



## THE IMPACT OF TEACHING REFERENCE CATEGORY AS A SUBDIVISION OF GRAMMATICAL COHESION ON IRANIAN EFL CONTEXT

Behnam Behfrouz  
Hakim Sabzewari Governmental University  
Towhid City, Sabzewar  
Khorasan Razavi Province, IRAN  
[Behnambehfrouz@hotmail.com](mailto:Behnambehfrouz@hotmail.com)

### Abstract

Based on recent studies on cohesion, some scholars believe that there is a positive relation between teaching cohesion, reference, in this case and learners writing quality. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the relationship between teaching reference through simple prose to Iranian intermediate EFL learners and their writing improvement in terms of the correct use of this cohesive tie. Sixty Iranian intermediate EFL learners were selected to participate in this study. A pretest was also administered on the writing ability of participants prior to the treatment. Twelve sessions of instruction each lasting for about 60 minutes comprised the whole treatment to the learners. After the treatment, a post-test was conducted to determine learning improvement compared to pre-test. The results of the study through independent t-test revealed that, there was no significant relationship between teaching of reference as a cohesive device and the writing quality of Iranian intermediate EFL learners before and after the treatment. The findings of the present study although did not reveal any statistically significant results, they showed an indication of the efficacy of the treatment. Therefore it is suggested that definitely more emphasis should be placed on teaching of reference during the practices of TEFL.

**Key Words:** Cohesion, Reference, EFL Learners.

### INTRODUCTION

According to relatively recent findings in communicative contexts, text is formed of various but connected elements which are semantically and syntactically connected. In order to distinguish these connections, cohesion and its subdivisions that have been under investigation by many linguists for years play an important role in text analysis. Cohesion as a fundamental issue in text processing alongside its subclasses like ellipsis, substitutions, etc had been under investigation by many discourse scholars (Halliday and Hasan 1976; Bartkuté 2005).

Cohesion is an important factor for readers and writers in order to create and understand texts and it has been emphasized by teachers in their teaching and writing evaluations (Liu & Braine, 2005).

The role of cohesion is to connect parts of the same text. Subsequently, it supplies continuity to the text. Accommodating this type of text continuity, cohesion authorizes the reader or listener to afford all components of the picture to its understanding. Cohesion in its usual form is the presupposition of one thing that has gone in the discourse previously, whether in the immediately preceding or not (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Based on Rashtchi and Gharanli (2010), input enhancement is a technique which can be used to draw the learners' attention to some grammatical features of input and also to increase the perceptual salience of the structure. Since Faghih and Esmaeli-Fard (2010) found that cognitive strategy-based grammar instruction did not affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' development of structural knowledge significantly therefore the

present investigator will attempt to teach English discoursal cohesive markers through simple prose to Iranian intermediate EFL learners in order to determine the impacts of using prose (texts) as explicit input in learning and using of English cohesive ties in their writings.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Cohesion

Text cohesion includes the affiliation among words, their sensations, and it refers to expressions which govern the connected level of text, and also it determines ties which are used to show semantic correlations. Text cohesion includes lexical cohesion (hyponymy, reiteration, etc) and grammatical cohesion (ellipsis, substitution, etc). There is reason (Irwin, 1980) that more cohesive ties have impacts on the summarizability of texts (Mani, 2001). (cited in Brown, 2005).

Cohesion refers to the grammatical or lexical correlations between various parts of a text which may be the correlation between sentences or parts of a sentence (Salehi, 2005). Different parts of sentences are related to each other by means of grammatical and lexical cohesion.

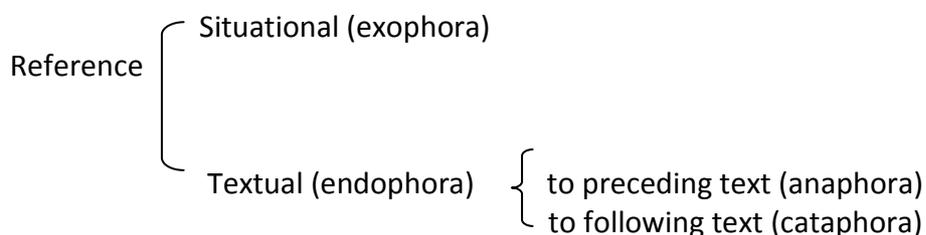
Cohesion considers the meaningful connection of linguistic elements in composed texts based on grammatical rules of each language (Malmkjær & Anderson, 2006). Generally, cohesion when compared with other general concepts like grammar, content and text length is more professional and almost uncommon for many people. Cohesion explains micro-local level of organization between individual clauses and also makes connections between these clauses (Bae, 2001).

As mentioned above cohesion can be categorized into distinctive labels; reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion. It is proven that the information behind these categories is hypothetical but it provides an applicable means to describe and analyze the texts. In text, these categories are determined by some characters; repetition, omissions, existence of especial words; which all of them determine that the interpretation of a text is dependent on other constituents (Cook, 1989; Halliday & Hasan, 1976, 1989; McCarthy, 1991; Renkema, 1993). One of the most important factors in cohesion which has been located under grammatical cohesion is reference category which is summarized below.

### Reference

In reference, fetched information is referential meaning; the existence of specific thing which is turned to; and cohesion belong to the connection of reference, by means of which similar thing comes to discourse for the second time.

It is useful to share some information which used to name situational reference. This is exophora reference and it could be compared with endophoric reference within a text:



As a common formulae, reference terms could be exophoric or endophoric and endophoric is divided into anaphoric or cataphoric. This kind of design makes it possible to admit special divisions inside of the set of reference items, based on their various functions (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

An exophoric item doesn't name anything but indicates that reference have to be made in the context of the situation. Exophoric and endophoric reference contain a rule to return to the essential information from the other place in order to interpret a passage and a reference item is neutral in isolation. Personal, demonstrative and comparative references are three kinds of references. (See Appendix A)

### Personal Reference

Personal reference is a kind of reference based on the function. Personal reference contains the three sets of personal pronouns, possessive determiners and possessive pronouns. In traditional grammar, there was no name for personals, since the members of this category related to various groups of distinct structural roles but principally they indicated a single system: person (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 44).

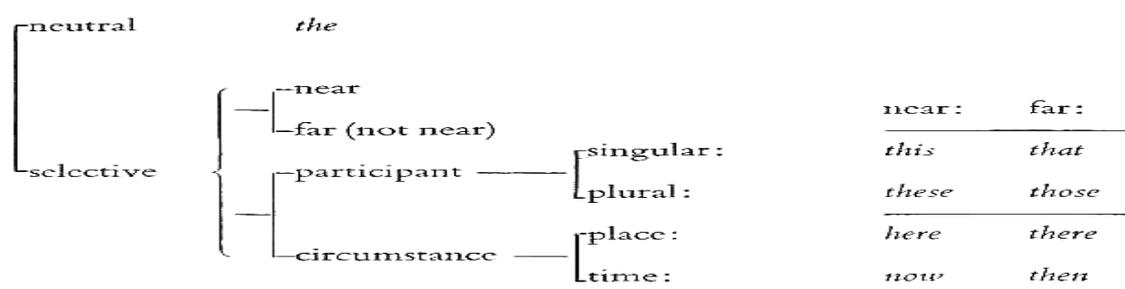
Speech roles			Other roles		
	Speaker	Addressee	Specific		Generalized Human
			Human	Non-human	
<i>one</i>	I me mine my	you you	he him his his	it it [its] its	one one -one's
			she her hers her		
<i>more than one</i>	we us ours our	yours your	they them theirs their		

All of these items are reference terms. They refer to things in order to define their purposes in the speech situations. This system is called person, which traditionally is divided into first person, second person and third person, of course they are also divided with numbers: singular and plural (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Persons are to some extent deluding, since this system contains not only impersonals (human, non-individualized) but also reference that is correctly non-personal, i.e., refers to objects. But most of the grammatical items have distorted borders. They explain the chief meaning of the class under investigation, and are defined to be easy to remember. The option would be absolutely unrealistic, like letters and numbers or one would have to aspire more authentic classifications, which would become awkward and syntactically incorrect. This approach is not part of a linguistic theory but is used as an address to convalescence (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

### Demonstrative Reference

This kind of reference is necessarily a form of verbal pointing. The speaker classifies the referent by locating it on a scale of adjacency. The system (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 57) is like:



The adverbial demonstratives *here, there, now, and then* refer to the place of a procedure in space or time and are usually directive too, not through placing person or object which participates in the procedure. So they work as adjuncts in the clause, not as the elements inside of the nominal set. They also play some secondary role as qualifiers. All other remained nominal demonstratives *this, these, that, those* refer to place of something in the procedure, for this reason, these elements happen inside of the nominal group (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Demonstratives like personals commonly turn to something exophorically inside of the context of situation. It is the basic form of verbal pointing, and it coincides with demonstrative action, like a sign which shows the thing which is referred to (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Demonstratives like *this, these, that, and those* develop widely with anaphoric function in all forms of English. Principally, they contain three systematic distinctions inside themselves:

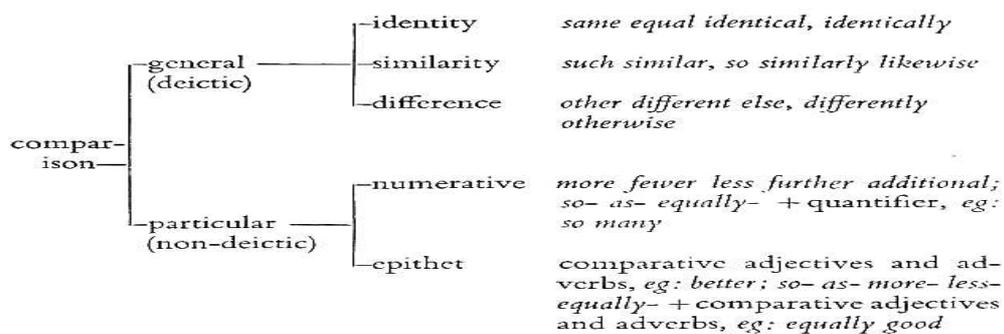
- (1) Between near (*this/these*) and non-near (*that/those*)
- (2) Between singular (*this/that*) and plural (*these/those*)
- (3) Between modifier (*this+noun*) and head (*this+∅*)

These differences are somehow related to cohesion, in a way that they functionally ascertain the use of these items in textual (endophoric) reference (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Moreover, *here, there, now, and then* are demonstratives but *now* is merely cohesive. These need to be categorized from their homographs which are written similarly but function differently: (1) demonstrative *there* should be recognized from pronoun *there*, (2) demonstrative *now* should be distinguished from conjunction *now*, and (3) demonstrative *then* should be categorized from conjunction *then*. Although there is no phonologically difference between demonstrative *then* and conjunctive one, but there is a common structure which states that non-demonstratives are phonologically reduced while not demonstratives (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

### Comparative Reference

In the following system (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p. 76) two types of comparative reference are distinguished.



(1) *General comparison*: It does not take account of any special feature; it refers to the comparison based on similarity and dissimilarity. Two things could be similar, different or the same. This category is defined with special group of adjectives or adverbs. The adjectives operate as deictic or as epithet in nominal group; they have different meanings. The adverbs function as adjunct in the clause. These items which are called adjectives or adverbs of comparison are differentiated from comparative adjectives/adverbs that are the comparative form of common adjectives and adverbs (e.g., shorter, longer, etc) (2) *Particular comparison*, on the other hand, refers to comparison that is essentially quantitative or qualitative. It is defined by the use of comparative form of common adjective/adverb(s) and not of particular category. The adjectives which function inside the nominal group are either numerative or epithet and not of deictic. The adverbs function as an adjunct in the clause, as an epithet, as a numerative, or within an adjunct. Whether the comparative adjectives or adverbs are inflected, makes no difference, i.e., meaning and function are not affected by this



division. Such an approach is applicable with comparison of other forms of reference, it can be anaphoric and cohesive or it may be cataphoric (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

### Some studies on Cohesion

In a study in China, the findings revealed that lexical devices took the highest position (55.6 %), reference devices (19.8 %), and conjunctions (14.6 %) in the argumentative writing of Chinese undergraduate non-English major. Also, based on the qualitative analysis of compositions, it found that among three sub-classes of reference devices pronominals (60 %) were the most frequently used devices, and demonstratives (4.6 %) least used. Using conjunctions indicates that students were able to connect new sentences with the previous ones in order to make their writing clear. Most commonly used items such as *and*, *but*, *or*, and *so* were the students' favorites, and others like *furthermore*, *on the contrary* were barely used. Chinese undergraduate non-English major students used lexical cohesion extensively but their hardly used synonyms, antonyms, and superordinates indicated that teaching vocabulary in China needs to be improved (Liu & Braine, 2005).

In a study by Chen (2008), the findings revealed that learners employed a variety of cohesive devices in their essay writing. Among the three cohesive devices, lexical devices were the most frequently used, followed by reference devices and conjunctions.

## METHOD

### Participants

The population from which the subjects of the present study were chosen included Iranian junior EFL students of English translation at Neghab's Payam-E-Nour university. They were students of first semester who had studied English text books introduced by Iran's ministry of education before being accepted to this university. The total number of participants in this study was sixty and since two groups were needed for this study, i.e. experimental group and control group, learners were divided in this manner: thirty participants: fifteen males and females were selected as the control group and thirty others with the equal division of fifteen males and fifteen females, were assigned to the experimental group too. The participants were selected according to stratified random sampling, and there was no age limitation in this way of division, and also all the learners had the same mother tongue, i.e. Persian.

### Instruments

This study made use of some instrument for the purpose of data collection:

1. First of all, a proficiency test was held in order to homogenize learners' level of proficiency. The test selected for this purpose was *Preliminary English Test (PET)* by Cambridge University Press (2009). The allocated time for this test was 120 minutes. Passing score for this test was between 70-84 and pass with merit score, ranged from 85 to 100.
2. During the pre-test as one of the fundamental steps in this study, in order to measure participants' abilities in writing before the treatment, descriptive paragraph writing was assigned to the participants to write on the subjects selected by the researcher. The selected source for this part was *Academic Writing of IELTS (2010)*.

There were two tasks in this writing:

Task1. Participants needed to write at least 150 words about the information of a table or a graph in about 20 minutes.

Task2. They were required to write an essay in 40 minutes and in about 250 words on a subject matter.

3. The other instrument used in this study was prose texts. Texts were selected because the focus of the present study was on teaching English discursal cohesive markers through simple prose. These texts were chosen from the following books:

1. *Introductory Steps to Understanding (1998)*
2. *Anecdotes in American English (1980)*



4. A post-test based on IELTS Academic Writing, in 60 minutes (20 minutes for task 1 and 40 minutes for task 2) was assigned to the participants in order to determine the amount of learners' progress in writing at the end of the experiment. Since the main focus of the present study was based on discourse markers, there was a need to measure these markers in two processes, first in the pre-test and then in the post-test. The comparison of pre-test and post-test results indicated the amount of progress the learners had made.

### Procedures

To conduct the experiment, twelve sessions with every session lasting for about 60 minutes were needed. Two texts were taught to students every session as treatment. For the first session the proficiency test of PET by Cambridge University Press (2009) was administered to learners in 120 minutes and also the investigator introduced the study and its purposes to the participants.

For the second session a pre-test based on IELTS Academic Writing (2010) was administered to both groups of experimental and control, on two tasks and in about 60 minutes.

At the third session and before presenting texts (prose) to the participants, the present investigator explained some cohesion ties that learners had learned in their last years of studies like pronominals, and he also gave a general explanation for English cohesion and cohesive markers to the participants. The first category which was introduced in the third session was *reference*. The researcher explained about reference in about 10 minutes and wrote some examples on the board about the subject matter, and also to make it clear he showed some examples of reference in the participants' texts. The introduced materials were pronominals, proper nouns, demonstratives, and comparatives. Other sessions up to the tenth session went on practical use of reference items.

The participants needed the researcher's assistance at the eleventh session and before the final examination in order to: (1) to check the progress of the learners during the studying process about the marked discursal cohesive markers (2) to solve their remaining problems within sentence connectors (3) to help to organize their thoughts about finding cohesive devices in selected texts (4) to monitor their progress in the process of teaching cohesion and finally (5) to find out if everybody in two groups had understood cohesion ties or not.

The procedure finished at the twelfth session by administrating a post-test based on IELTS Academic Writing to both control and experimental groups in about 60 minutes. During post-test the following tasks were suggested to learners to write on.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Pretest

The first stage during the statistical analysis of the findings of the study was to scrutinize the results of the pre-test in order to check the degrees of similarity at proficiency level of participants in writing and at the same time to determine the impacts of treatment when post-test is compared with the results of the pre-test. The writing section of IELTS was administered to both groups of participants and the following data was gathered: In order to achieve most valuable data means differences an independent t-test was applied and following information was revealed:

Table 1: Independent Samples Test for Pre-Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.913	.343	.715	58	.477	.200	.280	-.360	.760
Equal variances not assumed			.715	57.491	.477	.200	.280	-.360	.760

It is shown that at 58 degrees of freedom the amount of level of significant is .477 and since  $.477 > p = 0.05$ , then there is no great statistical distinction between results of control and experimental groups performances. Since the most emphasis of this study is on cohesive devices, especially reference, the analysis of cohesive categories was applied in pre-test too. First, all reference devices was numbered in the participants writings in pre-test tasks and then the descriptive statistics was conducted on cohesive side of their writing.

And finally in order to check the mean differences between two groups a t-test was applied on the cohesive devices of both groups in pre-test and the following information was found:

As it is shown in the Table 2 the difference in mean is small, but to gain more details the following table calculations were also carried out:

Table 2: Independent Samples Test of Cohesive Devices for Experiment and Control Groups in Pre-Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.978	.165	.171	58	.865	.567	3.323	-6.085	7.218
Equal variances not assumed			.171	56.235	.865	.567	3.323	-6.089	7.222

There is no significant difference between means of two groups since at  $df = 58$ ,  $p = .865 > 0.05$ , then the number of cohesive devices in two groups are almost homogeneous.

### Post-test

In post-test an IELTS writing section was administered to the participants in order to assess their progress as a result of the treatment of the present study. Specially, the purpose of the post-test was to examine the amount of scores dispersion after the treatment. The following information was gathered from the post-test.

Obviously in comparison with the pre-test, participants had some progresses in their writing because of some instructions on cohesive device. Of course the mean of the experimental group which was exposed to simple

prose in order to learn cohesive device was higher than their mean in pre-test but the result of their means comparison was not significant. The following table reveals that there was not a treatment effect on the groups' performance, since in 58 degrees of freedom with the amount of *P*-value at 0.05 level of probability, the level of significant was .101 which is higher than *P Value*, i.e.,  $.101 > 0.05$ . Thus it can be understood that while the mean scores of the experimental group in post-test was more than the mean scores of control group but there was not sufficiently remarkable differences between these two groups on the post-test. It is also realized that the explicit teaching of discorsal cohesive marker through simple prose does not have any effect in participants' performance in writing.

Table 3: Independent Samples Test for Post-Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.202	.655	1.664	58	.101	.53333	.32044	-.10810	1.17476
Equal variances not assumed			1.664	57.224	.102	.53333	.32044	-.10828	1.17495

To check the differences of mean scores for two groups the following t-test was applied:

Table 4: Independent Samples Test of Cohesive Device for Experiment and Control Groups in Post-Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.093	.762	1.752	58	.085	5.433	3.102	-.776	11.643
Equal variances not assumed			1.752	58.00	.085	5.433	3.102	-.776	11.643

In this analysis, the level of significant is .085 which is more than *P*-value, i.e.  $.085 > 0.05$ . In the case of cohesive device, the treatment had a great impact for participants in using more quantity of devices in post-test in comparison with numbers of cohesive device in pre-test, but the amount of its affection on the writing abilities of participants in both groups was not significant.

## DISCUSSION

This study aims to signify the relationship between teaching references through some texts in order to measure the strength of this kind of method to increase the learners' knowledge of reference category. The findings of the data analysis revealed that teaching references does have significant effect on the knowledge of references

of those learners taking part in this program. And finally the analysis of the data based on the comparison of the number of references, which were used in pre-test and post-test, the following information was gathered:

Cohesive Device	Pre-test	Post-test	Percentile
Reference	2775	3226	8.33

## CONCLUSION

This study had two main purposes: (1) to check the possible increase in the frequency of use of cohesive device, reference, after the treatment by the learners, (2) to check learners' progress in writing skill after applying the treatment. The present study examined the role of simple prose in teaching cohesion for the Iranian EFL learners. The findings of the study revealed that (a) there was no significant relationship between teaching discoursal cohesive marker resulting in improvement of writing. This finding was arrived at as a result of analysis of the numbers of cohesive device which was used by the participants in pre-test and post-test, and also an independent sample test held in order to check the mean dispersion of two groups in progress. And (b) this study also found that the high frequency use of cohesive device in learners' writing did not have any significant impact on the participants' writing ability, since on the basis of statistical data the mean scores of the control and experiment groups were almost similar. As a result, the major finding of this study was that there is no significant correlation between frequent use of cohesive device and writing quality.

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