Text and Its Influence on Reading Comprehension and Writing Skills

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the effects of cohesive devices or discourse markers on the learners' perception and reading comprehension as well as their writing ability. A total of 28 EFL students participated in the study. They were divided into two groups and both groups took a pretest. While the control group received no treatment the experimental group was exposed to the materials rich in discourse markers during six sessions. An independent samples t-test was conducted. After taking the immediate posttest, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between their mean scores. Taken together, the findings suggest that it is beneficial to employ discourse markers or cohesive devices since this would enable learners to comprehend texts better.

Keywords: cohesion, discourse markers, reading perception, relating ideas

INTRODUCTION

In order to convey information we need a text. Providing a text which will be meaningful for the readers is of great importance. While a good and well-organized text helps the reader comprehend and get the writer's intended meaning, a bad text makes the reader into trouble. And when it comes to write a text, the problems multiply. Students usually find it difficult and challenging to start writing. It is also difficult for them to join sentences and connect their ideas. Both of these abilities, that is, reading comprehension and writing abilities should be present if the student looks for educational success.

A factor which improves and at the same time facilitates comprehension is the person's background knowledge. A model is proposed for text comprehension (Kintsch, 1988). According to this model, there are two main levels for comprehending a text, which are a text based understanding and a situational understanding. Some years later, and it was concluded that activating the background knowledge plays an important role when it comes to comprehend a text (McNamara *et al.* 1996).

Text coherence means the reader is able to find out the existing relationships between the ideas in a text (Halliday, 1978). It was mentioned before, that the learners find it effortful to connect their ideas. This coherence can be increased if the writer tries to

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include more cohesive devices. The focus of this study is on the helpful strategies that can be used to improve the writing abilities of the learners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The teachers should be aware of this fact and make the necessary changes in their way of teaching and try to make the learners aware of the benefits of utilizing discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987). A set of cohesive devices (reference, repetition, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) help create a text by indicating semantic relations in an underlying structure of ideas (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). They didn't speak directly of discourse markers.

In contrast to these scholars, whose major focus is on the cohesion of text, there is also a theoretical framework which concerns the meaning of sentences, specifically how one type of pragmatic marker in a sentence relate the message conveyed by that sentence to the message of a prior sentence (Fraser, 1999). Fraser's framework depends upon a differentiation between content and pragmatic meaning.

Content meaning is the referential meaning: "the speaker intends to bring to the hearer's attention by means of the literal interpretation of the sentence" (Fraser, 1990, p.385). On the other hand, pragmatic meaning concerns the speaker's communicative intention, the direct (not implied) "message the speaker intends to convey in uttering the sentence" (Fraser, 1990, p.386).

It is conveyed by three different sets of pragmatic markers: a) basic pragmatic markers (signals of illocutionary force, e.g. *please*); b) commentary pragmatic markers (encoding of another message that comments on the basic message, e.g. *well*); and c) parallel pragmatic markers (encoding of another message separate from the basic and/or commentary message, e.g. *damn*, vocatives).

Discourse markers are one type of commentary pragmatic marker: "signals how the speaker intends the basic message that follows to relate to the prior discourse" (Fraser, 1990; p. 387). The terminology of discourse markers, however, has never reached an agreement. (Schiffrin, 1987) believes that a discourse marker is a linguistic devise speakers use to signal how the upcoming unit of speech or text relates to the current discourse state. She believes they are "linguistic, paralinguistic, or nonverbal elements that signal relations between units of talk by virtue of their syntactic and semantic properties and by virtue of their sequential relations as initial or terminal brackets demarcating discourse units" (p.31).

From a more pragmatic point of view, they can be defined as "a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases [which] signal a relationship between the interpretations of the segment they produce" (Fraser, 1999, p.931). The discourse markers not only have grammatical functions but also work as effective interactional features.

He categorized the discourse markers (DMs). In the following the categorization can be seen:

1) DMs relating messages:

a. contrastive markers: though, but, contrary to this/that, conversely

b. collateral markers: above all, also, and, besides, I mean, in addition

c. inferential markers: as a result, so, then, therefore, thus

d. additional subclass: after all, since, because.

2) DMs relating topics:

In educational settings, the discourse markers are found to have a positive role in classroom context as effective conversational endeavors (Othman, 2010). In classroom context, they function as a lubricant in interaction to reduce understanding difficulties (Walsh, 2006). Discourse markers are constantly used in teacher language to help creating an effective flow of information from teachers to students in different stages of learning process, if used appropriately (Yu, 2008).

Discourse markers are classified into macro- and micro-markers (Chaudron and Richards, 1986). They believed that macro-markers function at the macro level to signal the relationship among main segments or to mark the major transition points in discourse (e.g., what I am going to talk about today is). Micro-markers function at the micro level to indicate inter-sentential relations or to function as pause fillers (e.g., and, so, and well). The results showed that macro-markers significantly helped the learners to comprehend listening lectures, but beneficial effects were not found for micro-markers.

In another study, the role of discourse markers in L2 lecture comprehension was investigated (Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995). They tried to determine whether the presence of markers aids students' comprehension.

In their analysis they used video-recording of the lecture, 63 electronic engineering students in the first year of a 3-year degree program at the City University of Hong Kong participated in the study. They were all LI Cantonese speakers and 25 lectures from the Hong Kong Corpus of Computer Science and Information Systems Lectures were used for the analysis.

A 1-hour 18-minute lecture on "Recursion'' by native speaker to a group of first-year electronic engineering undergraduates was given to the participants. Two versions of the lecture were employed, the original version vs. the deleted version. The participants had to be engaged with various tests including self-assessments, writing a summary, and true/false questions.

It was found that learners listening to a lecture with micro-markers performed better than those listening to the lecture without them. In this way, they demonstrated that micro-markers facilitate comprehension of L2 oral texts.

Three specific discourse markers *okay*, *right* and *yeah* used by NS lecturers in Lancaster University, UK was investigated, too (Othman, 2010). He found that college lecturers use discourse markers as signposts when taking turns in lecturing as a subconscious behavior. The study used naturalistic video recorded data and interviews with lecturers. It recognized the functional significance of those three markers in conversational interactions when organizing utterances.

By utilizing lexical and syntactic devices, the learner is able to join various items together and form a text (Baker, 1991, as cited in Silveira, 2008). Text cohesion means the extent to which background information will be beneficial for the readers to find a connection between the given information in a text.

When cohesive devices are employed the texture is kept and all the elements in the text are related to each other (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). They claim that when these elements are utilized, the sentences are integrated. To recognize and identify the connections which exist between the sentences, the learner must have the knowledge of cohesive devices (Widdowson, 2006). Three years later, he defined coherence and cohesion in terms of illocutionary act and proposition. So, cohesion considers how propositions used to create a text whereas coherence is related to how the illocutionary functions create discourse.

Another scholar also worked on this issue. It was proposed that to understand the meaning of a text, cohesion was not enough (Yule, 2006). He was eager to find about the role of cohesion in comprehending a text. The presence of coherence was essential and helped the reader move through the text. There are textual as well as lexical connections; by textual we mean substitution, co-reference, ellipsis and deixis and by lexical connections we mean paraphrase and repetition (Hoey, 1991, as cited in Kai, 2008).

It is really important for the learners to understand the relationship between the sentences (Nunan, 1993, as cited in Yeh, *et al.* 2010). In fact, through such connectors the readers are able comprehend the texts. When the learners are aware of such markers and employ them in their writings they can gain better scores (Wahby, 2014).

The present study aims to find out the influence of two types of texts (low coherent and high coherent) on learners' reading comprehension. The following questions are addressed here:

1. Are the learners' perception/comprehension and writing ability affected by the amount of cohesive devices used in a text?

2. Do high coherence texts lead to better perception and improve writing ability?

METHODOLOGY

Through convenient sampling, two English classes at ILI young adults' section were chosen for this study. The participants were all female ranging from 13 to 14. They were all students of Reach 2 and were at the same level of proficiency according to the placement test which they were taken. The control group included 15 students and the experimental group included 13 students. The classes were held 2 sessions a week and lasted for 90 minutes and both classes were held in the evenings at 6:30 to 8:00 but on different days. The control group just received low coherent texts while the experimental group was exposed to high coherence texts during 8 sessions of this study (four weeks).

To be sure about the reliability of the scores, since the learners' writings were scored by the teacher/researcher, another teacher was asked to read the students' writings and score them. This would increase the amount of reliability.

At the beginning of the study a pretest, containing one small text, was conducted. The paragraphs were chosen from *Advanced Reading Comprehension* by Masoomeh Mirzaee Damiriyeh (2004/1383). The students were given 10 minutes to go through the paragraphs once, read them individually then they had to put the paragraphs aside and within 5 minutes they were asked to write about the passages and include as many details as possible. After that all the papers were collected by the teacher who was the researcher too.

Then during six sessions (from session 2 to session 7) the experimental group was introduced with various texts about different subjects from the same book as the pretest texts were chosen. The teacher/researcher selected some texts which included some cohesive devices, gave them to the learners, asked them to read them but instead of writing about the texts the teacher asked some comprehension questions and the learners had to answer them orally. On the other hand, in the control group the cohesive devices or discourse markers were omitted intentionally from the texts but they were asked to answer some comprehension questions orally exactly the same as the experimental group.

Finally, in the last session an immediate posttest was conducted. Here again one text from the same book was given to the learners in both groups. They had 10 minutes to read the passages individually, the texts were collected and then had 5 minutes to write about them before delivering their papers to the teacher/researcher.

RESULTS

To analyze the scores on the pretest and immediate posttest by both groups the SPSS 22 was used. And the possible differences in the control and experimental group were checked through conducting t-tests.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Both Groups' Pretest and Posttest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest control	15	10.6000	2.02837	.52372
Pretest Experimental	13	11.1538	1.77229	.49155
Posttest control	15	11.2000	1.65616	.42762
Posttest Experimental	13	15.3077	1.43670	.39847

Table 1 above presents the descriptive statistics for both pretest and posttest for the control and experimental group. On the pretest, both groups behaved similarly. Interestingly, as the table illustrates while the mean scores of the control group changed little from the pretest (M=10.6000) to the posttest (M=11.1538), the mean score of the experimental group has undergone a change from the pretest (M=11.1538) to the posttest (M=15.3077).

However, the improvement in mean scores was not accompanied by any big change in standard deviations. In other words, both groups maintained an almost similar standard deviation from the pretest to the posttest.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig.	Mean difference	Std. error of difference
Pretest	.317	.578	-.763	26	.452	-.55385	.72544
			-.771	25.995	.448	-.55385	.71826
Posttest	.096	.759	-6.955	26	.000	-4.10769	.59065
			-7.028	25.999	.000	-4.10769	.58449

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the effects of employing cohesive devices or we can call discourse markers on the learners' perception and reading comprehension. In fact, this was the main concern of the first research question.

The result showed that there was a significant difference in the groups' performances ($p<0.05$). Specifically, the treatment group performed significantly better that the control group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Before going this section it should be mentioned that each study has its own limitations. The number of participants, the gender and their level of proficiency may be among the first things which perform as a limitation in this study. Due to lack of time in conducting this study, no delayed posttest was taken and only one immediate posttest was conducted.

The present study set out to examine the effects of cohesive devices or discourse markers on learners' perception and reading comprehension. The first research question investigated this issue. The findings revealed that the treatment group scored significantly higher than the control group.

This finding, that employing discourse markers affect the learners' reading comprehension, corroborates the findings of Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995) who found that learners listening to a lecture with micro-markers performed better than those listening to the lecture without them. In fact, they showed that micro-markers facilitate comprehension of L2 oral texts.

The findings contradict the results of Chaudron and Richards (1986). They classified discourse markers into macro- and micro-markers. And concluded that macro-markers significantly helped the learners to comprehend listening lectures, but beneficial effects were not found for micro-markers.

The second research question dealt with the effectiveness of utilizing cohesive devices and discourse markers. The analysis illustrated that when such markers are employed, the learners could comprehend the texts better because there was a significant difference between the performance of the experimental group and the control group. The participants in the control group demonstrated a very little change or improvement from the pretest to the immediate posttest.

When some elements in discourse or in a text are differently interpreted and this interpretation depends on other elements, the issue of cohesion needs to be taken into consideration (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In other words, one sentence in a text presupposes the other and both elements are integrated into a text.

In the process of comprehending a text, learners face a big challenge. The present study aimed to show the influence of cohesive devices on learners' perception and reading comprehension. The first way to improve the learners' comprehension and also improve the level of coherence of a text is employ more cohesive or discourse markers in a text. Utilizing such markers (for example referents, synonyms, ellipsis, etc.) make the ideas related to each other.

Acknowledgements

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