inconsistency in the use of personal reference items peculiar to TET 2 is shift in pronoun use. For example,

5. Second is government workers in this situation, those that are government workers, they do not have time to go to the work, come back and go to farm. For example if he is getting twenty Naira in the month and children are schooling...

In (5) the sentence which has as its subject “government workers” referred to within the same sentence as “they”, shifts to “he” in the sentence that follows creating confusion as to whether the referent is still “government workers”. Hatch attributes confusion in person deixis to uncertainty on the part of the writer of the “true identity of the reading audience (1992 p. 210).

This might explain why such inconsistencies were not found in texts elicited by TET 1 where the writer's role as a narrator looking on from outside the discourse situation and the reader's role as also external to the discourse are embedded in the elicitation task. It can be suggested that inconsistency in the deployment of personal pronouns can occur in ESL texts when the writer is uncertain of two things: the identity of the reading audience, and the participants in the discourse (Hatch, (1992).

The second sub-category of reference cohesion in the study data is demonstrative reference. The demonstrative reference item found to be characteristic of the corpus is the reference item "the". Its use in the data was found to be typically exophoric. For example,

6. The Musa went to the beer room with his fiancé. They sat on the chair in front of them on the table there were four bottles of green beer.

The identities of the referents in (6) are retrieved outside the text. The dependence on extra linguistic sources to make sense of an utterance is characteristic of the language of children (Halliday, & Hasan 1976). A preponderance of exophoric ties makes a text to appear ungrammatical or incomplete due to unresolved presuppositions (Halliday, & Hasan 1976). This may explain the feeling that something is missing which one experiences when reading some ESL texts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

In the light of the findings above, the following suggestions are put forward for consideration by ESL writing teachers, particularly in the Nigerian context. Firstly, the observation that a poor knowledge of the passive form contributed to poor cohesion opens up the grammar and ESL writing debate. It evident here that writing ability is enhanced by a rich grammatical repertoire from which to make choices that suit the communicative purpose of the discourse. Bearing in mind Ferris and Hedgcock's argument that "writing class is not a grammar class" (2013, p.273), there is the need for the explicit teaching of active and passive in the context of appropriacy to essay type.

Secondly, writing prompts for ESL composition should be made more elaborate. The ESL writer needs to be made conscious of the reading audience and his own role as a writer in the text being created.

Finally, the finding of the study with regards to the contributory role of unresolved presupposition to ungrammaticality and incompleteness of ESL texts, calls for ESL teachers to focus on intersentential relations and consider grammaticality beyond the sentence.

REFERENCES

- Ferris, D.R. & Hedgcock, J.S. (2013) Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. .
- Halliday, M.A.K & Hasan R. (1976) Cohesion in English. Longman. London.

- Hatch, E. (1992), *Discourse and Language Education*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Huddleston, R. (1988) *English Grammar: An outline*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Lee I. (2002) *Teaching Coherence to ESL Students: A classroom inquiry*. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 11/2 135-159.
- Liu, D. (2000) *Writing Cohesion: Using Content Lexical ties* *ESOL Forum* 38/1 28-37.
- Mojica, L.A. (2006), *Reiteration in ESL Learners' Academic Papers: Do they Contribute to Lexical Cohesiveness?* *The Asia-Pacific Education Research* 15(1), 105-125.
- Olateju, M.O. (2006), *Cohesion in ESL classroom written texts*. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. 15/3; 314-331
- Shapiro, I.R. & Hudson, J.F. (1991), *Tell me a make-believe story: coherence and cohesion in children's picture elicited narratives* *Development Psychology*, 27: 960-974.