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London International Monthly Conference on Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation

DEVELOPING UZBEK EFL STUDENTS' COMPETENCE IN THE APPROPRIATE USE OF COHESIVE DEVICES IN ACADEMIC WRITING THROUGH CORPUS-BASED FEEDBACK

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23063564

Abstract: Academic writing requires learners not only to produce grammatically accurate sentences but also to establish meaningful relationships between ideas across sentences and paragraphs. Cohesive devices, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, play an important role in creating textual connectedness. However, research on second-language writing demonstrates that EFL learners frequently misuse cohesive devices, overuse certain connectors, or employ cohesive forms without considering their discourse function. This thesis proposes a corpus-based feedback methodology for developing Uzbek EFL students' competence in the appropriate use of cohesive devices in academic writing. The proposed approach combines learner-corpus analysis, concordance-based observation, comparison with reference corpora, teacher-guided interpretation, and revision. Previous research has demonstrated that corpus tools can provide teachers with systematic information about students' linguistic choices and can support more targeted feedback. Studies of EFL writing have also shown relationships between appropriate cohesion and writing quality, while emphasizing that frequency alone does not guarantee effective textual cohesion. The proposed methodology therefore focuses on both quantitative distribution and qualitative appropriateness. It is argued that corpus-based feedback can increase learners' awareness of authentic cohesive patterns, reduce inappropriate repetition and connector misuse, and promote more independent revision practices. The approach may be particularly relevant to Uzbek higher education, where corpus-based research on student academic writing remains comparatively limited.

Keywords: academic writing, cohesive devices, cohesion, EFL, Uzbek EFL students, learner corpus, corpus-based feedback, concordance, data-driven learning, writing competence.

Introduction

Academic writing is a complex form of communication in which writers are expected to organize information logically, establish relationships between propositions, and guide readers through an argument. For EFL learners, achieving textual cohesion can be particularly challenging because successful academic writing requires more than knowledge of individual grammatical structures. Learners must understand how linguistic elements function across sentences and paragraphs and how particular expressions contribute to the development of an argument.

Halliday and Hasan's influential model conceptualizes cohesion as a set of semantic relations that contribute to the creation of textual unity. Their framework distinguishes reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion as major resources for connecting textual elements [1, pp. 1–13, 31–87, 88–141, 142–225, 226–273].

The pedagogical importance of cohesive devices is supported by research on second-language writing. Yang and Sun, for example, compared argumentative writing produced by Chinese EFL learners

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at different proficiency levels and reported that more proficient learners demonstrated stronger control of cohesive devices. Their study also found a significant positive relationship between appropriate cohesive-device use and writing quality [2, pp. 31–48].

At the same time, cohesion should not be reduced to the simple presence or frequency of linking expressions. Zhang's analysis of 107 expository essays written by Chinese university students showed that lexical devices were the most frequent cohesive resources, followed by conjunctions and reference devices. The study also identified ambiguity in reference, overuse and misuse of conjunctions, and restricted lexical cohesion [3, pp. 61–95].

These findings suggest that academic writing instruction should address not only whether students use cohesive devices but also whether they use them appropriately in relation to meaning, discourse function, genre, and context.

Corpus linguistics offers a practical means of addressing this issue. A learner corpus can reveal recurrent patterns in students' writing, while concordance lines allow learners to examine how linguistic forms are used in authentic contexts. Corpus-based feedback can therefore move writing instruction from generalized correction toward evidence-based analysis of actual learner production.

This issue is particularly relevant in Uzbekistan. Recent corpus-based studies of Uzbek EFL writing have begun to document recurring linguistic problems, but systematic research specifically addressing cohesive-device competence and corpus-based feedback remains limited. Existing work on Uzbek EFL learners has already demonstrated the value of learner corpora for identifying recurring patterns and errors in student writing [4].

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to develop a theoretically grounded methodology for improving Uzbek EFL students' appropriate use of cohesive devices through corpus-based feedback.

Methodology

The proposed methodology is based on a combination of learner-corpus analysis, corpus-based feedback, explicit instruction, concordance analysis, and iterative revision.

The first stage involves the creation of a small learner corpus consisting of academic texts written by Uzbek university students. The corpus may include argumentative essays, analytical essays, research assignments, and other academic genres appropriate to the students' level. To ensure comparability, texts should be collected under similar writing conditions and categorized according to proficiency level and genre.

The second stage involves identifying and classifying cohesive devices. Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy provides an established analytical framework consisting of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion [1]. Within this framework, conjunctions can further be examined according to their discourse relations, while lexical cohesion can be analyzed through repetition, synonymy, superordination, and collocational relationships.

The third stage consists of corpus-based quantitative analysis. Frequency information should be used to determine which cohesive devices are common or uncommon in the learner corpus. However, frequency should not be interpreted independently from context. A high frequency of a connector does not necessarily indicate successful cohesion. For example, repeated use of however, therefore, moreover, or on the other hand may produce mechanical or inappropriate connections if the semantic relationship between propositions does not correspond to the function of the connector.

The fourth stage involves concordance-based qualitative analysis. Concordance lines provide learners with multiple examples of a target expression in context. Martínez Hernández demonstrated the pedagogical usefulness of a corpus-aided approach for examining EFL students' writing and reported the

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use of LexTutor to analyze 93 higher-education students' written outputs, including cohesive devices [5, pp. 13–39].

The fifth stage is corpus-based feedback. Instead of simply marking an expression as "wrong," the teacher presents learners with evidence from concordance lines and reference texts. Students are encouraged to identify patterns, compare alternative forms, infer discourse functions, and revise their own texts.

The final stage is revision and reflection. Students revise their original texts and explain why particular cohesive devices were changed, removed, or retained. This stage is essential because the objective is not merely to correct individual errors but to develop transferable writing competence.

Results

The proposed methodology is grounded in findings already established by corpus-based research on cohesion and EFL writing.

First, research indicates that cohesive competence develops with increasing proficiency. Yang and Sun found differences between second-year and fourth-year Chinese EFL students in their use of cohesive devices, with more proficient students generally demonstrating stronger control of cohesion [2, pp. 31–48].

Second, cohesion develops over time rather than functioning as a static linguistic feature. Crossley, Kyle, and McNamara examined the writing of 57 L2 university students and reported growth in several local, global, and text-level cohesion features during a semester-long EAP course [6, pp. 1–16].

Third, the appropriate use of cohesive devices is more important than their simple frequency. Zhang's study demonstrated that the number of cohesive ties alone did not have a statistically significant relationship with writing quality, while specific problems such as ambiguous reference and inappropriate conjunction use were evident in student writing [3, pp. 61–95].

Fourth, corpus-based analysis can provide teachers with efficient diagnostic information. Martínez Hernández's study used corpus tools to examine student writing and concluded that corpus-aided analysis could help teachers identify deficiencies and provide general feedback more efficiently [5, pp. 13–39].

Fifth, corpus-based research confirms that conjunctions remain an important area of difficulty for EFL learners. Sanosi analyzed a 125,000-word EFL learner corpus and compared it with a native-speaker corpus using Halliday and Hasan's classification. The study identified differences in conjunction use and argued for the continued development of corpus-informed conjunction instruction [7, pp. 64–78].

These findings provide an empirical basis for applying corpus-based feedback to Uzbek EFL academic writing. Nevertheless, they should not be interpreted as evidence that a specific intervention has already been statistically validated for Uzbek students. Rather, they establish a research-based rationale for testing the proposed methodology in the Uzbek higher-education context.

Analysis and Discussion

The central methodological principle proposed in this thesis is that cohesive-device instruction should move from rule memorization toward contextualized linguistic analysis.

Traditional writing instruction may introduce lists of connectors such as firstly, however, therefore, moreover, and in addition. Although such expressions are useful, memorizing lists does not automatically enable learners to use them appropriately. Academic cohesion involves semantic and rhetorical relationships, not simply the insertion of linking words.

For this reason, corpus-based feedback should present cohesive devices in authentic textual environments. When students observe concordance lines, they can compare how the same expression operates in different contexts. For example, however can be examined in relation to contrastive

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propositions, whereas therefore can be examined in relation to causal or inferential relationships. Students can then compare these patterns with their own sentences.

This methodology also addresses the problem of overuse. Corpus evidence can show learners that effective academic writing does not require every sentence to contain an explicit connective. Sometimes lexical repetition, pronoun reference, parallel structures, or logical sequencing provides sufficient cohesion.

Research on academic essays also indicates that teacher feedback does not always correspond closely to objectively identifiable cohesion problems. Todd, Khongput, and Darasawang investigated cohesion, coherence, and tutor comments on postgraduate academic essays and found relatively little relationship between analyses of connectedness and tutors' written comments [8, pp. 10–25].

This finding is pedagogically important because it suggests that teachers may benefit from systematic corpus-based diagnostic information. Rather than relying exclusively on intuition, instructors can use learner-corpus evidence to identify recurring patterns across a class.

The proposed approach should also distinguish between grammatical correctness and discourse appropriateness. A sentence may contain a grammatically correct connector but still create an inappropriate semantic relationship. Consequently, corpus-based feedback should combine frequency analysis with qualitative interpretation.

Another important principle is learner autonomy. Students should gradually become capable of conducting basic corpus searches themselves. This corresponds to the broader data-driven learning tradition, in which learners investigate language evidence and formulate linguistic generalizations rather than receiving all rules directly from the teacher.

However, corpus-based feedback should not be implemented without scaffolding. Learners may initially find concordance lines difficult to interpret because individual examples are often incomplete. Previous research on corpus-based feedback has reported that students can experience difficulties with incomplete concordance sentences and the additional time required to analyze corpus evidence [9, pp. 47–69].

Therefore, an effective methodology for Uzbek EFL students should progress gradually. At the initial stage, the teacher should select and explain concordance lines. At the intermediate stage, students should identify patterns in guided corpus tasks. At the advanced stage, students should independently search for examples and use the evidence to revise their writing.

The proposed model can consequently be represented as:

Learner text → corpus compilation → frequency analysis → concordance analysis → teacher-guided interpretation → corpus-based feedback → student revision → reflection → subsequent writing.

Such a cycle transforms feedback from a purely corrective activity into a form of language investigation.

The relevance of this approach to Uzbekistan is reinforced by emerging corpus-based research on Uzbek EFL writing. Existing studies have demonstrated that learner corpora can identify recurrent linguistic patterns among Uzbek learners and provide an empirical foundation for pedagogical decisions [4].

A further advantage is that corpus-based feedback can be adapted to different proficiency levels. Beginner and intermediate students may work primarily with reference, basic conjunctions, and lexical repetition, whereas advanced students can investigate discourse-level cohesion, lexical chains, paragraph transitions, and genre-specific patterns.

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For academic writing, genre should also be considered. Swales emphasized that academic genres are associated with communicative purposes and discourse communities [10, pp. 1–32]. Therefore, students should not be taught that a particular cohesive device is universally appropriate. Instead, they should examine how cohesion operates within the particular genre they are expected to produce.

Conclusion

Corpus-based feedback provides a theoretically justified and empirically informed approach to developing Uzbek EFL students' competence in the appropriate use of cohesive devices in academic writing. Existing research demonstrates that cohesion is an important dimension of L2 writing, that cohesive competence develops with proficiency, and that appropriate use of cohesive devices is more meaningful than their simple frequency [2; 3; 6].

The proposed methodology combines learner-corpus compilation, quantitative frequency analysis, concordance-based qualitative analysis, teacher-guided feedback, revision, and learner reflection. Its principal pedagogical advantage is that it allows students to observe actual language patterns and make evidence-based decisions about their own writing.

For Uzbek higher education, this approach offers an opportunity to connect corpus linguistics with academic writing pedagogy. However, a full experimental evaluation with Uzbek EFL students is required before claims about the statistical effectiveness of the methodology can be made. Future empirical research should therefore compare control and intervention groups, measure pre- and post-intervention performance, examine changes in different categories of cohesive devices, and investigate students' ability to transfer corpus-informed knowledge to independent academic writing.

The proposed framework may consequently serve as a foundation for a larger empirical study aimed at establishing a locally validated methodology for teaching cohesion to Uzbek EFL university students.

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