

Teaching Freshmen Lexical Cohesion in Academic English Writing

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Abstract: Lexical cohesion has been neglected in English language teaching in mainland China for a long time and students tend to overuse conjunctive elements in their academic writing. This essay aims at teaching freshmen in mainland China to understand how to achieve lexical cohesion through the analysis of a text from *The Economist* and thus lay a solid foundation for their future academic English writing. Firstly, I will introduce the teaching context of lexical cohesion in mainland China in terms of its difficulty and importance and explain the reasons why I choose this text for analysis. In the next section, I will analyze it using two analytical tools: Nunan's lexical cohesive category and Flowerdew's signaling nouns. Then, I will provide pedagogical suggestions and design one activity to teach freshmen in mainland China lexical cohesion in academic English writing. At last, I will anticipate the challenge teachers may encounter when applying this activity and think about the countermeasures.

Keywords: Lexical Cohesion; Academic English Writing; Freshmen.

1. Introduction

This essay aims at teaching freshmen in mainland China to understand how to achieve lexical cohesion through the analysis of a text from *The Economist* and thus lay a solid foundation for their future academic English writing. Firstly, I will introduce the teaching context of lexical cohesion in mainland China in terms of its difficulty and importance and explain the reasons why I choose this text for analysis. In the next section, I will analyze it using two analytical tools: Nunan's lexical cohesive category [1] and Flowerdew's signaling nouns [2]. Then, I will provide pedagogical suggestions and design one activity to teach freshmen in mainland China lexical cohesion in academic English writing. At last, I will anticipate the challenge teachers may encounter when applying this activity and think about the countermeasures.

2. Teaching Context and Text Selection

Lexical cohesion has been neglected in English language teaching in mainland China for a long time where teachers mainly focus on functional connectives such as conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs [3] and few good descriptions of the form and functions of it could be found [2]. Thus, students may overuse conjunctive elements in their academic writing, such as "first", "secondly", "moreover", "furthermore", etc., because they assume these words connect the sentences and help achieve cohesion of the text. In addition, they may repeat the same word many times in an essay and cause redundancy. Teaching them lexical cohesion can improve their academic writing from the perspective of tied discourse and elegant style, enhance other basic English skills (listening, reading, speaking) through better understanding of texts and enlarge their subject-related vocabulary.

I selected an article called "Why GDP is a poor measure of progress" from *The Economist* for analysis on account of two reasons. For one thing, chosen from *The Economist*, a British magazine representing the native use of English, it is a good

illustration of lexical cohesion. For another thing, this article fits for freshmen English level in mainland China so that students do not need to spend many efforts on the language itself.

3. Text Analysis

According to Jones, lexical cohesion is the result of semantic relationship between words and can be achieved through repetition of the word or words related to the same subject.[4] Many researchers, such as Nunan, Jones, McCarthy, study this phenomenon carefully and develop various approaches for deeper analysis. In the following, I'm going to analyze the text "Why GDP is a poor measure of progress" according to Nunan's lexical cohesive category and lexical signaling in this General-specific structure.

3.1. Nunan's Lexical Cohesive Category

In Nunan's table, lexical cohesion is categorized into repetition, synonym, antonym, hyponym and collocation.[1] Apart from same word repetition, vocabulary could be varied through synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy and words related to the same subject may co-occur in a text to achieve cohesion. In the chosen text, these methods are used to employ appropriate words to make this article theme-centered, concise, cohesive and present high level English language proficiency.

Firstly, repetition in this native-written article is properly but limitedly used. If you read through the passage, you may pay attention to the abbreviation "GDP" because it repeated 15 times in total. The author used a concise abbreviation "GDP" to refer to gross domestic product all the time except for using its full name when introducing the concept because it makes the subject of the topic clearer and is easier for readers to understand than employing other cohesive ties. However, "compare", "measure", "progress" only appeared twice respectively in the text since repetition of these words would make the language redundant.

To produce theme-centered essay of high language quality, the author changed expressions of the same meaning through

synonyms etc. and used lexical chains[4] to illustrate a topic. For instance, “a feudal king swap places with a present-day insurance clerk”, “trade his kingdom for life as an office drone” and “compare the life of a medieval king to that of a modern-day worker” convey similar meaning; “insurance clerk”, “office drone”, and “worker” have similarity that they are ordinary persons in the 21st century; “swap” and “trade” are synonyms. Also, when talking about the king, words and expressions like “palaces”, “armies of servants”, “courtiers” and “kingdom” co-occurred to describe his life.

3.2. Signaling Nouns and Lexical Signaling

In addition to Nunan’s lexical cohesive category, many researchers such as Flowerdew suggest signaling nouns and lexical signaling also contribute to lexical cohesion. Signaling nouns[2] refer to the words which “we need to seek elsewhere in the context for their content”[5] and lexical signaling is the phenomena that some words usually occur in certain textual patterns which signals the structure of the text and thus result in cohesion.

This article is an argumentative essay which is centered around the topic “why GDP is a poor measure of progress” and follows general-specific-general texture pattern. Lexical signals of this pattern are usually changes according to different topics. In the first paragraph, the author introduces the topic with the comparison of a feudal king and a modern worker’s life. In the second paragraph, the concept of GDP is explained and the “critics” of using it as the measurement of progress are listed including destroying the environment and divorcing from spiritual well-being. Then, the understatement and “mis-measurement” of GDP is put forward and illustrated with concrete examples from the perspective of medical charge rise, digital services, online shopping and bank lending services. At last, this article is concluded with the summary of above analysis. The structure becomes clear with the use of words like “critics”, “understated” and “mis-measurement”.

Signaling nouns are properly utilized in this essay. For example, in the second paragraph, to understand the word “critics” the readers need to seek the negative effects of using GDP as measurement from the following sentences; the content of “charge” is more specific than its original meaning. In paragraph 3, “equation” refers to the relationship between GDP and material progress mentioned in the preceding paragraph. These signaling nouns connects words, sentences and paragraphs and builds lexical cohesion in the text.

4. Pedagogical Suggestions

Academic English writing is of great significance for freshmen in universities because it is the foundation of their future academic life and closely related to their grades. Being an important feature of successful academic works, lexical cohesion ties the words or sentences together and realize communicative purpose.

The analysis of lexical cohesion according to the above two approaches provides EFL learners new insight about cohesion in the text which attributes to the improvement of their overall English language competency and thus benefits their academic writing. For instance, student could enlarge their vocabulary through memorizing synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, topic and structure related words; they may enhance reading comprehension ability because of the deeper understanding of text structures in terms of cohesion; EFL students would be able to use various cohesion forms other than conjunctive elements and repetition.

However, it has been neglected in EFL teaching in mainland China for a long time. Therefore, academic English writing teachers should spend time and efforts on lexical cohesion instruction, especially for freshmen. In the next section, I designed an activity to apply for this idea into academic writing classroom.

5. Design of Teaching Activity

Inspired by Liu [3], a peer review activity is designed to teach 20 freshmen of intermediate level English in mainland China how to create lexical cohesive ties in their academic English writing. The students are required to work in pairs to finish the three tasks listed in the following paragraphs and achieve effective learning outcomes.

Step 1 Write an essay. Ask the students to write a short essay in 15 minutes to express their opinions about reality TV using appropriate lexical items, such as repetition, synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, collation, signaling nouns, lexical signaling, to enhance cohesion. The students may start with superordinate “reality TV” to hyponyms “American Next Top Model”, “Big Brother”, “American God Telling”, etc. Also, they may use several synonyms of “problematic”, such as “troublesome”, “negative”.

Step 2 Fill in the blanks. Students are asked to recognize the lexical cohesive ties in their partner’s essay according to the category listed in the Table 1 and fill in the blanks. This task tests students’ understanding of lexical cohesion and provide them an overview of some lexical items.

Table 1. Fill in the blanks

Lexical Item	Examples in your partner’s essay
Repetition	
Synonyms	
Antonyms	
Hyponyms	
Collation	
Signaling Nouns	
Lexical Signaling	

Step 3 Think about improvements. Ask them to discuss with partners about how to improve the essay in terms of the appropriate use of lexical cohesion and provide a revised version of partners’ essay. Communicating with the partners helps students realize the understanding gap between authors and audience so that they can improve the essay.

6. Challenges Expected

This activity is designed based on the assumption that students have a basic understanding of lexical cohesion. However, their English level and understanding of lexical cohesion is various. If the intermediate freshmen have difficulty in producing a cohesive essay, step 2 and step 3 would be impossible to continue.

To address this problem, I suggest teachers teach lexical cohesion after providing students an overview of academic English writing in several lectures and analyze it in a sample essay like what we did in section 3 before implementing this activity. In this way, students would be able to apply what they learned and produce more cohesive writings.

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