Explaining The Interplay Between The Inappropriate Use Of Cohesive Ties And Disruption In Text Coherence: A Study In English As A Second Language

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Abstract
This study has examined the challenges Pakistani students face as ESL learners while writing coherent academic texts, such as theses and dissertations. Since, it aimed to explore how the incorrect use of cohesive ties (e.g., overusing, underusing, or misusing transitional words and phrases) affects the clarity and logical flow of their writing, the study undertook a sequential mixed method design by combining descriptive text analysis and regression analysis to explain the interplay between text cohesion and coherence. A corpus of twenty initial drafts of theses produced by Social Sciences student writers was collected and descriptively analyzed. The manual descriptive analysis paved the way to conduct regression analysis. The results testified to the causal hypothesis and answered the research questions set in the study. The findings highlight the importance of balanced cohesion in achieving text coherence and suggest that ESL instruction should explicitly teach cohesive ties with special emphasis on lexical cohesion, vocabulary expansion, and self-assessment and editing skills to improve writing quality. The study also reveals a strong connection between cohesion and coherence in ESL writing, contradicting previous assumptions that they are independent constructs.

1. Introduction

In Pakistan, ESL student writers find it very difficult to produce an academic text in a language other than their native tongue i.e. in English. Particularly, producing an extended argument like a thesis or dissertation becomes a challenge for them (Khan & Ghani, 2021). Students face challenges in language use when joining (Javaid et al., 2024) and their emotions [1]are involved as well in learning language skills (Javaid et al., 2023). This challenge is maximized due to their low L2 proficiency and less provision of sufficient opportunities during their study at the tertiary level to overcome their textual incompetence (Khan & Ghani, 2021). This is why, these learners are deficient at producing a cohesive and coherent argument in the form of a thesis and keeping the red thread of their respective thesis run smoothly.

This study investigates the impact of text cohesion irregularity on text coherence in Social Sciences student writers' initial drafts. The research questions are:

i. To what extent does text cohesion irregularity affect text coherence in Social Sciences student writers' initial drafts?

ii. How does the irregular use of cohesive ties disrupt text coherence in these drafts?

The causal hypothesis is: "Text cohesion use positively/negatively impacts text coherence." This hypothesis will be tested using Simple Linear Regression Analysis.

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This hypothesis leads to the setting of associative hypotheses, which are:
  i.   Disproportionate use of cohesive links disrupts text coherence.
  ii.   Sophistication in the use of cohesive links reaches over to the achievement of text coherence.

2. Literature Review

The literature review reveals that EFL/ESL student writers often exhibit deficiencies in utilizing cohesive ties, manifesting in overuse, underuse, and misuse (Abdulraheim & Hussain, 2014; Afful & Nartey, 2014; Alraddadi, 2024; Azadnia et al., 2016; Ersanli & Tangin, 2015; Gunes, 2017; Lanjwani Jat et al., 2020; M. Ahmed, 2010; Kashiha, 2022; Khan & Ghani, 2021; Maisoun & Alzankawi, 2017; Medve & Takac, 2013; Mensah, 2014; Sadighi & Hedari, 2012; Yang & Sun, 2012; Yoon-Hee Na, 2011; Yin, 2015; Zhang, 2018). This inadequacy stems from factors such as limited understanding of cohesive devices, inapt application, and lacking mechanisms for self-assessment and proofreading (Azadnia et al., 2016; Jat et al., 2019; Kashiha, 2022; Menshah, 2014; Sadighi & Heydari, 2012).

In examining the nexus between cohesion and text quality, the contributions of Ghasemi (2013) and Tahara (2014) are noteworthy. Ghasemi undertook an investigation into the utilization of cohesive devices in second language writing, aiming to elucidate their relationship with writing quality. Analyzing texts produced by EFL/ESL researchers across academic and non-academic domains, the study revealed prevalent issues of overuse and underuse of cohesive devices, which impeded writing quality and hindered effective textual flow. Consequently, the study provided insights for future considerations in this domain.

Similarly, Tahara conducted a review of existing research on how students use metadiscursive nouns to achieve textual cohesion in their writing. The studies examined the working of Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion model though they varied in their methodologies, including correlation analyses, eclectic approaches to cohesion, and investigations of specific metadiscursive noun types. These studies, which encompassed diverse first language backgrounds, collectively exhibited the characteristics of textual cohesion fostered by metadiscursive nouns and other cohesive devices.

The literature review provides insight into the underlying factors that influence the effective use of cohesive links, which are essential for achieving text coherence (Abdi Tabari and Johnson, 2023; Saputra and Arif Rahman, 2020). By understanding and addressing these mediating factors, it is possible to improve the use of cohesive links, ultimately leading to enhanced text coherence. First, nice proficiency level in the target language influences the appropriateness and effectiveness of cohesive ties, affecting text coherence. Second, awareness of discourse conventions and genre-specific norms shapes the strategic use of cohesive devices, influencing text coherence. Third, readers' backgrounds, knowledge, and expectations interact with cohesive features to influence comprehension and interpretation of the text.

Language discursiveness is efficient in conveying meaning. The classroom environment and collaborative strategies used by teachers are effective (Ramzan et al., 2023). Pronunciation is learned well by ESL learners (Ikramullah et al., 2023). Contrastingly, a diverse perspective on text quality and coherence is proffered by Crossley et al. and McNamara et al. These scholars endeavored to evaluate the impact of cohesive devices on text readability, comprehensibility, and coherence achievement, asserting the independence of cohesion and coherence as constructs (McNamara et al., 2010; Crossley et al., 2016). While conventional wisdom among researchers suggests that cohesion facilitates text comprehension and correlates with essay

coherence, Crossley and McNamara et al. contend that cohesion and coherence represent distinct facets of textuality, with the latter holding paramount importance in determining essay quality.

The present study is based on some theoretical frameworks to elucidate the interplay between the inappropriate use of cohesive ties and disruption in text coherence, providing insights into the mechanisms underlying this relationship within the context of ESL. These concepts are:

2.1. Cohesive Ties

Cohesive ties refer to linguistic devices such as conjunctions, pronouns, lexical repetitions, and transitional phrases that create connections between different parts of a text. These ties can be categorized into lexical, grammatical, and referential cohesive devices, each serving to maintain textual cohesion (Kuo, 1995 and Palmer, 1999). They facilitate coherence by signaling relationships between ideas, guiding readers through the logical progression of a text. It is the first theoretical basis that supports this study. The mix of two models has been used to assess text cohesion use in ESL context of Pakistan: Halliday and Hassan's (1976) model of Cohesive Ties and Cook's (1997) Formal Links.

2.2. Text Coherence

Text coherence denotes the logical organization and smooth flow of ideas within a text, enabling readers to construct meaning and comprehend the author's message. It is manifested through logical sequencing of ideas, clear relationships between sentences and paragraphs, and absence of abrupt shifts in topic or focus (Kuo, 1995 and Palmer, 1999). Coherent texts are easier to understand, enhance reader engagement, and convey the author's intended message effectively. Text coherence is ensured by having well-structured paragraphs constructed. This is why, Gray's (2005) concept of paragraph and its structure sets the basis to assess conceptual consistency and the achievement of text coherence in this study.

3. Methodology

Keeping in view the set of hypotheses and research questions formulated in the beginning, the sequential mixed method design was used. The plan of the study was Qual-first and Quan-then by adopting the method of manual descriptive text analysis reaching over to the statistical procedure. Since, the population of this study were the student writers with varying research interests in the discipline of Social Sciences at different degree levels, their initial drafts were to be accessed through feasibility sampling. As it was imperative to access initial drafts of student writers working on their respective thesis, efforts were made to collaborate with the Social Sciences Supervisors serving across various HEIs.

So, the availability of this corpus was possible only by requesting the concerned Social Sciences Supervisors serving as permanent faculty members in these HEIs. They were contacted through their emails retrieved from the homepage of Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) through Eportal (Search engine for HEC approved Supervisors) and Manual system of HEC approved Supervisors available on the given link; (https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/scholarshipsgrants/ASA/Pages/Approved-PhD-Supervisors.aspx). The retrieved email addresses were 96 in total. The response rate was unfortunately too low. Many email addresses bounced the email back too. Either those email addresses were changed or not found in system. Many of them did not respond to any of the email sent to them. The response rate is depicted in the given table:

Table 3.1. Response Rate of Supervisors

Sr. #	Email Status	Email Response Rate	%
1	Bounced Emails	18	18.7
2	Not Responded Emails	43	44.7
3	Responded Emails	35	36.4

In case of delay, reminder emails were also sent. They were requested to share parts of initial drafts produced by their students at different program levels ranging between 1500 to 1550 word count.

However, the response was received from eighteen Supervisors of sixteen HEIs of Pakistan. The list of HEIs is presented here:

Table 3.2. List of HEIs

Provinces	No. of HEIs	Names of HEIs
Punjab	1	University of Punjab, Lahore
	2	National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad
	3	Riphah International University, Islamabad
	4	Pakistan Agricultural Research Council, Islamabad
	5	Fatima Jinnah Women's University, Rawalpindi
	6	The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Bahawalpur
	7	Government University College for Women, Bahawalpur
	8	Bahauddin Zakaria University, Multan
	9	University of Education, Multan
Sindh	10	Institute of Business Management, Karachi
Balochistan	11	Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences (LUAWMS)
	12	College of Education, Quetta
	13	University of Balochistan, Quetta
Gilgit Baltistan	14	Karakoram International University, Gilgit
Azad-Jamu Kashmir	15	Al-Khair University
Khaber Pakhtunkhua	16	Iqra National University, Peshawar

It is noteworthy that the Supervisors consented to share the drafts only when their identity of as Supervisors and their students as researchers were kept confidential. Therefore, to keep the ethical considerations in view, the identity of any Supervisor and the researcher has not been disclosed.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning here that in six months, a corpus of twenty-six extracts in total was received. However, twenty of the extracts were selected with a criterion i.e. up to 1000-1500 word limit; the six extracts were withdrawn due to their lower word limit.

At first, the descriptive analysis of the collected corpus was done manually (see Appendices for the Sample Analysis). For this purpose, the texts were scored between 1-4 where each score represents categories ranging from very poor, inadequate, adequate and good respectively. The texts were scored twice – once for cohesion keeping the irregular pattern of cohesive devices used and then for coherence (thematic progression and conceptual gaps) as per the level of disruption the disproportionate use of the ties had caused in the texts (see Appendices for personally created Texts Assessment Rubrics).

The manual descriptive analysis of the corpus led to the statistical analysis. Thus, regression analysis was carried out. For this purpose, irregularity in text cohesion was taken as a predictor variable (independent variable, IV) and disruption in text coherence as an outcome variable (dependent variable, DV) as an independent variable predicts either a positive or negative impact on the dependent variable.

4. Analysis

As per the plan of the study, the analysis consists of two parts: descriptive analysis of available texts and simple linear regression analysis. These parts are presented below:

4.1. Descriptive Analysis of the Available Texts

At first, it was necessary to assess the texts in terms of the asymmetrical use of cohesive links and their quality based on the presence of conceptual gaps. This assessment was conducted through manual descriptive analysis by using the assessment rubrics afore-mentioned. Thus, in this connection, initially the available texts were assessed and scored as per the inappropriate use of cohesive links. Then, the text quality was assessed and scored based on the presence of conceptual gaps. In these available texts, mechanisms of disruption were found present which were caused due to the overuse, inappropriate placement (misuse) and lack of variety (underuse) of all or range of cohesive links.

It was noted with concern that excessive repetition of cohesive devices or reliance on formulaic expressions led to redundancy which in turn disrupted the natural flow of the text. Furthermore, misuse of cohesive devices created ambiguity, confusion, or illogicality, undermining overall coherence. In addition, limited repertoire of cohesive ties or failure to employ diverse linguistic strategies resulted in monotony and hindered coherence. Thus, out of the total 20 texts analyzed, majority were rated between very poor and inadequate; however, few texts were rated as adequate and good.

4.1. Texts Scored in terms of the Presence of Conceptual Gaps

Text Score	Use of cohesive links	Text quality
1 (very poor)	8 Texts	7 Texts
2 (inadequate)	8 Texts	8 Texts
3 (adequate)	2 Texts	3 Texts
4 (good)	2 Texts	2 Texts

Table 4.1 shows the inadequacy of the available texts in terms of the use of cohesive links and text quality. This is how, the descriptive analysis established a basis to proceed with regression analysis.

4.2. Regression Analysis to Explain the Interplay between Text Cohesion and Coherence

Regression analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between irregularity in text cohesion and disruption in text coherence. The model summary revealed a strong correlation (r = 0.923) between the two variables, explaining 85.2% of the variance in the data. The ANOVA results indicated a significant prediction (p < .001), confirming that irregularity in text cohesion is a significant predictor of disruption in text coherence. The coefficient table showed that an increase in irregularity of text cohesion was associated with a substantial increase in disruption in text coherence. The resulting predictive model, Proportion of Disruption in Text Coherence = 0.272 + 0.79 * (Irregularity in Text Cohesion), demonstrated a strong positive association between the two variables. A simple linear regression plot visually depicted the relationship, illustrating that changes in irregularity of text cohesion directly influenced the level of disruption in text coherence. The findings revealed that irregularity in the use of cohesive devices significantly predicted large disruption in coherence ($\beta1$ = .79, p < .001), indicating that any increase or decrease in irregularity of text cohesion largely results in a corresponding increase or decrease in disruption in text coherence.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the inappropriate use of cohesive ties significantly disrupts text coherence in ESL student writers' initial drafts. The study's results support the theoretical frameworks of cohesive ties and text coherence, highlighting the importance of effective cohesive device use in achieving text coherence. It is important to mention that study has testified the causal hypothesis and answered the questions set in the beginning by doing Simple Linear Regression Analysis, confirming that text cohesion indeed affects text coherence. Thus, it is proven that inappropriate use of cohesive links disrupts text coherence, while appropriate use enhances it.

The study's findings are consistent with previous research (Abdulraheim & Hussain, 2014; Afful & Nartey, 2014; Alraddadi, 2024; Azadnia et al., 2016; Ersanli & Tangin, 2015; Gunes, 2017; Lanjwani Jat et al., 2020; M. Ahmed, 2010; Kashiha, 2022; Khan & Ghani, 2021; Maisoun & Alzankawi, 2017; Medve & Takac, 2013; Mensah, 2014; Sadighi & Hedari, 2012; Yang & Sun, 2012; Yoon-Hee Na, 2011; Yin, 2015; Zhang, 2018) that highlighted the challenges ESL writers face in using cohesive devices effectively. Though, these studies support the findings of the present study, caution is advised due to variations in linguistic contexts.

However, the conclusions drawn from this study contradict the perspectives of Crossley and McNamara, who contend that cohesion and coherence are independent constructs with no significant impact on each other. They argue that cohesive ties neither predict nor disrupt text coherence. Nonetheless, the empirical evidence presented in the current study, supported by regression analysis, suggests a strong association between irregular use of cohesive ties and disruption in text coherence, thus challenging the notion of independence between cohesion and coherence.

The study's results have implications for teaching and learning ESL writing. The findings suggest that ESL instructors should prioritize teaching cohesive devices and their effective use in achieving text coherence. Moreover, the study highlights the need for ESL writers to develop awareness of discourse conventions and genre-specific norms to improve their writing quality. It underscores the importance of explicitly teaching cohesive devices and fostering lexical cohesion among ESL learners to improve text coherence.

This study proposes the balanced use of cohesive ties by L2 student writers to achieve text coherence. The proposition that balanced use of cohesive ties contributes to text coherence

aligns with the arguments put forth by previous researchers such as Abdul Rahman and Ghasemi, who emphasize the detrimental effects of both limited and excessive use of cohesive ties on text coherence. Moreover, the assertion that inappropriate use of cohesive ties disrupts text coherence resonates with the findings of Azadnia, Gunes, Karadeniz, and Yang & Sun, underscoring the importance of cohesive devices in achieving text consistency and coherence in ESL contexts.

Stand-alone and integrated courses may offer awareness-raising activities and explicit instruction on cohesive devices to help learners recognize and address inappropriate usage patterns. In addition, integrating authentic texts and communicative tasks into language teaching may facilitate the development of cohesive writing skills in ESL learners. Recommendations from El-Gazzar, Lanjwani Jat, and Mensah regarding vocabulary instruction and practice are in line with the identified need for enhancing students' linguistic proficiency to promote cohesive writing.

To conclude, the present study contributes to the understanding of the interplay between inappropriate use of cohesive ties and disruption in text coherence, providing insights that can inform ESL teaching practices aimed at improving students' writing skills and enhancing text quality. The use of regression analysis has led to a significant proposition regarding the optimization of course content for an EAP Academic Writing Course. This proposition suggests that alongside teaching text cohesion and coherence, it is imperative to instruct students on how irregular use of cohesive ties can disrupt text coherence. Thus, a balanced approach to text cohesion is advocated as a result of this study, where achieving sophistication in text cohesion corresponds to achieving text coherence. The scope of the study is delimited to the social sciences discipline, researchers working on dissertations/theses, ESL context, English textuality issues, and tertiary academic levels in Pakistan. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable.

Further empirical research is warranted with respect to investigating the specific linguistic features and discourse contexts contributing to disruptions in text coherence. Longitudinal studies can also be conducted exploring the development of cohesive writing skills among ESL learners that can provide insights into the effectiveness of instructional interventions. Even, conducting comparative analyses across different proficiency levels and language backgrounds can reveal variations in the interplay between cohesive ties and text coherence.

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Appendices

Text Assessment Rubric 1: Text Cohesion

Sr. No.	Cohesive Ties	Overuse	Underuse	Misuse
1	Reference Cohesion	↑ R	↓ R	× R
2	Conjunction	↑ C	↓ C	× C
3	Lexical Cohesion	↑ L	↓ L	× L

| 4 | Ellipsis/Substitution | ↑ E/S | ↓ E/S | × E/S |
| 5 | Verb Form | ↑ VF | ↓ VF | × VF |

Text Assessment Rubric 2: Text Coherence

High Achievement	Medium Achievement	Low Achievement	Least Achievement
4	3	2	1
Good thematic progression leading to high readability due to least conceptual gaps	Adequate thematic progression leading to nice readability due to less conceptual gaps	Inadequate thematic progression leading to low readability due to many conceptual gaps	Very poor thematic progression leading to least readability due to countless conceptual gaps

Sample Analysis of Inappropriate Occurrences of Cohesive Ties and Low Readability

Sr. No.	Inappropriate Use of Cohesive Ties	Remarks
1	In different regions though family **at the same time** as a social group exists all over the world but the capacity to change…	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Misuse × C
2	According to a report by Khokher & Beauregard (2014), in Pakistan 67% **population** favour to live in joint family system, 31% **are** in favour to live in a nuclear family system.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse ↓ E/S ↓ R ↓ C
3	In Pakistan, … **In 2010 Census**, 62% of the nation's 75 million children in the United States lived in two parent homes …	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse ↓ C
4	Some multiple systems which **are existing** in the following types of families **are present** today in Pakistan though, Myle & Blessings (2017) **mentioned** different family patterns.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse and Misuse ↓ C × L
5	This change **may be** a death of a spouse or after the **divorced**.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse and Misuse ↓ C, × L
6	Their children **alloted** their homes to grandparents for their happiness comfort **and due to the after** they grow up, they give **the respect**, regard and care to all **members** of **family**.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse, Misuse and Overuse (affects coherence by increasing its readability) × VF, × L, × R, ↓ C

7	**Parent child relationships can have** impact on **students** education **and** career **and** the parents education level **has** also **effect** on **students** overall development **and** growth.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Overuse and Misuse ↑ C, × C, × L
8	**Parents** presence **providing the** nurturing environment to **students** that **effect** the **students** emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social development.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse and Misuse × L, ↓ E/S
9	**Parent's education aspiration** for **the** children **associated** to their socio-economic status, sex and race.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Underuse and Misuse ↓ VF, × L
10	... **As the other factors**, **parent child** relationship has also an effect on **students** educational and career aspirations.	Inappropriate use of cohesive ties: Misuse × C, × L

Sample Analysis of Text Coherence in terms of Conceptual Gaps

Sr. No.	Paragraphs	Remarks
1	In different regions though family at the same time as a social group exists all over the world but the capacity to change…	Topic Sentence 1, (Conceptual Gap) Topic Sentence 2, Supporting detail Topic Sentence 2, (Conceptual Gap) Topic Sentence 3, No Concluding Line (Abrupt End)
2	According to a report by Khokher & Beauregard (2014), in Pakistan 67% population favour to live in joint family system, 31% are in favour to live in a nuclear family system…	Topic Sentence 1, Supporting detail 1, Supporting detail 1 (Conceptual Gap), Concluding Line 1, (Conceptual Gap) Supporting detail 1, (Conceptual Gap) Topic Sentence 2, Concluding Line 2, Supporting detail 2, Abrupt End
3	Some multiple systems which are existing in the following types of families are present today in Pakistan though, Myle & Blessings (2017) mentioned different family patterns…	(Conceptual Gap) Abrupt Start (without connecting with the prior paragraph), No Topic Sentences, (Conceptual Gap) Only Supporting details are presented, (Conceptual Gap) No Concluding Line