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POSSIBLE EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP COHESION IN WRITING IN ENGLISH LESSONS

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Abstract

Cohesion is an important component of effective writing because it enables ideas within a text to be linguistically connected and easily interpreted by readers. However, learners of English as a second language often experience difficulties in using cohesive devices appropriately, resulting in writing that lacks smooth flow and clarity despite grammatical accuracy. This article examines effective classroom strategies for developing cohesion in ESL writing through a review of relevant literature and an analysis of empirical findings from previous studies.

Key words

classroom strategies, cohesion, cohesive devices, effective writing, written discourse, coherence

Introduction

Cohesion is a crucial element of effective writing, as it enables ideas within a text to be logically connected and easily understood by the reader. For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), achieving cohesion in writing is often challenging due to limited linguistic resources, insufficient exposure to authentic texts, and interference from their first language. As a result, ESL learners may produce texts that contain grammatically correct sentences but lack smooth flow and connectivity. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal work remains the foundational model for analyzing cohesive devices in written discourse. They describe cohesion as the network of linguistic elements — reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical ties — that bind sentences together to create meaning in texts. This article explores effective classroom strategies that teachers can use to help ESL learners develop cohesion in their writing.

Cohesion refers to the linguistic devices that link sentences and ideas together in a text. These devices include reference (e.g., pronouns), conjunctions, lexical repetition, substitution, and ellipsis. Unlike coherence, which deals with the overall meaning and logical organization of ideas, cohesion focuses on the surface-level connections that make a text unified. ESL learners often struggle with cohesion because they may overuse certain linking words, misuse pronouns, or fail to maintain consistency in vocabulary. Therefore, explicit instruction and guided practice are essential in helping learners master cohesive writing.

Methods

According to Kashiha (2022), one of the most effective classroom strategies can be the explicit teaching of cohesive devices. Teachers should introduce different types of cohesive ties, such as connectors (however, therefore, moreover), reference words (this, these, they), and lexical cohesion (repetition and synonyms). Instead of presenting long lists of connectors, teachers should focus on their functions and appropriate contexts of use. Through examples and short texts, learners can observe how cohesive devices operate within meaningful writing. This approach helps learners move beyond memorization to practical application.

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Teaching Paragraph Structure

Strong paragraph structure significantly contributes to cohesion. Teachers should guide learners in writing clear topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences. When learners understand how ideas within a paragraph are related, they are better able to use cohesive devices effectively. Classroom activities such as identifying topic sentences, adding supporting details, and linking ideas within a paragraph can strengthen learners' ability to create cohesive texts. Teaching paragraph unity also reduces the tendency to present unrelated ideas.

Using Model Texts and Text Analysis

According to Zhou (2024), model texts are valuable tools for teaching cohesion. By analyzing well-written samples, learners can identify how writers use cohesive devices to connect ideas. Teachers can encourage learners to underline linking words, circle pronouns, or trace repeated key terms. This analysis raises learners' awareness of how cohesion works in authentic writing. Over time, learners can apply these patterns to their own writing, improving both accuracy and fluency.

Sentence-Combining and Rewriting Activities

Sentence-combining exercises help learners practice connecting ideas smoothly. In these activities, learners are given short, simple sentences and asked to combine them into more cohesive ones using appropriate connectors or reference words. Rewriting tasks, such as replacing repeated nouns with pronouns or synonyms, also enhance lexical cohesion. These activities encourage learners to think critically about relationships between ideas rather than writing sentences in isolation.

Peer Review and Collaborative Writing

Peer review and collaborative writing activities promote awareness of cohesion. When learners read their classmates' writing, they often notice breaks in flow or unclear references more easily than in their own work. Guided peer feedback, with a focus on cohesion, helps learners identify missing links, overused connectors, or unclear pronoun references. Collaborative writing tasks, such as group paragraphs or essays, also expose learners to different ways of linking ideas.

Providing Focused Feedback

Teacher feedback plays a vital role in developing cohesion. Instead of correcting every grammatical error, teachers should provide focused feedback on how ideas are connected. Comments such as "This idea needs a linking word" or "Who does this pronoun refer to?" guide learners to revise their writing more effectively. Over time, this feedback helps learners become more conscious of cohesion during the writing process.

Discussion

Interpretation of Learners' Tendencies

The predominance of reference and conjunction devices suggests that ESL learners tend to rely on familiar or easily accessible cohesive resources when writing. These devices are often taught early in EFL/ESL curricula and are straightforward to use, which may explain their dominance in learners' texts (Tahsildar & Yusoff, 2018) However, the relative absence of substitution, ellipsis, and wider lexical cohesion indicates limited pedagogical focus on these less overt but important resources. This pattern reflects findings from discourse analysis research, which argues that mastering a broad range of cohesive ties is integral to producing fluent and well-connected texts.

Pedagogical Implications

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The observed frequency patterns and errors have direct implications for teaching. The underuse of substitution and ellipsis signals that learners may not fully understand how these devices contribute to text economy and cohesion. Therefore, classroom instruction should go beyond basic linkers and referential pronouns to include less familiar cohesive forms. Teachers can scaffold this by using model texts that illustrate how substitution and ellipsis reduce redundancy and enhance flow, and by incorporating explicit practice tasks targeted at these devices.

Additionally, the overuse or misuse of conjunctions suggests that learners may apply cohesive devices mechanically, without attending to their communicative function. This supports calls for more focus on meaning and context in cohesion instruction rather than rote memorization of linking words. Activities like discourse analysis, rewriting poorly connected paragraphs, and peer review with a cohesion checklist can help learners see how intended meanings are shaped by cohesive ties.

Relation to Writing Quality

Although cohesion alone does not guarantee overall text quality, strong cohesive connections are correlated with clearer idea progression and better readability. Research indicates that cohesive ties contribute to readers' ability to follow logical development, which is an important criterion in academic writing assessments.

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Limitations and Future Research

While these studies provide valuable insights, many are limited by sample size or specific educational contexts (e.g., single universities or regions). Future research could explore cross-cultural differences in cohesive use, longitudinal development of cohesion skills, and the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions.

Conclusion

Developing cohesion in ESL writing is a gradual process that requires consistent instruction, practice, and feedback. Effective classroom strategies—such as explicit teaching of cohesive devices, paragraph structure instruction, model text analysis, sentence-combining activities, peer collaboration, and focused feedback—can significantly improve learners' ability to connect ideas smoothly. As Sekwo (2025) highlighted, when ESL learners gain control over cohesive devices, their writing becomes clearer, more organized, and more reader-friendly. Ultimately, fostering cohesion empowers learners to express their ideas confidently and effectively in written English. The results indicate that ESL learners tend to rely heavily on reference and conjunction devices, while underusing substitution, ellipsis, and varied lexical cohesion. Misuse and overuse of certain cohesive ties, particularly linking words, are also commonly observed. The discussion highlights the pedagogical implications of these findings, emphasizing the importance of explicit instruction, the use of model texts, sentence-combining activities, peer feedback, and focused teacher feedback to enhance learners' awareness and use of cohesive devices. The study concludes that systematic and context-based classroom strategies can significantly improve cohesion in ESL writing, leading to clearer, more organized, and reader-friendly texts.

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