



**GRAMMATICAL COHESION SKILL FOR EFL LEARNERS:
THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY LEVEL KURDISH
LEARNERS OF ENGLISH**

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Abstract:

The skill of grammatical cohesion is required for EFL learners to be able to write cohesive texts. It includes having a command of reference cohesive devices (both anaphorically and cataphorically) of the foreign language. The aim of the current research was to explore the cases of anaphoric pronoun resolution of university level Kurdish Learners of English (KLEs). The secondary aim of the study was to find out the reason why participants did not use that cohesive device properly. To this end, the writing assignments of 60 senior English department students were analysed. The results showed the use of pronoun reference, reiteration of expressions (lack of using pronoun reference), and unsuccessful use of pronoun reference. The results also showed possible cases of Cross Linguistic Influence (in both its positive and negative forms). The study concluded that lack of suitable instructional strategies was the reason behind inappropriate use of reference. In the light of the results, it is recommended that Kurdish EFL learners need more efficient instructional strategies to use grammatical cohesive devices.

Keywords: anaphoric reference, pronoun anaphoric resolution, cross linguistic influence

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1. Introduction

Learners of a foreign language are expected to gain the knowledge and ability of writing cohesive texts in the target language, specifically, the grammatical cohesion skills. To compose cohesive text in the foreign language, learners may find it difficult as it demands utilization of cognitive and linguistic strategies. Perhaps, the difficulty is caused by lack of linguistic knowledge which eventually motivates the learners to recourse to other sources to fill out the gap. One of the sources is learners' L1 (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Odlin, 1989). Though learners have the knowledge and skill in their native language, the way they work may not be similar to those of the foreign language. Even if the cohesive structures are similar, the learners might not be aware of the similarities found between the two languages easily. Hence, the expectation may not occasionally be met due to specific reasons among which the different realization of textual links in L1 and L2. For instance, "*Some languages may tolerate more repetition of the noun head rather than pronominalisation*" (McCarthy 1991, p.166). In other words, although cohesion is needed as linking feature for all types of texts across various languages, its realization is a language-specific property. Kurdish Learners of English (KLEs), who are the subjects and target group of the present study, appeared to lack the ability to write cohesive English texts. The claim was made by the researchers after they were assessing and examining texts written by KLEs in the course of their study as senior university level students majoring in English language. The researchers found the urgent need to investigate the reasons why KLEs could not write cohesive English texts. Thus, the topic of the current research is invaluable as it empirically addressed a vital issue as an action research.

The main objective of the current study is to find out the reasons behind KLEs' inharmonious combination of English sentences. Specifically, it is thought that lack of proper realization of cohesion techniques might have caused production of the incoherent texts. The realization of the techniques may be affected by learners' native language, especially the ones which are not found in or different from the target language. Hence, the secondary objective of the study is to identify cases of Cross Linguistic Influence (CLI) (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), particularly, the negative type of influence which potentially has unfavourable consequences.

The hypothesis in the current study is that one of the reasons behind language learners' incoherent L2 texts is the different realization of the cohesion links among languages. Based on Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Cross Linguistics Influence (CLI) (James, 1980; Odlin, 1989 among others), language learners at a specific learning level recourse to L1 structure elements while using L2. CAH with a language teaching prospective affirms that similarities and differences between structural elements of L1 and L2 provide sound, plausible interpretations for L2 learners' improper use of the target language. CLI, in part, attributes the misuse of certain L2 structures to a negative influence of L1, or, to the improper projection of L1 structures onto L2 use (Omar, 2017). Additionally, learners' lack of awareness of the resemblance is also crucial for learners, hence, for which the role of pedagogy is called for to familiarize learners of the

correspondence between L1 and L2 in bringing about textuality through grammatical cohesion in both languages. The aim of the study is to offer feasible interpretations which can scientifically support the reason(s) which caused production of incoherent texts.

2. Literature Review

Researchers paid considerable attention to EFL learners' writing products and writing quality. Within this area, they extensively studied the cohesion and coherence features of EFL learners based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) cohesion theory. They also focused on how cohesive devices used by EFL learners affect the quality of their writing. According to Brown and Yule (1983), based on Halliday and Hassan's (1976) cohesion theory, the cohesive relationships which create texture determine whether a group of sentences to be considered a text or not. The texture property, which is weaved by the grammatical cohesive devices, distinguishes it from something that is not a text. Although cohesion concerns the grammatical relationships between the surface elements in a text, it helps the text to be coherent. Coherence is something which is not directly mentioned in the surface of the text, but it is about the meaning of the text which is inferred via unexpressed elements of knowledge, concepts or cognitive structures (Titscher et al., 2000). So, if the text is not cohesive, it loses its coherence, too.

In general, the field of grammatical cohesion and textuality is classified as Reference, Ellipsis/Substitution and Conjunction (McCarthy, 1991). Anaphoric Reference, which is the subject of the current study, is discussed as one of the building blocks to bring about cohesive texts. For EFL learners in general and KLEs in particular what a pronoun or a noun phrase refers to poses difficulty. In other words, the anaphora resolution – the process of determining the antecedent of the anaphor (Mitkov, 2002) or the process of finding the correct antecedent of an anaphor (Schmolz, 2015) – is the area of difficulty for learners. McCarthy (1991) stated that *"There does seem to be some evidence that [EFL] learners do not handle anaphoric reference at the text level as efficiently as they might"* (p.166). Hence, it is the focal point in the study and it inevitably needs to be attended. *"What anaphora resolution, when done correctly, enables us and systems to do, is to merge the previous information about an entity with the new information we encounter."* (Nicolov, 2003, p. 31). Widdowson (2007) in turn posited that the anaphoric connection is not directly signalled by the pro-forms, it needs to be inferred by identifying and interpreting the cross-reference. The identification and resolution processes entail tracing back the encoded semantic features to the previously mentioned referent (antecedent). Martin (1992) asserted that where number, gender and case are sufficient, personal pronouns as reference are used to identify the participant in the text. For example, the pronoun (he) has the semantic features of being singular and masculine, thus, in the sentence *"He owes much to his mother, she is always there for Mike."* the antecedent should be Mike as both share the same semantic features of being singular and masculine. Similarly, the semantic features of the pronoun 'she' should be traced back to the antecedent with the same semantic features of being singular and feminine, in this case Mike's mother. Pronominal

reference, eventually, is perhaps influenced by the different structural aspects of both L1 and L2 for language learners. KELs, specifically, are liable to face difficulties when using L2 both in speaking and writing due to substantial variation found in the pronominal systems of English and Kurdish languages (the topic is discussed below).

2.1. Kurdish Textuality and Cohesion Relationships

Kurdish linguistic researchers and scholars extensively attended to the area. They dealt with textuality and cohesion relations which have direct effect on creating cohesive texts. They addressed the area similarly by insisting that collection of sentences may not form a text without the cohesion relations by which text grid and textuality are created (Qadir, 2017). He also thought that the textual relations can only appear in texts if one of the relations presupposes the existence of the other. Abdullah (2018) states that any text is considered as a horizontal neatly follow up linguistic references which is deliberately directed from a specific sender to a particular receiver (p. 5). He also divides text analysis as vertical and horizontal. He believes that for the latter type the units, paragraphs, sentences and even phrases and words of each text have a horizontal relationship with each other which are tied together by text markers. Unlike the above two researchers, some researchers (Frhadi, 2008; Faraj, 2000 among others) define anaphoric and cataphoric references and provided examples for each type. Farhadi (2008), for instance, stated that in order for a group of sentences to be considered as a text there should be linking relations between them. These relations can be semantic, lexical and syntactic (p. 183). She also divided the types of reference as anaphoric and cataphoric references which are purely in-text relations and they are formed by the indefinite article, adverb of place, demonstratives and bound pronouns - a type of pronoun which is attached to nouns (Kim, 2010). Examples were provided for each of the types. Similarly, Faraj (2000) said that the Kurdish language pronouns (Independent and Bound pronouns) have both anaphoric and cataphoric references for each of them examples were also provided (pp. 70-71). However, his approach on references varies in that he posited time references through the use of demonstratives are quite popular in Kurdish texts.

2.2. Anaphoric Reference

Based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) cohesion taxonomy, anaphoric reference is divided into person and demonstrative reference. The former includes three categories of personal pronouns, possessive determiners and possessive pronouns. The latter type of reference is expressed by demonstratives (this, that, these and those), locative adverbs (here and there) and temporal adverbs (now and then). Kurdish language, as the participants' native language, almost shares the same reference system as English. Nonetheless, the two languages may vary in aspects of the reference techniques. An overview of the main diverse features of both English and Kurdish languages pronominal system is presented. Starting with L1, unlike English, Kurdish has two different types of pronouns; independent and bound pronouns. First, the independent pronouns have one

single form for the subjective and objective forms of English pronouns (Kim, 2010): I am a student. نهمه بۆمنه? ? ئهمه بۆمنه Is this for me? ئهمه بۆمنه خويندكارم

I = من , me = من

Another point of difference is the gender identification by pronouns which is not found in Kurdish language; he = ئهو, she = ئهو, it = ئهو. Hence, in the sentences "Mike and Rose were racing yesterday. She could defeat him." The pronouns are easily resolved to their antecedents in English. However, the Kurdish equivalents for the above sentences are like "مايك و رۆز پيشيركييان دهکرد دوينى. رۆز مايكى بهزاند". Here, pronoun reference may not work well; it becomes like "ئهو ئهوى بهزاند" which causes ambiguity as the pro-form for both Mike and Rose is 'ئهو' in Kurdish. Furthermore, the form of the demonstrative pronoun 'that' is very similar to the third person singular, e.g. "Is that for her or him?" "ئايئا ئهوه بۆ ئهوه بۆ ئهوه يان بۆ ئهوه؟". For the sake of clarity, Kurdish language users need to recourse to the reiteration of the proper nouns instead of referencing them with pronouns. The stated L1 feature is liable to be projected onto L2 use which consequently causes a negative transfer as English language allows for pronoun referencing to avoid repetition and redundancy. Furthermore, Kurdish writers tend to extensively use demonstrative type of reference (Faraj, 2000) which may be represented in KLEs' L2 texts as well.

With regard to the researches and studies carried out, there are a lot of works which addressed the area. For example, Chanyoo (2018) studied Thai students', who are majoring in English language, use of common cohesive devices and their frequency of use in writing in L2 and the relationship between the number and type of cohesive devices and the quality of writing. The results of the study revealed that four types of cohesive devices were used by the participants (reference, ellipsis, reiteration and conjunction) and the number of cohesive devices used positively correlated with the participants' scores.

Kafes (2012) studied the intricate relationship between L1 (Turkish) and L2 (English) lexical reiterating cohesive devices employed in composing texts by Turkish learners of English. Data was collected from 40 students whom they wrote in both L1 and L2. Analysis of the data revealed that there were significant similarities between the use of lexical reiteration in L1 and L2 which implies influence from L1 discourse competence. Ong (2011) investigated Chinese EFL learners' cohesive errors in expository compositions. Based on error analysis paradigm and Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion taxonomy, 20 university level student essays were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to find out the frequency and type of cohesive errors. Results showed that the use reference as a cohesion strategy was the greatest challenge for the participants. They also showed that repetition and misuse of the cohesive devices posed the most difficult task for the learners.

To sum up, in the light of the studies reviewed, there is a gap in the literature with regard to KLEs. The current research is to fill out the gap by attending to the area and describe the type of difficulty KLEs face to write a text in English.

3. Methodology

In this study, a descriptive exploratory method was used. The approach was to compare the types of references, particularly anaphoric relations, to those of L1 and L2. The aim of the comparison was to identify the resemblance of KLEs' cohesion relationships. To this end, texts written by 53 KLEs were qualitatively analysed to identify the way those learners use reference to arrange texts in the target language. The participants in the study were senior students of English Department/ College of Education-Qadze at University of Raparin. They were all from the same nationality and cultural background. This group was selected because they formed a homogenous group of learners in terms of their native language (Kurdish), they were learning English as a foreign language, and finally they regularly took writing courses such as Composition, Essay Writing, etc. as degree requirement in their study.

Data collection procedure was to make use of the daily assignments by the participants which were in the form of book chapter summaries whom they did for the course ELT Testing. The participants had enough time and resources to write the summaries. Then, the texts were analysed by searching for the types of reference used in them.

4. Analyzing the Data, Results and Discussion

The texts analysed contain some reference cases among which the pronoun reference was prominent. The anaphoric referencing was the main frequent type found in those texts. Brown and Miller (1999: 19), based on Chomsky's Binding Theory (BT) (1981), point out that BT is based on three principles. Concerning this study, two principles are covered which are about pronouns. Principle A: "An anaphor (= reflexive and reciprocal pronouns) must be bound by an antecedent in its governing category". It simply means that a reflex pronoun must be close to its antecedent. And because it is a principle, it is common in many languages including Kurdish and English. That's why the following excerpt successfully followed this principle. "... the exercise of receptive skills does not usually manifest itself directly in overt behavior". The reflexive pronoun "itself" is within the governing category of (very close to) its antecedent "the exercise of receptive skills". And Principle B states that "A pronominal (= a nonreflexive pronoun) must be free in its governing category". This principle means that the nonreflexive pronoun cannot be near the antecedent. For instance, in the excerpt "Testing reading is one of the testing skills that has its own specialty. Also, it has some problems such as uncertainty about the skills of reading and measuring ..." the pronoun 'it' refers back to 'testing reading' in the preceding sentence. The possessive determiner 'its' also refers back to testing reading. Similarly, in the excerpt "If we want to test our students reading ability, we should get them to read a text." The pronoun 'them' refers back to the word 'students' in the same sentence but in a different clause. The above cases of anaphoric reference were common and frequently occurring in the participants' writings. Perhaps, the above writing trait

occurred due to the clear resemblance found between English and Kurdish conventions of anaphoric pronoun resolution which might have made the use of it easy and accessible. Additionally, since there was no gender-specific occasions of anaphoric reference, the task of resolving the pronoun had not been exposed to any sort of difficulty by the writers. If there were cases of gender-based referencing, it would not have been used by the writers. Hence, a clear case of positive Cross Linguistic Influence was evidenced. However, few cases of anaphoric reference were not successfully accomplished. The use of the pronoun 'it' for instance on certain occasions was ambiguous for which anaphoric resolution was difficult.

On the other hand, in some of the texts analysed anaphoric references were needed to avoid repetition and building coherence. Nonetheless, EFL writers did not recourse to it as a cohesive device. For instance, in the excerpt below the word 'reading' has been repeated across the paragraph.

Reading is defined as a cognitive process that involves decoding symbols to arrive at meaning. is an active process of constructing meanings of words. *Reading* with a purpose helps the reader to direct information towards a goal and focuses their attention. Although the reasons for *reading* may vary, the primary purpose of *reading* is to understand the text.

Reading is a process that involves recognizing words, leading to the development of comprehension.

Similarly, in the excerpt "In the testing reading ability, you need to bring a text, and then ask some questions about the text or the passage." The word 'text' is reiterated in the same sentence for which a pronoun was needed. Other clear cases of the above phenomenon were found in the participants' writing which they witnessed a commonly occurring feature of their writing. One of them was the misuse of the possessive pronoun 'their' in the following excerpt for a singular pronoun required; "Reading with a purpose helps the reader to direct information towards a goal and focuses their attention."

With regard to the demonstrative reference, KLEs tended to use 'this' and 'these' in their writing. The use of the structure this+noun head is quite popular in Kurdish writing. In the following excerpt the reference is anaphoric which is created by this+noun structure: "another problem, the existence of a particular skill is perfect but it is still difficult to know whether an item has succeeded in measuring it. The best solution to *this problem* depends on our purpose in reading and the kind of the text." However, the use of this type of reference strategy does not affect comprehensions and coherence of the texts. The following excerpt attests another demonstrative reference strategy used by KLEs; "For beginners there may be a dispute for including in a diagnostic test items which test *the ability* to distinguish between letters (e.g. between b and d). But normally *this ability* will be tested indirectly through higher level items". In the excerpt below, the plural form of demonstrative reference is inappropriately used twice to refer back to the piece of writing:

It is one of types of testing student but this one for testing students ability of reading, you can give your students a piece of writing with some questions or you can

give you student information about something and some questions which is related to these text but some time students have a problem with these test, the basic problem is that the exercise of receptive skills doesn't necessarily, or usually manifest itself directly in overt behavior.

In general, one of the reasons behind Kurdish EFL writing is that Kurdish conventions of writing allow reiterating the same expression for the sake of clarity and avoiding any ambiguity to occur. For instance, in the following excerpt, the word 'reading' has been repeated instead of being referenced: *"One of the 4 main language skills is reading and reading needs some techniques depends on purpose of the reading"*. Hence, a clear evidence of Cross Linguistic Influence was found. This is so as the participants did not have or obtain discourse and textual knowledge of the foreign language in which other structures are preferred. For example, the use of the relative pronoun 'which' instead of reiterating the same word 'reading' is preferred for the sake of economy. The extract should be *"One of the 4 main language skills is reading which needs some techniques that depends on purpose of the reading"*. Once again, the word 'that', which functions as a subject relative pronoun referring back to its antecedent 'some techniques', is missing and it does not have agreement with its verb 'depends'. The reason for this mistake is that in L1 (Kurdish) the word 'أش' is used for all relative pronouns referring back to all types of antecedents. In Kurdish, the word 'أش' is equivalent to all English relative clause markers: 'who', 'whom', 'which', 'whose', 'that', 'where', 'when', etc.

Eventually, the students depended on their L1 knowledge to write in English! It is also due to constant thinking in L1 which is a feature of low-level language learners. The view is supported by psycholinguistic theories of language learning and use.

5. Conclusion

KLEs' writing inharmonious combination of sentences caused by lack of L2 cohesive devices and consequently resulted in texts which were characterized by lack of unity and coherence. The reasons KLEs produced these texts were many among which projection of L1 cohesion strategies onto L2 writing. It is also concluded that lack of knowledge, awareness and skill of L2 writing, particularly grammatical cohesion, were the reasons behind KLEs projection of L1 writing conventions onto L2.

In the light of the above conclusions, grammatical cohesion, as a sub-skill of writing, should be acquired by L2 learners to be able to write cohesive texts. This entails learning about the textual features of L1 and L2 as there may be resemblance and differences which exist between the two writing systems. L2 learners' awareness of the differences will help them avoid projection of L1 cohesive features (anaphora in particular) onto L2 writing. This will consequently eliminate redundancy and repetition in writings of KLEs.

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Conflicts of interest statement

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