

# THE IMPACTS OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONS ON COHESIVE DEVICES ON IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION

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**Abstract:** This action research examines the effectiveness of an explicit cohesive device training procedure on improving foreign language learners' reading comprehension. The research was carried out in a six-week experimental teaching process for a class of 24 non-English majored students with the aid of two main data collection instruments, including two reading comprehension tests (a pre-test and a post-test) and a survey questionnaire. The data was mainly analyzed quantitatively using the Paired Sample T-tests. The overall result revealed that there was a significant improvement on students' reading comprehension, which indicated that the technique worked well and was found effective in the study.

*Keywords:* reading comprehension, cohesive devices, International Standard Program (ISP)

## 1. Introduction

With regard to the great importance of reading competence in academic and occupational contexts, teaching reading comprehension has been always the focus of much concern. However, it is observed after years of practice in reading, second language learners still find it difficult to make sense of the texts they read. As pointed out by many scholars such as Cook (1989) and Nuttal (1982), one of the reasons the failure to interpret the writer's cohesive signals as intended which leads to readers' inability to understand correctly the functional value of individual sentences in regard to their relationship with one another and within the whole reading passage.

In the view of Halliday and Hasan (1976) the continuity that cohesive relations bring

about is a semantic continuity. This makes it possible for cohesive patterns to play an indispensable role in the processing of text by a listener or reader. It is, therefore, necessary to help our students identify different kinds of cohesive relations which form the backbones of different types of text, because those chains signal organizational patterns of different types of text.

Within the recent decades, there have been a number of studies on cohesion, coherence and EFL reading worldwide, which have shown the important role played by cohesion and coherence in facilitating reading comprehension. Chapman (1983) finds a relationship between reading ability and the ability to complete anaphoric relation in a cloze test, and he concludes that the masters of such textual features - including cohesive ties is a central factor in fluent reading and reading comprehension. Mackay (1979) and Cowan (1976) similarly argue

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that the recognition of conjunctions and other intersentential linguistic devices is crucial to the information gathering skills of second language readers. As a result, the teaching of reading should include classroom instruction on the cohesive devices of English, and their function across sentences and paragraphs. Many other researchers have also come to the conclusion that all types of textual cohesive conjunctions facilitate reading comprehension in the same way such as Cooper (1984), Chung (2000), Degand & Sanders (2002).

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Cohesion and coherence

Basically, cohesion can be thought of as all the grammatical and lexical links that link one part of a text to another. Halliday & Hasan (1976) assert that cohesion refers to the ranges of possibilities that exist for linking one sentence with the others that have gone before or are previously mentioned. According to these researchers, cohesion is expressed partly through the grammar and partly through the vocabulary. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004: 523) provide a more comprehensive elaboration of cohesion; that is:

*“set of lexico-grammatical systems that have evolved specifically as resources for making it possible to transcend the boundaries of the clause - that is the domain of the highest-ranking grammatical unit.”*

Coherence, on the other hand refers to the semantic relations that underline texts. Van Dijk (1979: 93) writes:

*“Coherence is a semantic property of discourse formed through the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences, with “interpretation” implying interaction between the text and the reader.”*

With this definition, Van Dijk (1979) highly relates coherence with the interpretation of the text. However, the text here is limited to written texts, not covering spoken texts.

Briefly put, a text has cohesion, or is cohesive if its elements are tied together with explicit linguistic marking of meaning relation. Meanwhile, a text has texture, or is coherent, if it makes sense. In other words, it builds up mental creation of meaning relations during text processing.

### 2.2. Cohesive devices

The grammatical and lexical links are indicated through a system of cohesive devices. However, there are certain differences in the categories of cohesive devices.

Oshima & Hogue (2006) point out four ways to achieve coherence including repeating key nouns, using consistent pronouns, using transitional signals and arranging ideas in a logical way. However, this is quite meager classification as it excludes a number of means to link ideas in a written text like synonyms and ellipsis.

Halliday & Hasan (1976) distinguish five cohesive devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The first four are grammatical devices, and the last, lexical. Lexical cohesion devices include reiteration and collocation. Reiteration is further divided into full and partial repetitions. Full repetition means two lexical items are the same in both form and meaning while partial repetition involves two lexical items which are different in form but having certain similar semantic features, including synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy and general nouns. Collocation refers to the co-occurrence of lexical items. This is a thorough classification of cohesive devices which is utilized as the theoretical background of the study.

A number of studies have pointed out the importance of understanding cohesion and cohesive devices in reading comprehension. Connor (1984) asserts that the appropriate use of cohesive devices enables readers to capture the connectedness between what precedes and what follows. This means the dependency of the linguistic elements on one another in a text constructs a semantic unit. This shows that connectedness is an indispensable element in any written discourse.

In fact, Brown & Yule (1983) points out the 4 roles of cohesions in assisting reading comprehension.

1. Cohesion provides the main thread of a text by showing that some entity or circumstance, some relevant feature or argument persists from one moment to another in the semantic process as meanings unfold.

2. Cohesion creates the characteristic “feel” of a text. The continuity expressed by cohesion not only makes a text interpretable, but also provides it with its affective power.

3. Cohesion enables readers to supply all the missing items necessary for the interpretation of a text.

4. Cohesion provides the basis for making predictions and building expectation.

Muto (2007), in his study named “The Use of Lexical Cohesion in Reading and Writing”, provokes the considerable effect that the knowledge of lexical cohesion has on readers’ understanding of the story. The necessary information, which authors hint at in the text, could be exposed by paying attention to the cohesive ties among words.

### 3. Research question

The research is conducted to address the following two research questions:

1. How do the instructions of cohesive devices improve the reading comprehension of

students who study English as a foreign language?

2. How do students perceive the effectiveness and necessity of the instructions of cohesive devices in improving their reading comprehension?

### 4. Research design

#### 4.1. Participants and training procedure

The participants of the study were 24 first-year non-English majored students from the International Standard Programme (ISP) who had achieved B1 level and were studying to reach B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The homogeneity in terms of language proficiency of the participating students was established thanks to a placement test at the beginning of the course. These students were selected because they all belonged to one class to whom the researcher was in charge of teaching reading and they all had no experience with instructions of cohesive devices.

The students took part in a 6-week training procedure, during which they had reading lessons; each lasted 100 minutes and was delivered by the researcher.

In the original shape of a reading lesson, students had 50 minutes to explore the reading text and to do the following reading exercises in the book which are designed in the form of multiple choice questions and short-answer questions about the main idea, detailed information and vocabulary in the reading text; the other 50 minutes was used for post-reading activities regarding vocabulary consolidation, topic discussion and writing reflection. However, the researcher used the time of the post-reading part for delivering instructions of cohesive devices. The post-reading exercises were assigned as homework. The intervention was illustrated in the following table:

Time	Original lessons	Adapted lessons
50 minutes	Reading practice	Instructions about cohesive devices
50 minutes	Post-reading (vocabulary consolidation + topic discussion + writing reflection )	Reading practice

During the training procedure, students experienced explicit instructions on 5 types of cohesive devices (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion). For the instruction of lexical cohesion, the researcher only taught students about repetition using synonyms, antonyms and general nouns. Aspects related to hyponymy, meronymy were excluded as they were considered to be beyond students's B1 level. Each type of cohesive devices was taught in two lessons so that students could have chance to consolidate what they learnt.

During each lesson, students were trained to recognize cohesive devices and their functions across the text and guided to apply their knowledge and understanding during the reading process to enhance comprehension. Each lesson lasted 100 minutes and was divided into two phases, namely knowledge development and skill practice. In phase 1, the teacher gave explicit instruction on the cohesive devices by providing controlled practice tasks related to the use of cohesive devices. In the second phase, students were guided to locate cohesive items in the reading passage and analyze their use. After analyzing and making sure that students understood the types of cohesion, the teacher let students do the reading exercises provided in the course book.

#### 4.2. Research instruments

##### *Reading comprehension tests*

Two reading comprehension tests (one pre-test and one post-test) were designed

by the researcher. The time allowed was 40 minutes with 3 reading passages; each includes 10 multiple choice questions. The pre-test and the post-test were carefully selected from the TOELF reading practice passages to have the same level of difficulty regarding the number of questions, question types, the length of the text, the text structure. Regarding vocabulary range, a software named Lexical tutor was used to make sure the passages in the pre-test and post-test were at similar lexical level.

The pre-test was delivered before the training session for the teacher to identify the reading level of the students and the post-test was conducted after the training session. All the students' scores then were recorded and analyzed using a software named SPSS, more specifically the Paired Sample T-tests to show whether the training session did have a significant effect on students' reading comprehension or not.

##### *Survey questionnaire*

After the intervention, the students were asked to complete a survey questionnaire to express their their opinions of the training process and the knowledge and skills they grasped.

Since the questionnaire was designed for collecting factual, behavioral and attitudinal data, so it uses various types of questions regarding yes/no questions, multiple-choice items, open-ended questions, and Likert-scale. However, most of the questions do belong to the two main kinds: multiple-choice and Likert-scale.

The results from multiple choice, yes/no questions and Likert-scales were counted and presented in forms of charts. Those from open-ended questions were simply recorded due to the limited number of participants.

**5. Results and discussion**

The results and discussions cover two main parts in accordance with the research questions, namely students' level of improvement in reading comprehension after training procedure; and students' perception of the necessity and effectiveness of the instructions on cohesive devices in improving their reading comprehension.

*5.1. Students' level of improvement in reading comprehension*

The participants' reading comprehension ability was measured by counting the number of correct answers out of the 30 multiple choice comprehension questions. In order to determine whether the training procedure had an effect on reading comprehension, two measurements were made. First, the class average scores in the pre-test and post-test were calculated and compared. Second, the students' scores were processed using the Paired Sample T-tests in order to reveal the significance value of the scores.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the group's performance in the pre-test and post-test

Paired Samples Statistics					
Pair 1		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test		5.8750	24	.85019	.17354
Post-test		6.3125	24	.60456	.12340

As can be clearly seen, there was a significant rise in the average score of all the students. In the pre-test, the mean stood at 5.8750. After 6 weeks' training, this figure rose to 6.3125, which is an indicator of the students' general improvement. Besides, the standard deviation in the post-test was 0.60456 which was

lower than the the standard deviation in the pre-test. This means the difference in the students' reading scores was significantly narrowed. In other words, the instruction on cohesive devices not only helped improve students' reading comprehension but also appeared to help reduce the gap in reading ability among them.

Table 2. Results of the paired-sample T-tests

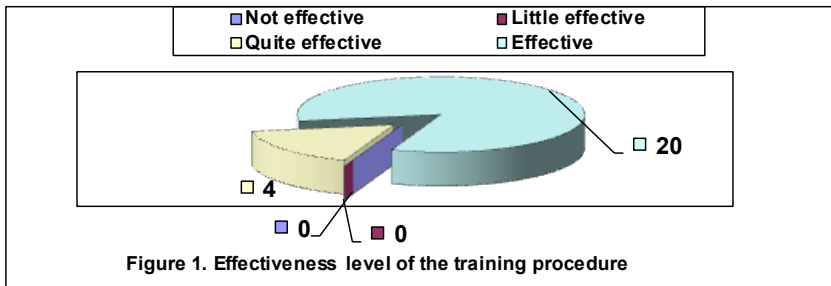
Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
<i>Pair 1</i>	<i>Pre-test - Post-test</i>	-.43750	.68067	.13894	-.72492	-.15008	-3.149	23	.004

*P* < .005

As the level of significance shows, it was smaller than 0.05 in the results of the groups, which means the experimental teaching phase did have positive effects on the studied students' reading comprehension performance.

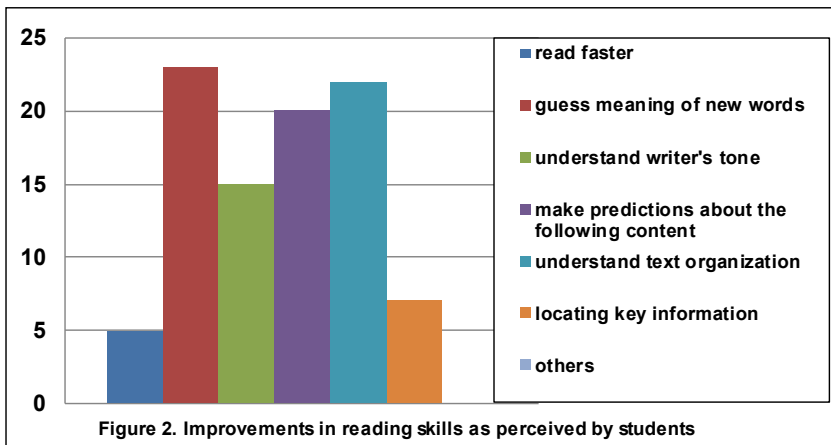
5.2. Students' perception of the necessity and effectiveness of the instruction on cohesive devices

The success of the training procedure was also revealed in the students' answers in the survey questionnaire after the intervention. In fact, all the students stated that the training procedure was effective for their study with twenty students choosing "effective" and four choosing "quite effective". The evaluation of the students was illustrated in the pie chart below:



The majority of the students confessed that they were satisfied with the six-week learning session as through it they gained considerable knowledge about cohesion that they had never learnt about before and their

reading skills had considerable improvement. In the survey questionnaire, the students also identified the reading skills that they acquired improvement after the treatment procedure.



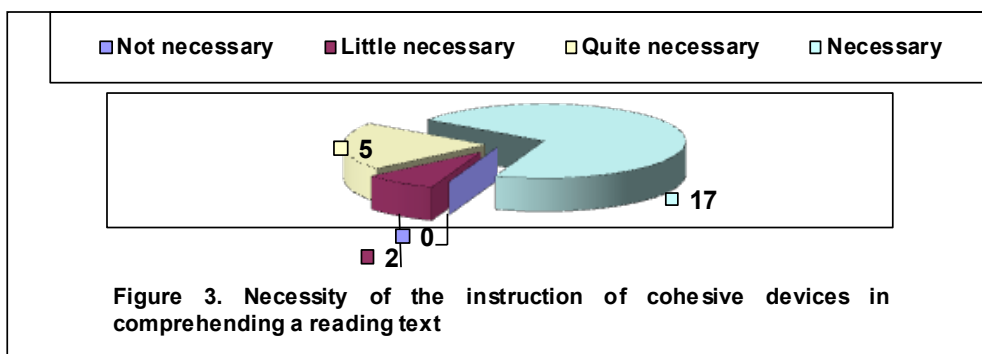
As can be seen from the bar chart, the biggest improvements in students' reading skills were related to the ability to guess the meaning of new words based on the context with 23 students. Such improvement was not difficult to explain as with the knowledge of

cohesive devices, students could understand the lexical ties within a paragraph which greatly facilitated their ability of guessing new vocabulary. This is also demonstrated by Brown & Yule (1983) when he points out that cohesion enables readers to supply all the



missing items necessary for the interpretation of a text. A majority of the students stated that they did better with questions involving text organization (22 students), making predictions about the following content (20 students), and understanding the writer's tones (15 students). These results also correlate with Brown & Yule (1983)'s explanation of the role of cohesion in assisting reading comprehension that cohesion provides the main thread of a text

by showing that some entity or circumstance, some relevant feature or argument persists from one moment to another in the semantic process as meanings unfold and cohesion provides the basis for making predictions and building expectation. However, the instructions of cohesive devices did not help much in improving students' reading pace and ability to locate key information with just 5 and 7 students respectively.



All the students agreed that it was necessary to understand cohesive devices when comprehending a reading passage with two students saying "little necessary", five "quite necessary" and seventeen "necessary" because understanding of cohesive devices helped them to follow the reading texts more easily, as responded by the majority of the students. Overall, it can be seen that the students had strong motivation to learn about cohesion since they all believed this would help them improve their reading ability.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Summary of major findings

From the analysis and discussions of the data collected from the survey questionnaires and score analysis, significant findings were identified.

First, it was discovered that students are highly motivated to learn about cohesive devices in reading lessons. The evidences of such great motivation came from the results of

the survey questionnaires and the test scores. Specifically, all the students admitted that the instruction of cohesive devices played a crucial role in their reading comprehension and it was necessary to learn about cohesive devices while practising reading skills. All the students wished to continue learning about cohesive devices in their reading comprehension lessons.

Second, apparently the instruction of cohesive devices did facilitate students' reading comprehension. After the training procedure about cohesive devices, the students' scores in the reading test improved significantly compared with the scores in the test they did before. The score analysis also indicated that the gap in students' reading competence was considerably narrowed. This finding was of real significance in teaching reading comprehension.

### 6.2. Recommendations

With the success of the experimental teaching phase so far, several suggestions are put forward to enhance the effectiveness of the model

teaching as well as to make a step toward a new way of teaching reading comprehension.

First, it is important to raise teachers' awareness of the instruction of cohesive devices in teaching reading comprehension. This can be achieved by holding seminars and professional meetings, in which teachers share their experience in working with cohesion and reading teaching. Creative techniques will be exchanged; difficulties will be shared so as to seek solutions and pedagogical suggestions will be raised in order to better the new method. Besides, competitions on designing and teaching reading lessons based on cohesion instructions among teachers should be encouraged. In such competitions, different teaching techniques will be introduced and shortcomings will be detected, thus providing helpful guides for teachers to apply the new method better.

Second, one of the difficulties in teaching cohesive devices to improve students' reading comprehension was the source of materials, especially reading texts. Therefore, one way to enhance the application of this method is to form a reading materials bank. Teachers of the same professional groups should share with one another their reading materials in which they focus on analyzing one type of cohesive devices that appears the most in the passages and build up a bank. Once the materials in such banks are regularly revised and updated, they can be reused for a long time. Furthermore, for better exploitation, teachers are advised to run workshops in which they consider and reflect on samples of cohesion-reading materials with references to the classes they teach. In addition, serious studies should be conducted to have deeper insights into the use of the materials as well as to provide theoretical base and references for better exploitation.

These are the two recommendations which provide helpful incentives for educational administrations and teachers to expand the

teaching of cohesion to improve students' reading ability.

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# TÍNH HIỆU QUẢ CỦA QUÁ TRÌNH GIẢNG DẠY VỀ CÁC PHƯƠNG TIỆN LIÊN KẾT VĂN BẢN TRONG VIỆC NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH

Bồ Thị Lý

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**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết miêu tả kết quả của một nghiên cứu hành động xuất phát từ thực tiễn giảng dạy tiếng Anh của tác giả cho sinh viên không chuyên. Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu này là xem xét tính hiệu quả của việc lồng ghép giảng dạy lý thuyết về các phương tiện liên kết văn bản nhằm nâng cao khả năng đọc hiểu của người học ngoại ngữ. Nghiên cứu được tiến hành thông qua một quá trình giảng dạy thực nghiệm kỹ năng đọc hiểu tiếng Anh kéo dài sáu tuần cho một lớp gồm 24 sinh viên không chuyên với sự trợ giúp của hai công cụ thu thập dữ liệu chủ yếu, bao gồm câu hỏi khảo sát và hai bài kiểm tra trước và sau quá trình thực nghiệm. Kết quả tổng thể chỉ ra rằng việc giảng dạy lý thuyết liên kết văn bản đã có những tác động tích cực đối với việc phát triển kỹ năng đọc hiểu của nhóm thực nghiệm.

*Từ khoá:* đọc hiểu, lý thuyết liên kết văn bản, phương tiện liên kết văn bản, sinh viên Nhiệm vụ chiến lược