

AN INVESTIGATION INTO COHESION ERRORS IN VSTEP WRITING TESTS OF THE SECOND YEAR EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

VSTEP, the first-ever Vietnamese standardized test of English proficiency, was nationally released in March 2015 and considered a graduation requirement at some universities in Vietnam. The tests evaluate students' four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Especially, task 2 writing tests are marked based on cohesion criteria which contribute to the overall meaning of the text. However, a few research studies have been conducted to investigate cohesion mistakes in VSTEP writing papers, which have a far-reaching effect on candidates' writing scores. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze and examine cohesion mistakes related to transition signals and references in academic writing. Eighty VSTEP essay writing tests of the second year EFL students at the University of foreign language studies – the University of Danang were collected randomly. Data collection then was analyzed to see what types of cohesion mistakes students made and the frequency of errors. The study makes use of both qualitative and quantitative information employing a descriptive method. A framework by Halliday and Hassan (1976) was adopted to analyze the data. In terms of transition signals-related mistakes, the findings reveal that those common ones are repetition, overuse, or lack of transition signals, even misuse of linking devices inadequate meaning and formal register. Also, unclear referencing and misuse of reference are found. Based on the findings, some implications and suggestions on cohesion teaching and cohesion self-check strategies when doing the VSTEP writing test were put forward.

Key words: cohesion mistakes; VSTEP writing; linking devices; references

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing, a productive skill, is the art of expressing our views, ideas, and thoughts. Although writing seems easy while thinking about it, many times, it could lead to unorganized and scattered pieces of information on paper, and create confusion or a wrong message. Especially, academic writing can be a daunting task since it demands much more than mere correct grammar. Writers need to gain knowledge about sentence structures, develop their vocabulary, and build other basic writing skills. Hampton (1989) indicated that writing skills can help learners gain independence, comprehensibility, fluency, and creativity in writing. In other words, writers are independent when they can write without much assistance, and they gain comprehensibility when producing an explicit, readable, and legible writing paper for themselves and others. They are also fluent when they can write smoothly and easily as well as understandably, and writers gain creativity when expressing their ideas in their paper. Therefore, writing papers and writing tests are commonly used to evaluate learners at school.

In terms of writing foreign language assessments, the VSTEP writing test is a typical type. According to the National Foreign Language 2020 Project carried out by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training, all English major students at the tertiary level must pass the official proficiency examination (level C1) before graduating. And VSTEP, the first-ever Vietnamese standardized test of English proficiency, was nationally released in March 2015 and considered a graduation requirement at some universities in Vietnam, including the University of Foreign Language Studies. The tests evaluate students' four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Especially, task 2 writing tests are marked based on cohesion criteria which contribute to the overall meaning of the text. However, dealing with cohesion is a challenge for test-takers, which has a far-reaching effect on candidates' writing scores.

To make texts achieve the logical flow of ideas connected by various language devices, Halliday and Hassan (1976) introduced the concept of cohesion. They noted that meanings of a text are held together in related sentences in a number of ways, and cohesion is created to establish the structure of meanings. In other words, for them, the various parts of a paragraph are connected together by cohesive ties. According to Halliday and Hasan, the presence of these cohesive devices is essential for building text cohesion, construct text by linking ideas and connecting phrases and sentences. Therefore, our current study will adopt the cohesive categories of

Halliday and Hasan as a framework to analyze the cohesive errors made by EFL students, whose native language is not English, in process of producing a VSTEP written text.

The English-major students at the University of Foreign Language Studies, Danang university encounter difficulties in producing well-connected VSTEP-oriented essays, which is taught since the second school year. However, these problems primarily indicate that students fail in their academic register when it comes to writing, low proficiency in vocabulary use, incoherent paragraph, as well as misuse of lexical items. The researchers as English language instructors noticed that students do not gain a deep insight into how to use cohesive devices correctly as well as efficiently in their written text, which results in creating ambiguous statements and obstruct the clarity of messages. These reasons have been the main motive for the researchers to conduct this study. Hence, this study investigates grammatical cohesive devices errors made by the second-year EFL students in VSTEP written essays at the University of Foreign Language Studies, Danang University.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To identify the types of grammatical cohesive devices errors employed by UFL-based students in VSTEP essays;
- To pinpoint the most frequent grammatical cohesive devices errors in students' VSTEP essays;
- To give implications and suggestions on enhancing the use of grammatical cohesive devices

3. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

There are five categories of cohesion in the frame of Halliday and Hasan (1976), which include the reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical, and conjunction; however, our current study mainly focuses on reference and conjunction errors in the VSTEP written text of the second-year students at the University of Foreign Language Studies, Danang University.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Halliday and Hasan (1976) identify five types of cohesion: reference,

substitution, ellipsis, lexical, and conjunction. The first three types belong to the category of grammatical cohesion. Lexical cohesion, conversely, refers to relations between any lexical items. Conjunctive cohesions are affected by the cohesion elements that are called conjunctives. Conjunctions are considered as grammatical devices with a lexical component. According to Halliday and Hasan, the presence of these cohesive devices is essential for building text cohesion, but the use of cohesion is a very problematic area for EFL learners. Peterson & McCabe (1991) noted that cohesion is the linguistic relationship between clauses and how the surface linguistic element of a text are linked to each other in order to create unified whole text. In our current study, we mainly focus on reference and conjunction errors.

It is necessary to shed the light on some of the studies conducted on student's cohesion ties in written compositions and cohesion errors, especially in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Researchers have paid considerable attention to how EFL learners write and the problems they are faced with. Some came up with similar findings while others have been contradictory.

Johnson (1992) investigates three types of Halliday and Hasans (1976) cohesion: reference, conjunction, and lexical cohesion in good and weak essays written by both Malayan and native speakers in English under a specified time length, and they are evaluated as "good" or "weak" by Malay teachers and American teachers. The result indicates that good essays written in English had more syntactic ties (conjunction and reference) while good essays written in Malay had more semantic ties through the reiteration of words. However, the findings did not show many contributions to solving how to help learners recognize the cohesive errors and apply more cohesive ties to have effective writing.

Also based on the categories of Halliday and Hasan (1976), Meisuo (2000) conducts a study to investigate the relationship between the number of cohesive devices and the quality of writing of Chinese undergraduate EFL students in two PRC universities. He focuses on the improper use of three main types of cohesive ties, including reference, conjunction, and lexical cohesion in the students' essays. The research indicates that lexical devices were the most frequently used, followed by conjunctions and reference devices. His findings show that the inappropriate reference devices as well as the overuse and misuse of conjunctions, and restricted use of lexical

cohesion has negative effects on writing quality by making the ambiguous contextual meaning or misleading to the readers.

Some study has been conducted to investigate the cohesive errors in written works of students at different age group in various countries in the world where English has been taught as a second foreign language. They are Alzankawi (2017), Nassser (2017), Ting (2003), and Zarepour (2016). These studies all use Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesive devices to investigate cohesive errors in EFL students' compositions, including paragraphs or essays. The findings revealed that cohesion errors committed by learners were related to reference cohesion, conjunction, lexical cohesion, ellipsis, and substitution, but in different frequency for each studies . Moreover, the learners used unnecessary additive conjunctions to link short and simple sentences, and they were confused about how to put the conjunction in the appropriate order. Furthermore, in these studies, some pedagogical implications had been suggested for language teachers regarding cohesion. However, the problem with using reference and conjunction among Vietnamese students has not been addressed adequately and needs further investigation.

Guna (2015) analyzes the types of cohesive devices used and identify cohesive errors that the students committed in their cause - effect essay. The study revealed four types of cohesive devices used by the students in their essay: Reference, Substitution, Conjunction, and Lexical cohesion. most of the students committed errors following the source of interlanguage errors and intralingual errors. The results of this study can contribute some pedagogical implications for writing teachers and students. However, since the study just focuses on cohesion in a cause-effect essay, it has not demonstrated how cohesive devices are used in other types of essays.

This study is different from the above-mentioned studies because it focuses on grammatical cohesive devices errors made by the second-year students at the University of Foreign Language Studies, Danang University.in VSTEP written test.

5. METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

To achieve the research objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the types of grammatical cohesive devices errors made by the second-year EFL students in VSTEP writing tests?
- What is the most frequent category among grammatical cohesive devices errors made by the second-year EFL students in VSTEP writing tests?
- How is technology applied to enhance the ability to use cohesive devices of the second-year EFL students?

The study makes use of both qualitative and quantitative information employing a descriptive method to investigate cohesive devices errors made by the second-year English major students in their VSTEP writing tests at the University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Da Nang. The quantitative analysis of the cohesive errors is used to identify types, and the frequencies of errors, while the qualitative analysis is employed to describe errors made by the subject of the study. However, the analysis was confined to the cohesive devices errors which are mainly reference, and conjunction without taking into account other kinds of errors. The model of Halliday and Hassan (1976) was adopted to analyze the cohesive errors in students' task 2 VSTEP essay samples. 80 essay samples (250-285 words) were collected randomly from second term mid-exam in the school year 2019-2020. These exams were done by the second year English major students in their VSTEP writing tests at the University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Da Nang. The subjects are similar in terms of their age, ranging from 19-20 years. They are also homogenous in regards to nationality, native language (Vietnamese), and educational background. In addition, the writing samples are designed according to VSTEP-oriented format.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dulay (1982) notes that errors are an integral part of teaching and learning language. Thus it provides a window into what is going on "inside the learner's mind"; enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and to take pedagogical precautions towards them to overcome some questions and propose solutions regarding different aspects. After applying the methods and analyzing the students' essays, a number of errors in the use of cohesion devices are identified in terms of types and frequencies of grammatical cohesive errors. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of grammatical cohesive errors in written VSTEP essays, including reference, and conjunction errors.

Table 1. Grammatical cohesive errors made by UFL-based students

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Reference	309	55.8%
Conjunction	245	44.2%
Total	554	100%

As can be seen from Table 1, errors of conjunction recorded 309 frequencies, accounting for about 55.8% of the whole errors. Also, the number of reference errors was 245, making up about 44.2% of the overall errors. It is realized that the second year UFL-based students committed more reference errors than conjunction ones. The cohesive sub-devices errors of reference and conjunction are analyzed in detail as follows.

6.1. Errors in the use of reference

Halliday and Hasan (1976:308) define “reference” as “the relationship between an element of the text or something else by reference to which it is interpreted in the given instance”. The reference itself is divided into three types: personal, demonstrative, and comparative. Table 2 illustrates the frequency and percentage of reference cohesive sub-devices errors in written VSTEP essays.

Table 2. Reference cohesive sub-devices errors in VSTEP essays

Sub-devices	Frequency	Percentage
Personal	165	53.4%
Demonstrative	90	29.1%
Comparative	54	17.5%
Total	309	100%

Looking at Table 2 in detail, personal errors recorded 165 frequencies in producing about 53.4% of the whole reference errors, followed by demonstrative errors, which scored 90 making about 29.1% of the whole errors. Comparative errors frequented least, at 54 in producing about 17.5% of the total errors. Some examples of such errors are analyzed as follow:

- (1)Online shops offer customers a variety of choices. They can find different products from various famous brands in there.
- (2) In conclusion, it seems to me that the benefits of technological evolution are more big/ bigger than drawbacks.

(3) Many people prefer to online shopping because it brings they a lot of benefits.

In example (1), this error rooted from the first language interference or inter-lingual errors. Students previously developed habit in their mother tongue into English without being concerned about the English rules by adding unnecessary word “in” in front of “there” as demonstrative adverbs. Moreover, example (2) illustrates comparative reference error due to both inter-lingual and intra- lingual sources. Vietnamese and English differ in both lexical and grammatical structure in expressing comparison. In the Vietnamese language, comparative structures are formulated by adding the functional word “hơn” or “more” (which is translated into English) before the adjective. Students are affected by this habit of adding “more” before one syllable adjective whenever they want to express comparison. Similarly, the object pronoun “they” is an error here because the writer misused the subject pronoun and object pronoun; therefore, this error makes no correlation between “they” and “people”

6.2. Errors in the use of conjunction

Halliday and Hasan (1976) classify conjunction into four categories which express a number of semantic relations, they are: additive, adversative, causal and temporal. Although students have adequate ability to produce integrative text and create a cohesive texture of the produced text while using referential devices, they still commit errors in the use of the additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. Table 3 illustrates the frequency and percentage of reference cohesive sub-devices errors in written VSTEP essays.

Table 3. *Conjunctive cohesive sub-devices errors in VSTEP essays*

Sub-devices	Frequency	Percentage
Additive	45	18.3%
Adversative	85	34.7%
Causal	83	33.9%
Temporal	32	13.1%
Total	245	100%

As can be seen from Table 3, adversative errors in students' essay recorded 85 frequencies in producing about 34.7% of the whole, followed by causal mistakes reported 245, making about 33.9%. The percentages of

Additive and Temporal errors are lowest, at 18.3 and 13.1 % respectively. Some examples of such errors are cited:

- (4) Although people can buy various products on the internet, but they cannot check its quality.
- (5) Another problem is that youngsters can spend hours a day sitting in front of a screen without going outside or do exercise. So, they can have some health issues, for instance are myopia √ obesity,...
- (6) It is undeniable that the advances in technologies have altered the way young generation manage their time. Despite of some advantages of technological progress , this development brings more negatives than positives.

One of the typical errors is the overuse of the adversative conjunction “although... but” (in example 4). In this kind of error, students use two adversative conjunctions together in a sentence to express contrast. This is partly because of the effect of the mother language in with the structure “mặc dù...nhưng” (“although....but” in English). In addition, students seem to be unaware of the “although” they are using; hence, they repeatedly use another adversative “but”. “Although” and “but” are used to contrast two conditions, but they have to stand alone between two contrast conditions. To make it appropriate, one of the two devices must be deleted, because there is no difference between the both of them. In example 5, it is inappropriate to put “so” at the beginning of the sentence since its function is to show the result between two independent clauses. So is used to mark the 'result' and not the 'cause' as is customary in English. As regards example 6, the misuse of “despite of” is the interference of mother tongue in Vietnamese structures into English. Students often add “of” after “despite” because they make errors between “in spite of” and “despite” with the same sound and syllabus /spait/.

7. IMPLICATIONS

The findings show that students often make cohesive errors when doing VSTEP writing tests, which partly affect the semantic tie and coherence of the whole task 2 VSTEP essay. Therefore, several recommendation should be implemented.

Firstly, there is a need for students to be taught how to think in English while writing in English rather than thinking and preparing their ideas in

Vietnamese and then transferring them into English. This addresses the problem with adding unnecessary words or omitting words in a conventional structure.

Secondly, in terms of teaching writing discourse, instead of focusing on the word and sentence levels this will lead to non-cohesive texts, teachers had better go beyond structure-level analysis and focus more on the whole texts, which can shift the learners' attention to discourse features that are fundamental in achieving unity.

Thirdly, students should be encouraged to expose to a wide range of cohesive devices and the way they are implemented by native speakers. This can enable the students to avoid overemphasizing certain types and ignoring other types since over-reliance on one or two strategies may result in redundancy and misunderstanding.

Fourth, Hirvela (2004) noted that teaching the various types of cohesive devices in isolation does not help the learners to use them appropriately in their writing; therefore, teachers need to focus on the way cohesive devices are used in novels written by native speakers of English where a demonstration of all those devices is made manifest in writing. A teacher should also point out the semantic consequences of particular patterns of language use to facilitate students' awareness of the organization of relevant meanings in relation to each other in a text. In this case, the students will become familiar with the crucial role of cohesive devices in developing the topic.

Fifth, Hirvela (2004) also stated that to enhance students' awareness of cohesion, it is essential to incorporate reading activities into writing classes. This enhances the students' awareness of the characteristics of good writing, including cohesion. Teachers should give students model paragraphs, and show them how grammatical cohesive devices are used effectively and appropriately. Also, teachers should focus on reading activities and combine them with writing activities. These practices aim to increase students' awareness of grammatical cohesive devices, then they can apply what they have learnt to make their writing papers better.

Traditionally, giving appropriate correction, feedback and necessary writing tasks for practicing are duties of teachers, and it is important to include cognitive practice and technology application. Ghahri, F, Hashamdar, M & Mohamadi, Z. (2015) stated that using technology can enhance learning in the EFL classroom, strengthen students motivation, and have a positive impact on their writing skill. Some helpful websites for writing improvement

are suggested. The first one is “bubble.us”, which offers teachers as well as students a mind-mapping tool. It is much easier and quicker for learners to brainstorm what they are going to discuss in their essay, then seeing mind-map, they can select the best conjunction for each case. Pham Vu Phi Ho et al. (2020) revealed that peer commentary activities has significant impacts on students’ writing quality, especially the peer e-comments outperformed the traditional peer comments. The useful website “zoho.com/writer is a powerful word processor available across all learners’ devices. Collaborating with a teammate in real-time, partners will help them correct the errors, create an elegant, inspiring document for free.

8. CONCLUSION

In this study, Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) cohesion framework was adopted to analyze UFL-based students’ use of cohesive devices. The data was qualitatively analyzed through quantitative results in identifying the numbers and types of cohesive device errors made by the second-year UFL-based students in their task 2 VSTEP writing papers. Results of this study show a total of 554 errors are identified in students' task 2 VSTEP essay samples including errors in the use of the reference, and conjunction. The percentage of errors in the use of the conjunction is 55.8 %, followed by reference category, at 44.2%. In details, the dominant number of reference errors belongs to personal (165 errors, accounting for 53.4%) while the highest percentage of conjunction errors belongs to causal (33.9%). The problem is the inappropriate use of the different types of cohesive devices. This means that, in some cases, the students employ a certain cohesive device where it is not required, while in other cases, some parts of the text need cohesive devices, but the students do not use them. Moreover, due to the influence of the mother tongue, students may omit cohesive devices or translate word by word from Vietnamese to English, causing redundancy in their written work. A better understanding of the errors in the process of EFL writing will help teachers know students’ difficulties in learning that language; therefore, error analysis can be considered as a fundamental tool in language teaching to reorganize teacher’s point of view and readdress his/her methodology for fixing and fulfilling the students’ gaps (Londono Vasquez, 2007).

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