

# The Importance of Cohesion in Academic Writing

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# The Importance of Cohesion in Academic Writing

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes academic essays written by Japanese university students. One of their weak points lies on a lack of coherence in their writings. In order to investigate the characteristics of their writings in English, I conducted a micro-level analysis based on a student's essay and a macro-level analysis by using learner corpus consisting of 21 students' essays. The findings show that Japanese students have difficulty with using cohesive devices such as reference and conjunction.

**Keywords:** academic writing, cohesive device, learner corpus

## 1. Introduction

Teaching academic essay writing seems laborious work for teachers, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries. Crossley and McNamara (2009) suggest that a huge difference between first language (L1) writers of English and second language (L2) writers of English lies in their lexical choices. Silva (1993) states that L2 learners use fewer cohesion devices such as conjunctives and lexical ties. These devices are crucial to write academic essay which have considerable persuasive power.

My aim is to investigate an effective approach to guide the students in how to write an appropriate academic essay. As a micro-level analysis, I focus on one student's essay in order to give feedback individually. As a macro-level approach, I will use the learner corpus to investigate the potential of mistakes to help direct academic essay writing for whole classes. This essay mainly focuses on cohesive ties, such as reference and conjunction, since they are often pointed out as weak points for Asian students.

## 2. Cohesive ties of text

Hewings and Hewings (2001: 199) suggest that “academic text not only contains propositional content, but also devices having textual and interpersonal functions.” Halliday (1994) points out that the ‘textual component’ of the grammar of English lies in structural and cohesive devices (cited in

Bloor and Bloor, 2004: 85). Bloor and Bloor (Ibid.: 84) observe that ‘Texture is simply the quality of being a text, rather than a set of unconnected bits of language’, and Halliday and Hasan (1976: 299) note that ‘Cohesion expresses the continuity that exists between one part of the text and another.’

According to Thompson (2004), cohesive components can be classified into five main types:

1. Reference: can be cohesive when two or more expressions in the text refer to the same person, thing or idea
2. Ellipsis: can be used to avoid the repetition of a lexical item and is able to draw on the grammatical resources of the language to replace the item
3. Substitution: can be used for the omission of words, groups or clauses
4. Conjunction: can be used to describe the cohesive tie between clauses or sections of text in such way as to demonstrate a meaningful relationship between them
5. Lexical cohesion: refers to the cohesive effect of the use of lexical items in discourse where the choice of an item relates to the choices that have gone before

Adversative conjunction and pronoun reference are frequently used by Chinese students in an inappropriate way. In addition, even Chinese English teachers frequently do not operate as English speakers do. She explains that her results can be attributed to the style of teaching; focusing on words and phrases as isolated items out of context in China (Johns 1984 in Hatch 1992: 232). Baba (2009: 191) suggests that L2 lexical proficiency depends deeply on ‘semantic networks’ and ‘the ability to metalinguistically manipulate words.’ Analysing Japanese L2 writers’ essay can lead to encourage them to write powerful essay which is convincing.

### 3. Participants and Data

My participants were 21 students I taught in the Science and Engineering Department at university in 2009. They were all freshmen and intermediate level, assessed by their entrance examination score. They took an English compulsory class and were required to write approximately 400 words essay in given topic. In my class, their topic was “Do you agree that the government should spend money on space development projects?” I would like to focus on one student’s essay to see details as a micro-level and to investigate the tendency of Japanese English learners’ writing.

#### 3.1. Micro-level analysis: a sample essay

I chose one sample essay whose graded score was average in my class. The result of the entrance examination for the university placed him at intermediate level. According to the Flesch–Kincaid readability test, ‘whose formula indicates readability is determined by two important variables: average sentence length and average number of syllables per word’, the writer’s result is shown in figure 1. (downloaded from <http://flesch.sourceforge.net/>)

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Words	402
Sentences	40
Syllables	673
Average Syllables per Word	1.67
Average Words per Sentence	10.05
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	8.08
Flesch Reading Ease Level	55

Figure.1 The Results of Flesch Test

Scores between 90.0 and 100.0	easily understandable by an average 5th grader.
Scores between 60.0 and 70.0	easily understood by 8th and 9th graders
Scores between 0.0 and 30.0	easily understood by college graduates

Figure.2 Criterion of Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

90-100 : Very Easy
80-89 : Easy
70-79 : Fairly Easy
60-69 : Standard
50-59 : Fairly Difficult
30-49 : Difficult
0-29 : Very Confusing

Figure.3 Criterion of Flesch Reading Ease Level

The writer is assessed as an intermediate learner in Japan while this result indicates he is equivalent to a college graduate. His writing was evaluated as ‘fairly difficult’. Although it indicates that each of his sentences is structured using relatively many words, this includes no academic word level perspective. To judge the essay level, it is important to observe how the students organize their essays and to see how powerful the essays are in convincing readers.

### 3.2. Sample essay

(1) In late years, *various industries* are evolving in the world every day. (2) *Various industries* of world are very great. Especially, science and technology growth is noticeable. (3) There are a lot of funny in space. (4) *A space development project* is progressing speedily in science technology. (5) **However** *a space development project* spends much money. (6) Of course, people that spend money helping are important too. (7) Science and technology must not stop development to help a lot of people either. (8) *A space development project* should spend money to explore space because we will discover new resources in the future and connect to develop medicine and mechanism.

(9) **First of all**, we can use fossil fuel now. (10) The earth is very delicate. (11) *If* a human hands increase, the earth becomes good, then bad. (12) We live to use resources of oil and coal. (13) It is very problem. (14) This problem is the most famous in the world. (15) Fossil fuel affects much carbon dioxide and goes up temperature. (16) It is made mainly by a human being. (17) From such

situation, scientists notices wind energy, solar energy and geothermal energy. (18) These become an indispensable now. (19) This energy is very necessary to make our future better. (20) Scientists think whether there are not good resources other than this energy. (21) **So** we have to research for new resources in space. (22) The space is submerging many possibilities. (23) **If** we can discover new resources, the industry develops greatly.

(24) **Secondly**, we were able to accomplish industrial development because we had a lot of resources. (25) We must search to discover unknown resources in space. (26) Naturally, scientists use various science techniques to analyze resources. (27) Various science techniques and a lot of resource is affinity. (28) We spend our life better by these things. (29) **If** technology develops, we can raise various industrial basics. (30) In other word, it is medicine, mechanism, and scientific evolution. (31) We can help a lot of people and our earth in these evolutions. (32) We need to consider these evolutions in future.

(33) **In conclusion**, *a space development project* is of good cheer in future, **sowe** should get new energy and develop medicine and mechanism. (34) *A space development project* spends much money. (35) **However**, we must not forget that the background has much possibility. (36) It is great for us to succeed development. (37) Scientists should use the techniques that get space development again for the earth. (38) The environment of the earth protects us from an obstacle. (39) **Therefore**, we must not neglect evolution in space.

### 3.3. Reference

This essay is characterized by its distinctive lexical choices. Repetition of the same words is used more than reference words such as pronouns. The phrase *various industries* appears in (1) & (2) and the most frequent participant is *a space development project* in (4), (5) and (7) of the introduction and in (33) and (34) in the concluding section. The phrases are simply repeated. Despite the sequence of sentences, the words are never replaced by pronouns.

Interestingly, although a high ratio of repetition is used, few cohesive devices of demonstratives such as *the* and *that* are used in this text. Thomson (2004: 159) explains that *the* is used to 'point forward to a postmodifying prepositional phrase within the same nominal group' and *that* is used 'to refer back to a participant mentioned in the same sentence, not in an earlier sentence.' As presented in the essay, the phrase *space development* is accompanied by the demonstrative *a*, 'which is used before a noun that names something or someone that has not been mentioned before, or that the person you are talking to does not know about' (Longman Advanced American Dictionary 2000).

### 3.4. Conjunction

Thomson (2004: 189) notes that conjunction has 'three basic levels, which are within the clause (preposition); between clauses (conjunctions); and between clause complexes or sentences

(conjunctive adjuncts)'. He also mentions that the conjunctive adjuncts contribute the most to cohesion. Bloor and Bloor (2004: 98) explain that there are four classes of conjunction adjuncts, which are: 'additive', 'adversative', 'causal', and 'temporal'.

The additive-sequential relationships in *first of all* and *Secondly* in sentences (9) and (24) are categorized as internal, since it is ideas within the text that are stated in sequence. On the other hand, *firstly* and *secondly* could be an external temporal sequence in a different text, since they initiate the time sequence of a specific matter. The causal-result relationship is indicated in *in conclusion* in sentence (33). These conjunctive adjuncts help readers to follow the flow of the text and understand the writer's points.

Other features are noticeable in this text, for example, *if* is used for condition in (11), (23) and (29) properly. *However*, on the other hand, is used twice, in (5) and (35), inappropriately. Although these two *howevers* are used as conjunction adjuncts, their behaviors are different.

(34) A space development project spends much money. (35) **However**, we must not forget that the background has much possibility.

According to the Longman, *however* is 'used when you are what you have just said.' The latter *however* in (35) tries to justify the expenditure for a space development project by pointing out the benefit from the project. In this case, the use of *however* is still too weak to show an unexpected fact or the strong disagreement in the writer's opinion.

(4) *A space development project* is progressing speedily in science technology. (5) **However** *a space development project* spends much money.

Moreover, the use of *however* in (5) has no indication of objection against the previous sentence. The conjunction *and* can be replaced with *however* to join parts of sentences because the information followed by *however* in (5) is just added by introducing the same nominal subject of *a space development project*.

(20) Scientists think whether there are not good resources other than this energy. (21) **So** we have to research for new resources in space.

Another interesting feature of conjunction usage in this text is the use of *so* and *therefore*.

In terms of *so* as a causal conjunction, this *so* appears in sentence (21) and behaves as a conjunction, since a new sentence is started by *so*. The writer seems to be confusing conjunction with conjunction adjunctive and this confusion leads to grammatical error.

(33) In conclusion, a space development project is of good cheer in future, **so**we should get new energy and develop medicine and mechanism.

Although the second *so* in sentence (33) is seen in the concluding part and this seems apparently to be a correct use of *so*, once the meaning of the sentence has been observed carefully, it does not make any sense. According to the dictionary, *so* is used to give the reason why something happens, why someone does something. The first part of the sentence should have mentioned what has already been done or completed instead of hoping for the future, and the second part of the sentence should state an action in result of the previous sentence.

(38) The environment of the earth protects us from an obstacle. (39) Therefore, we must not neglect evolution in space.

In sentence (39), although *therefore* is used to end this essay as indicated above, Thomson (2004) mentions that *therefore* functions as cause and effect. From a grammatical point of view the first part of the sentence should read: the earth's atmosphere (not environment) protects the earth from obstacles, since there is more than one obstacle in space. Evolution in space in the second sentence has no relation to protecting the earth's environment in the first sentence. Unfortunately, the cause and effect relationship cannot be confirmed at all in sentence (33).

### 3.5. Macro-level analysis: Learner corpus

A learner corpus is a useful tool to investigate what kind of grammatical mistakes Japanese students might make. 21 students' essays containing 8371 words were analyzed with ANTCOCONC software. Although I tried to compare this corpus with BAWE (British Academic Written English) and demonstrate the difference, especially in lexical cohesion between native speakers and non-native speakers, the learner corpus is too small to give validity to the generalization.

In this essay, after a deductive approach analyzing one student to find the potential frequent mistakes by Japanese students in academic writing, an inductive approach was conducted. As already mentioned, the writer tends to confuse the use of conjunctions with conjunctive adjuncts. Coordinate conjunctions especially, such as 'for', 'and', 'nor', 'but', 'or', 'yet', and 'so' - called 'FANBOYS' after their initials - are not recommended to start a new sentence. In Figure 4, surprisingly, *so* is used in an inadequate way in almost 30 percent of instances. The results also show that Japanese students tend to use *but* instead of *however*, this occurring in more than 25 percent of instances. They also use *and* incorrectly in 2.3 percent of instances in the learner corpus.

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	No (beginning of sentence)	Frequency	%
So	8	27	29.6%
But	9	34	26.5%
And	4	172	2.3%
For	0	111	0.0%
Or	0	17	0.0%
Yet	0	3	0.0%
Nor	0	0	0.0%

Figure.4 Numbers of Japanese students' mistakes in their papers

### 4. Conclusion

This Functional Grammar approach, developed by Halliday (1976), helps teachers to decide what their students need to know in order to succeed in conveying their own opinion. Once teachers understand the grammatical rules, it becomes possible to train their students linguistically and create effective textbooks.

This essay found that the most frequently occurring error in cohesive ties in a Japanese student's writing concerns reference and conjunction, especially involving conjunction adjuncts, and that other Japanese students might have similar problems in their writing according to a small learner corpus. This deductive approach to analyzing an essay provides the basis on which to discover potential common mistakes among the Japanese by using a learner corpus. This mixed approach can help teachers understand how to coach the students in order to write powerful academic essays. A 'powerful' essay does not always mean 'assertive', but rather having the power to convince people by explanation. Both learning and teaching powerful communication, not only in spoken, but also in written language is essential for our education.

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