

The Effect of Textual Cohesive Reference Instruction on the Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Students

Nader Assadi Aidinlou¹, Noushin Khodamard² & Jaber Azami²

¹Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch, Ahar, Iran

²Department of Humanities, Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch, Ahar, Iran

Correspondence: Noushin Khodamard, Department of Humanities, Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch, Ahar, Iran. Tel: 98-911-600-8890. E-mail: khodamardnoushin@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of textual cohesive reference instruction on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students. To do so, about 60 students at advanced level participated in this study. The researcher divided them into two groups: control group and experimental group (30 students in each class). The control group received placebo (without useful instruction about cohesive references), but experimental group received treatment (textual cohesive reference instruction). The researcher's subjects were collected from Islamic Azad university of Rasht, Iran. They were studying English as a foreign language (B.A). The age average amongst them was 23 to 26. Also as the level of our instruction and by the help of test-retest analysis it was proved that these subjects can do that kind of test and instruction. In order to investigate the effect of textual cohesive reference on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students, the results of the pre and post tests were used to gain the mean and standard deviation. Finally with the help of our experimental study this research led to the conclusion that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups allowing the researchers to reject the null hypothesis with more than 95% confidence.

Keywords: discourse, cohesion, textual cohesive references, grammatical devices, reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Students go to school to learn many language skills. Reading in a foreign language is one of the most important skills that a learner can develop when leaving school. However, foreign language readers encounter many problems when trying to achieve a satisfactory understanding of written text. Inability to identify reference, recognize their meaning and functions, and the semantic relations they signal in written texts are among the major problems Rasht university students face.

It is suggested that Rasht university students' reading comprehension can improve if they can identify the reference items, understand their meanings, and recognize the function they have in making the semantic relations that exist in written texts.

This study investigates the impact of textual cohesive reference on the reading comprehension of English Language teaching students in Rasht University. These students study English as a foreign language, since they entered into the university and they selected that field of study and their native language is Farsi. The study assumes that cohesive references have a positive effect on reading comprehension if students are explicitly taught these items.

1.1 Cohesion

Cohesion and coherence are terms used in discourse analysis and text linguistics to describe the properties of written texts. Since text has become the focus of research, cohesion and coherence have attracted the attention of researchers as the main features of understandable text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) were among the earliest linguists who suggested practical and detailed approaches to study the cohesion and coherence of text. Cohesion has been defined in a number of ways. According to Halliday and Hasan, Cohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one PRESUPPOSES

the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text (1976: 4). Cohesion in its broadest sense is “a semantic relation between an element in the text and some other element that is crucial to the interpretation of it” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 8). They interpret cohesion as “the set of semantic resources for linking a SENTENCE with what has gone before” (1976: 10). Cohesion is the grammatical and/or lexical relationships between the different component parts of a text. Cohesion might exist within or between sentences in a text (Richards, J., Platt, J., & Platt, H., 1987). Widdowson (1993) defines it in terms of the distinction that is made between the illocutionary act and the proposition. In his view (P. 52), propositions, when linked together, form a “text” whereas illocutionary acts, when related to each other, create different kinds of “discourse”. Cohesion is the grammatical and lexical relationship between the different elements of a text. This may be the relationship between different sentences or between different parts of a sentence (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Malmkjar (2004: 543) defines cohesion as “the way in which linguistic items are meaningfully connected to each other sequentially on the basis of grammatical rules”.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) introduced a model for the analysis of cohesion in English texts. According to Halliday and Hasan’s model (1976), textual cohesive devices are divided into grammatical devices and lexical cohesion. Grammatical devices are reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. These five devices are glossed in the quotation by McCarthy and Carter:

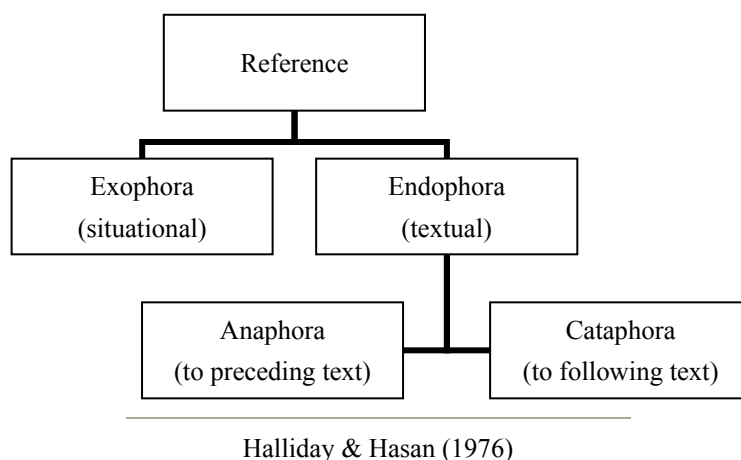
How pronoun and articles refer within and without the text, how ellipsis and substitution carry understood information over from previous utterances and signal knowledge, how conjunctions create coherent relation between segments of the text, and how lexical items relate to one another across textual boundaries... (McCarthy & Carter, 1994: 89-90)

In this study, we will concentrate on textual cohesive references and their effects on the reading comprehension of EFL students. Reference enables speakers to make multiple references to people or things in a text and it consists of three subtypes—personal (person), demonstrative (proximity), comparative (identity of similarity).

In the case of reference the information to be retrieved is the referential meaning, the identity of the particular thing or class of things that is being referred to; and the cohesion lies in the continuity of reference, whereby the same thing enters into the discourse a second time. (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 31)

1.2 Reference

Reference is concerned with a relationship that obtains between people, objects or places indicated mostly by the nominal group or the adverbial group and their other guises expressed through personals, demonstratives or comparatives on next mention at different places across the text. Also, Thompson (2004: 180) states that “reference is the set of grammatical resources that allow the speaker to indicate whether something is being repeated from somewhere earlier in the text (i.e. we have already been told about it), or whether it has not yet appeared in the text (i.e. it is now to us)”. There are two general types of reference: exophora and endophora. The first kind of reference is known as exophoric (pointing outwards) whereas the second is endophoric (pointing inwards). Exophoric reference links the language to the external context, whereas endophoric reference signals how the messages fits specifically into its textual context: the meaning that is being repeated has already been mentioned earlier in the text. Most cohesive, endophoric, reference is anaphoric (pointing backwards). Less often reference may be cataphoric (pointing forwards): this signals that the meaning of the reference item will not be specified until further on in the text (Thompson, 2004: 181). In the exophora reference the identity of the reference item is recovered from outside the text in the environment, but in the endophoric reference it is recovered from inside the text. This is why both exophora and endophora, says Martin (1992: 124), are associated with the context of situation (see Halliday & Hasan, 1991) with the latter being verbal and included in the text under examination while the former being non-verbal and excluded from the text.



The anaphoric references are lexico-grammatically encoded by personals, demonstratives and comparatives.

1.3 Personal Reference

The category of PERSONALS includes the three classes of personal pronouns, passive determiners (usually called possessive adjectives), and possessive pronouns (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 43). Personal references are realized by:

- i) subject, object and possessive pronouns
- ii) possessive adjectives

Typically the personals referring to the speaker (I, me, my, mine) and the listener (you, your, yours) as well as the speaker together with the listener (we, us, our, ours) have their referents in the context of situation, hence non-cohesive, but they can become cohesive in quoted speech (Pandian & Assadi, 2012).

1.4 Demonstrative Reference

Demonstrative reference is essentially a form of verbal pointing. The speaker identifies the referent by locating it on a scale of proximity (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 57). Demonstratives are realized by:

- i) the adverbial groups *here, there, now* and *then* which refer to the place and time of a process.
- ii) The demonstrative pronouns/adjectives like *this, these, that, those*, which refer to the location of somebody or something.
- iii) By the definite article *the* which refers to the definiteness of the noun at issue.

In general, *this, these* and *here* imply nearness to the speaker; *that, those* and *there* imply distance from the speaker, and *the* implies neither nearness to nor distance from the speaker (Pandian & Assadi, 2012).

1.5 Comparative Reference

Comparatives are realized by adjectives or adverbs referring to:

- i) general comparison including sameness (e.g. *same, identical, identically*), similarity (e.g. *similar, similarly, likewise*), and difference (e.g. *different, else, differently, otherwise*)
- ii) particular comparison including quantity (e.g. *more, few, further, additional*) and quality (e.g. *better, more, so/as*).

Unlike the personals and demonstratives that set up co-referentiality, the comparatives establish a relation of contrast between two parts of the text. But, they can also point backwards and forwards (Pandian & Assadi, 2012).

2. Review of Literature

Many studies on first (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition have shown a strong relationship between cohesion, in general, and reading comprehension. Chapman (1982) in a study with 1355 children, ages 8, 10, and 13, found that children's perception of cohesion was a significant element in reading comprehension in L1. Rather than "retreat from print", secondary school teachers should pay attention to the cohesive property of texts

when trying to help students bridge the gap from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”. Also, Bensoussan (1984) showed that difficulties in processing reading texts by ESL college students are not limited to lexical items but are related to connections between ideas in sentences and paragraphs. Another study by Hadley (1987) found a strong relationship between elementary school children’s understanding of specific cohesive items and general reading comprehension ability. Hardly showed a significant relationship between the comprehension of the selected anaphoric personal items and ability in reading.

Furthermore, the relationship between reading comprehension and specific cohesive ties, such as anaphora has been investigated by many researchers. Barnitz (1980) demonstrated that structures with forward reference were easier to comprehend than those with backward reference. The results of a study done by Gottsdanker-Willekens (1981) showed that the use of anaphoric expressions will interfere with the reading comprehension of eighth graders. Monson (1982) in a study about the effect of type and direction on comprehension of anaphoric relationships indicated that substitution/ellipsis structures were most difficult for all age groups and that referent structures were easiest for all except the 7-year-olds who found lexical structures easiest to comprehend. Results also indicated that all age groups except 7-year-olds found forward structures easier to comprehend than backward structures. Similarly, Demel (1990) found that misunderstanding of co-referential ties reflects a misunderstanding of the descriptive phrases to which the pronouns refer. In another study, Berkemeyer (1994) demonstrated that German language ability is significantly correlated with both coreferential tie comprehension and overall text comprehension.

For years, many researchers have well investigated the relationship between reading comprehension and specific cohesive ties, such as anaphora. In this study, the effect of textual cohesive references instruction on the reading comprehension will be discussed.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

- 1) Can subjects identify and interpret reference items and their functions in written texts correctly?
- 2) Does the ability to identify reference items and interpret their function facilitate their reading comprehension?

3.2 Procedure

This study has been conducted at Islamic Azad University of Rasht, Iran. About 60 students at advanced level participated in this study. The researcher divided them into two groups: control group and experimental group (30 students in each class). The control group received placebo (without useful instruction about cohesive references), but experimental group received treatment (textual cohesive reference instruction).

3.3 Instruments

In this study, the researcher administered three steps in order to investigate the effect of textual cohesive reference on students. In the first step the subjects received a reliable test. We say reliable because that test had been reliable before by the help of Test-retest analysis. By the help of pre test, the homogeneity of the subjects established. The treatment had given to the experimental group. The designs of the treatment were as follows:

- 1) Reference Items Identification (Halliday & Hasan, 1976):

The subjects were asked to identify the reference items and underline or circle them. In order to help the subjects the teacher had given an explanation about reference and how they can be detected from the text. Also the teacher described the sub parts of reference.

- 2) Function Recognition of Reference Test:

Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) taxonomy of reference items has four functions: 1) exophora, 2) endophora, 3) anaphora, 4) cataphora. The subjects were asked to classify them according to their functions. Of course, this was done with the help of a prepared text which was developed for the students to recognize those parts the researcher seek to accomplish.

- 3) Reading Comprehension Test:

A TOEFL reading test that consists of one reading passage followed by 10 multiple choice questions.

After one month as an instruction, they received post-test. The post-test was the same as the pre-test. The pre-tests’ results of groups described and frequencies, percentages, and means calculated. An independent-samples t-test conducted to measure the significance between the pre-test and post-test scores.

3.4 Participants

In this study, the researcher's subjects were selected from Islamic Azad university of Rasht. They were studying English as a foreign language (B.A). The age average amongst them was 23 to 26. Also as the level of our instruction and by the help of test-retest analysis it was proved that these subjects could do that kind of test and instruction. The number of subjects in each group was 30 one.

4. Data Analysis

In order to investigate the effect of textual cohesive reference on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students, the result of the pre and post tests are used to gain the mean and standard deviation. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the pre and post- test of control and experimental groups.

Table 1. Report for pre CE and post CE (mean and Std. deviation)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest controlG	30	25.5333	3.63160
Pretest ExperimentalG	30	25.5000	3.37332
Posttest controG	30	24.7333	4.44067
Posttest ExperimentalG	30	32.9833	4.54950
Valid N (listwise)	30		

After ten sessions of instruction as a treatment, both groups were post-tested. The data obtained from two groups' performance was analyzed statistically. The scores on the two tests were analyzed and submitted to a T-test analysis and the results obtained as illustrated in the following tables.

Table 2. Paired samples statistics for pre and post CE (mean, Std deviation, Std error mean)

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-Test EG Post-Test EG	-7.4833	3.28393	.59956	-8.70957	-6.25709	-12.48 1	29	.000

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest controlG	25.5333	30	3.63160	.66304
	Posttest controlG	24.7333	30	4.44067	.81075

The Tables show that the mean scores for the experimental group in pre-test and post-test are clearly significant. (25.5000 for experimental group in the pre-test and the mean score for this group in the post-test is 32.9833).

A paired sample T-test was conducted to reject or accept the null hypothesis of no difference between the groups at the significance level $\alpha < .05$. To check for significance, a T-test was computed. The value obtained for T-test

indicated that the performance of the two groups on reading comprehension was significantly different. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected at $p < .05$.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The data generated by this study also suggest that implementing textual cohesive instruction within a communicative task can help learners to improve their knowledge of cohesion. This study supports the use of textual cohesive reference instruction for the purpose of developing the Reading Comprehension of advanced students. The present research merely aimed to hold up the claim that the use of textual cohesive instruction in the classroom within the framework of preplanned structured input is a fruitful tool in facilitating foreign language learning.

Finally with the help of our experimental study this research led to the conclusion that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups allowing the researchers to reject the null hypothesis with more than 95% confidence. A careful study of tables points out a highly significant difference between the two groups.

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