# Cohesive Features in English as a Second Language Students' Argumentative Writing

## 一Taking Kunming University as an Example

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*Abstract*—**Productive skills, especially writing, are the most problematic areas for ESL students. Nowadays, how to write a coherent text is of great importance particularly in argumentative writing. Based on Halliday and Hasan's theory, this article analyses the cohesive features in the 20 students' English argumentative writing from the Preliminary of "FLTRP Cup" English Writing Contest in 2017. The results indicate that there exist some problems in their wiring, such as overusing simple cohesive devices and misusing some cohesive devices. Therefore, the author suggests that the teachers of College English in Kunming University could focus much on giving instruction of cohesion theory and helping students learn how to use various cohesive devise appropriately in writing.**

*Keywords—cohesive features; argumentative writing; conjunction; lexical cohesion; teaching strategies*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the four basic language skills, writing is often a challenging skill for ESL learners to develop (Zhang, 2000; Zhang, 2013). Nowadays, it is common for ESL students to write an argumentative essay, ranging from assignments and final exams to tests and competitions. When students are asked to write an argumentative essay, they are not only required to use the language, but also they are required to express their ideas. As a result, they need to produce a collection of sentences, and at the same time to keep the connectivity of ideas across sentences, clauses and paragraphs.

The connectivity of ideas is called cohesion, which was firstly introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976) in the book, *Cohesion in English*. As two important textual elements, cohesion and coherence have long been regarded as important features of "good" writing (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Halliday, 2000). With texture, a unified text is formed, which will make sense to the reader or audience; without texture, a non-text is produced, which will be difficult to understand. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), there are various cohesive ties to create texture, namely reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

This study concentrates on the cohesive features of 20 argumentative writing essays from Kunming University with respect to the frequency of conjunctions and lexical cohesive markers. Analyzing the cohesive features in ESL students' argumentative writing, on one hand, can help students understand the importance of texture and improve their writing

skills; on the other hand, it can be beneficial to language teachers and their teaching. Therefore, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

1) What are the cohesive features in the argumentative writing with regard to conjunction and lexical cohesion used by students in Kunming University?

2) How do the results facilitate teaching for language teachers in the university?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohesion is an indispensable linguistic feature in any discourse, spoken or written. Halliday and Hasan (1976) provided a framework for the study of cohesion and coherence in ESL/EFL writing for different areas including linguistics, translation and language teaching and learning. Since then, a number of studies have analyzed the function of cohesion in text and its comprehensibility, among which are grammatical cohesion including reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction in English written texts (Benner-Kastor, 1986; Coulthard, 1994; Parsons, 1996; Stotsky, 1983) and texts in other languages (Oshima, 1988; Roberts, Barjasteh, Delforooz & Jahani, 2009). Some researchers find that compositions considered "highly rated" contain more cohesion than those "low rated" ones (Jafarpur, 1991; Zhang, 2000). According to Rahimi and Ebrahimi (2012), analysis of cohesive devices in a text provides more insights into how the writer organizes what he wants to say and helps the reader make judgement of whether something is well-written or not.

As two crucial elements of textual cohesion, conjunction and lexical cohesion have been the focus of a wide variety of studies.

Conjunction is the type of cohesion that involves the use of ties that perform the main function of connecting sentences (Paltridge, 2006); these would include the use of devices such as additive, adversative, causal, temporal, and continuative (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). In his later work, Halliday (2000), nevertheless, classifies conjunctive elements into three broad types: elaboration, extension, and enhancement. In elaboration, one sentence elaborates on another by specifying or describing it. In extension, one sentence adds something new to another by supplying more information, replacing something or providing an alternative. Finally, in enhancement, one sentence

qualifies the meaning of another by reference to time, place, manner, cause, condition, or matter.

In an experimental study, after having investigated the effect of cohesion theory on the teaching of writing to the Chinese graduate students, Xin-hong (2007) put forward that "conjunction" proved to be the most effective area in teaching. Jo-Ling (2007) investigated college students' use of cohesive devices and the relationship between the number of cohesive features and writing quality, and drew the conclusion, that is, among the five sub-categories of conjunction, additive devices had the largest percentage of use, followed by adversatives, causals and temporals.

Lexical cohesion is a cohesive relation whose cohesive effect is achieved by the repetition of a noun phrase, or the use of another noun phrase in reference to the antecedent noun phrase. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), lexical cohesion is divided into two categories, reiteration and collocation. Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves the repletion of a lexical item, which falls out into repetition, synonymy, antonym, hyponym, and metonymy.

Many studies have been conducted in the field of lexical cohesion. Lexical repetition was investigated by Hoey (1991) by introducing simple and complex system of it. Philips (1985) focused on the type of collocation, while McGee's (2009) study highlighted the issues of lexical cohesion inside the classroom. In a project, MacMillan (2007) found that lexical cohesion played a basic role in reading comprehension sections of TOEFL tests.

It can be concluded from the review that researches on conjunction and lexical cohesion have been flourishing in the past decades, which demonstrates its importance in second language acquisition.

## III. METHOD

### A. Participants

From 104 argumentative essays written by participants in the Preliminary of "FLTRP Cup" English Writing Contest of Kunming University in 2017, 20 were randomly chosen as the subjects of the study. The objectivity of the study is achieved by choosing the subjects from different scores, which have been graded by the markers based on the scoring criteria of "FLTRP Cup" English Writing Contest. Furthermore, the subjects are selected from different departments, grades and classes randomly, which fairly representative of the actual are writing level of students in Kunming University.

The task is to write a 400-word argumentation on the material of two paragraphs with contradicting views within 60min.

### B. Data analysis

Although different models have been put forward after the original Halliday and Hasan model concerning the categories of conjunction and lexical cohesion, the study is based on the frame theory. The categorization is shown in Table 1.

TABLE I.    CATEGORIES OF CONJUNCTION AND LEXICAL COHESION ADOPTED BY THE STUDY

|  | Conjunction | Lexical cohesion |
|---|---|---|
| Categories | 1. Elaboration<br>2. Extension<br>3. Enhancement | 1. Repetition<br>2. Synonymy<br>3. Antonym<br>4. Hyponym<br>5. Collocation |

Data analysis took several steps. First, cohesive devices, conjunction and lexical cohesion, were identified and counted by the researchers respectively. And then the results were checked crosswise and classified based on the framework of Halliday and Hasan (1976; 2000). Finally, frequency and percentage of each category were computed.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Findings

#### 1) General analysis

Applying Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesive framework as the basis of data analysis, only conjunction and lexical cohesion in each writing were counted, followed by the frequency and percentage (see Table 2).

TABLE II.    THE GENERAL STATISTICAL RESULTS

| Cohesion devices | Number of occurrence | Percentage | Number of essays | Number of words |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conjunction | 338 | 36% | 20 | 6513 |
| Lexical cohesion | 590 | 64% | | |

As shown in Table 2, the subject of the research is 20 argumentative essays written by undergraduates of Kunming University. The total number of words is 6513. The table presents the numbers and percentages of conjunction and lexical cohesion identified in the essays as a whole. It is evident that lexical cohesion has the highest percentage (64%), followed by conjunction (36%).

As the main carrier of conveying message and the means of expressing ideas, lexical items are the principal components of any writing, which may account for the fact that lexical

cohesion is the most frequently used device of cohesion in students' argumentative writing.

**Example 1:** *There are two different opinions about our* ***teachers***. *Some people think that* ***teachers*** *are* ***absolute right***. *And they believe what the* ***teacher*** *said. Others think humans are not perfect and everyone maybe* ***makes mistakes***. *As far as I'm concerned,* ***I hold*** *the latter* ***attitude***. *The reasons are as follows.*

*2) Use of conjunction*

Conjunction is an important cohesive device to establish logic relations among clauses, including conjunctions, adverbs, prepositions and prepositional phrases. Elaboration, extension and enhancement have been identified as the main categories in Halliday's model, which will be illustrated in Table 3 by means of frequency and percentage.

TABLE III.    FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF CONJUNCTION USED IN THE ESSAYS

| | Categories | Frequency | percentage | Most frequently used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conjunction | Elaboration | 12 | 3.5% | in one's opinion |
| | Extension | 178 | 52.7% | and; but; however |
| | Enhancement | 148 | 43.8% | so; when; if; firstly(in the first place, first of all) |

Based on Table 3, among the three sub-categories of conjunction, extension devices (52.7%) accounted for the largest percentage of use, followed by enhancement devices (43.8%). Elaboration devices occurred only 12 times among the total of 338 times.

As can be seen from the table above, extension devices were the most frequently used, among which were "and", "but" and "however". In the essay, extension devices were used to supply more information, replace something or provide an alternative by either positive (e.g. and…) or adversative ways (e.g. but, however…).

**Example 2:** *Most students always strongly believe that the teacher in class is the only one who can voice his opinion in the past,* ***as well as*** *now.* ***However***, *I don't agree with this view. I think students should "make a sound"* ***and*** *express their ideas in class bravely. My ideas are explained as follows.*

As for enhancement devices, the highest frequent used ones were "so", "when", "if" and "firstly…". In using enhancement devices, one sentence was linked to another in terms of cause and effect, time and space or condition.

**Example 3:** ***First of all***, *teachers are not perfect; they're just your teachers…* ***Secondly,*** *teacher, this kind of career, is only to teach you experience and knowledge they have. It is not the symbol of truth…* ***At last,*** *supposed that you want to be a*

*seeker of truth, keeping a heart that is eager to question and challenge is an important thing…*

**Example 4:** ***First,*** *no one is perfect,* ***so*** *we cannot just believe his opinion blindly…* ***Second,*** *I always believe that the teacher is just a guide…* ***Last but not the least;*** *students should voice our views when we have our own ideas…*

Among those three categories, elaboration devices had the least percentage of use, which were used to "represent or restate an element by exemplifying" or "summarize" (Halliday, 2000). The prepositional phrase "in one's opinion" appeared in the concluding part for a couple of times, instead of phrases like "in short", "to sum up", or "to conclude".

**Example 5:** ***In my opinion***, *we should learn from teachers. But sometimes we can't believe teachers are the truth-holder.*

**Example 6:** ***In my opinion,*** *I still strongly believe students should voice their opinions in class bravely.*

*3) Use of lexical cohesion*

Halliday and Hasan (2000) defined lexical cohesion as the kind of cohesive effect which was achieved by the selection of vocabulary. That is, to apply lexical means to make the text cohesive by repeating or using synonym, antonym and hyponym (see Table 4).

TABLE IV.    FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF LEXICAL COHESION USED IN THE ESSAYS

| | Categories | Frequency | Percentage | Most frequently used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lexical cohesion | Repetition | 425 | 72% | teacher; student; mistake; perfect; opinion; truth |
| | Synonym /Antonym | 40 | 6.7% | opinion/view/idea; perfect/not perfect |
| | Hyponym | 3 | 0.5% | / |
| | Collocation | 122 | 20.7% | make mistake; voice one's opinion; resort to; strongly against |

In Table 2, it has been showed that among conjunction and lexical cohesion, the latter occupies the largest proportion of use in students' argumentative writing. Here, in Table 4, the proportion of each category of lexical cohesion is demonstrated. Among all these four devices, repetition ranks the highest, followed by collocation (20.7%), synonym and antonym (6.7%) and hyponym (0.5%).

As shown in Table 4, repetition is the most frequent lexical device used in students' essay. Constant repetition of lexical items concerning a specific topic would make it easier for any reader to catch the main idea in a sequence of sentences.

**Example 7:** *As we know, nobody is perfect and he may* <u>*make mistakes*</u>. *Everyone will* <u>*make mistakes*</u> *sometimes, so we should question the* <u>*authority*</u> *of everyone. Most Chinese* <u>*students*</u> *always believe that* <u>*teachers*</u> *are truth-holder in class*

*and their <u>authority</u> is unquestionable. They fear voicing their own opinions, let alone defying the <u>authority</u> of <u>teachers</u>. I think this is not right. <u>Students</u> should learn to against <u>teachers</u> in order to seek the truth. <u>Teacher</u> and <u>student</u> should learn from each other.*

**Example 8:** *There is a phenomenon that many students always believe that their <u>teachers</u> are <u>truth</u>-holder in China. But is it <u>true</u>? What will happen if they think that all the time? … As we all know <u>teachers</u> <u>teach</u> us not only the book knowledge but also <u>teach</u> us the <u>truth</u> of life. They are very important for us. But, is it <u>true</u> that <u>teachers</u> are <u>truth</u>-holder?*

When it comes to collocation, it refers to the relation between lexical items that regularly co-occur. Lexical collocations consist of various combinations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs.

**Example 9:**
*Some students are <u>strongly against</u> that teachers are truth-holders. (adv. +v.)*
*Both teacher and student can have a <u>profound view</u> about this question. (adj. +n.)*
*Teacher could give you a <u>host of ideas</u>. (n. + n.)*
*Students should <u>have their opinions voiced</u> in class when they know the answer. (n. +v.)*
*I think that teachers are the greatest person in the world. But they can <u>make mistakes</u> sometimes. (v. +n.)*
*However, students will be also eager to seek the truth, either by <u>resorting to</u> reference books or by <u>turning to</u> teachers for further discussion. (v. +prep.)*
*At last, please remember that you need to believe in yourself, <u>work hard</u>, and you will be the best. (v. +adv.)*

*B. Discussion*

The findings revealed that lexical devices (64%) constituted the highest percentage of all cohesive devices used in argumentative essays, followed by conjunction devices (36%). This finding was consistent with that of some previous studies (Zhang, 2000; Liu, Braine, 2005), showing that students relied more on lexical cohesion and less on conjunction in order to create a text.

From the findings in the last part, a conclusion of the use of conjunction and lexical cohesion in argumentative writing for students in this study could be drawn.

*1) Students have basic consciousness of using cohesive devices*

As it is shown in Table 3 and 4, students in the research employed a variety of cohesive devices with regard to conjunction and lexical cohesion in their argumentative writing. No matter how many times it may appear, all the subcategories of conjunction and lexical cohesion could be identified in the essays.

When writing an argumentative essay, students would remember to use different conjunctions and vocabulary to achieve the goal of logical cohesion. By using "and", it added new elements to the text; by repeating some key words, it could achieve cohesion through connectivity between one lexical item and another related one.

*2) Students lack the ability of using various and advanced cohesive devices*

Although all the subcategories of conjunction and lexical cohesion were used so as to produce a piece of well-organized and coherent argumentative writing, students being investigated did use and repeat some simple and common conjunctions and lexical items instead of using various and advanced ones.

As we can see from Table 1, it is clear that students in this research employ much less conjunctions than lexical items in their argumentative writing. Among the three categories of conjunction used in the writing, extension devices occupied the largest proportion of the whole. The additive conjunction "and" ranked first with 113 times of occurrence, followed by "but" (25 times) and "however" (10 times). All of these conjunctions belong to the group of easy words and expressions Chinese students start to learn as soon as they have access to English (Liu, Braine, 2005). On the one hand, the overuse of some simple conjunctions like "and" could make the essay redundant; on the other hand, this may imply that students in the study were not competent enough to use other conjunctions such as "what's more", "moreover", "on the contrary" and "alternatively".

When it comes to lexical cohesion, repetition (72%) formed the highest percentage of use in the 20 essays. However, the majority of the most frequently used repeated words were "teacher" (197 times), "student" (83 times), "opinion/ view/ idea" (50 times) and "truth/true" (44 times). These were the words given in the direction and closely related to the theme of the topic. It is also true to the use of collocation; the most frequent used collocations were "make mistake", "voice one's opinion", "question one's authority" and "seek the truth".

*3) Problems with conjunction and lexical cohesion*

Although students in this research used cohesive devices like conjunction and lexical items when writing an argumentation, they also made some errors. Although these three additives like "such as", "for instance" and "for example" can be used for enumeration, "such as" is only followed by a noun or noun phrase instead of a sentence. Some students in the research couldn't tell the difference between "but" and "therefore"; others preferred using "first", "firstly", "second", "secondly", "third", "thirdly" or "finally" to express the sequence of time or importance, but it was not the case. Another major error was the incorrect use of collocation, "study knowledge" should be corrected as "acquire/ obtain knowledge", "rich one's knowledge" should be changed into "enrich one's knowledge".

V. CONCLUSION

As illustrated in the above findings and discussion, this study was an attempt to analyze the cohesive features in the argumentative writing with regard to conjunction and lexical cohesion used by students in Kunming University, and then tries to gain some hints on how to facilitate teaching for language teachers in the university.

The results of the study showed that lexical devices were the most frequently used cohesive device compared to

conjunction, which was in line with that of other studies (Zhang, 2000; Liu, Braine, 2005). As to the use of lexical cohesion, simple repetition was the most frequent category, followed by collocation; while in using conjunctions, extension devices ranked first among those three devices. Even though there appeared such problems as repeating the same key words, overusing simple cohesive devices and misusing some cohesive devices, students in the study employed a variety of conjunction and lexical devices with some subcategories used more frequently than others.

The study could provide a number of pedagogical implications. First of all, the necessary instruction of cohesion theory and various cohesive devices should be an essential part in the teaching. When teaching College English, besides presenting some basic writing templates, teachers should emphasize the importance of cohesive devices. For example, when learning a text in *New Horizon College English*, the features of cohesive devices used in the text and how the native speaker achieve cohesion and coherence by using various kinds of cohesive devices should be explained in class. Secondly, when teaching the usage of words and phrases, teachers should help students learn how to use the lexical item in context instead of just remembering the meaning. For instance, if teaching coordinating conjunctions, teachers could first teach correlative coordinators, such as "not only…but also", "not…but", "not…nor"; and then teach several quasi-coordinators like "as well as", "as much as", "rather than" and "more than", etc. Finally, after having taught some basic knowledge about cohesion theory and cohesive devices, and the use of lexical items, teachers should give students guidance in writing an argumentation, such as feedback on grammatical and lexical errors as well as on cohesion errors found in the essay.

The present study has contributed to a better understanding of the general cohesive features in the argumentative writing by students in Kunming University. However, further research still needs to be done. For example, a particular conjunction or a certain type of collocation could be the focus of it in order to help the students more in improving the quality of their writing.

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