

Coherence of academic texts: a case study of research papers in management

The ability to write a well-formed academic text is seen as key to success in educational settings across many subjects at modern universities (Wolfe, 2011). Although lecturers and supervisors primarily assess students' writing for its content (ideas and information), content is not only about the meaning of individual ideas and pieces of information but also about text development and inter-relation of ideas and information. Therefore, coherence comes to be one of the most significant attributes of academic style. Despite a substantial number of works devoted to the use of cohesive devices in student writing, coherence has remained a relatively vague construct and has been under-theorised in the field of Applied Linguistics, which might be explained by the fact that “coherence is not directly observable” (Struthers et al., 2013: 187).

Slide 2 Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines coherence as ‘the quality of being logical and consistent’ (OALD). But the problem which researchers, teachers and students face lies with the question how to achieve this logic and consistency of a text.

There have been different approaches to studying coherence. **Slide 3.** For example, Jeanne Fahnestock (1983) differentiated between semantic and lexical coherence. She defines semantic coherence as the one occurring between clauses without explicit semantic markers while lexical coherence is marked with lexical items.

Another approach was suggested by Dedand et al. (1999) who explored relational and referential coherence. **Slide 4.** Relational coherence is made explicit by linguistic markers linking such coherence relations as relations are Cause-consequence, List, and Problem-solution. These markers are extensively present in various text books of English for Academic Purposes and are almost always taught in EAP classrooms because they are quite familiar and understandable for both teachers and students. However, research shows that the use of such cohesive devices might not result in more coherence (Bublitz, 2001). In today's report we are going to focus on another kind of coherence, which is far less frequently addressed by EAP teachers and researchers. Dedand et al. (1999) call it referential coherence. It is realised by referential markers, namely anaphora.

Slide 5. The word anaphora literally means "back reference" (from Greek *ana*-backwards, *-phorein* – carry, bear). Anaphora is commonly

understood as a language phenomenon, which introduces the connection between pointing back expression Anaphor (called referent as well) and antecedent – the segment of a text anaphor refers to (see, for example, Ducrot & Schaeffer, 1995: 458; Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002: 45; Matysiak, 2007: 183). For example, *Michael injured himself playing football*. (Antecedent – Michael; anaphor – himself).

There are different types of anaphora **Slide 6**:

- Nominal anaphora (expressed by pronouns or lexical noun phrases), e.g.:

*Our experimental results revealed that decision makers saw opportunities for increased legitimacy if **they** complied early with the coercive demand primarily when **they** faced low institutional complexity. As institutional complexity increased, **they** planned increasing delays in **their** compliance (AM 2015-58).*

In the examples antecedents are underlined and anaphors are given in bold.

- **Slide 7** Verbal anaphora e.g.:

*Hospitals that did not offer robotic surgery, especially when other nearby hospitals **did**, risked losing appeal and patients (AM 2015-58);*

*In sum, there are several reasons why managers perceive women as having less career motivation than men **do** (JM 2014-40).*

- **Slide 8.** Adverbial anaphora, e.g.:

*I belong to that category of people that, I mean, if I read one night about a new intervention performed in Boston, the following day I was rushing **there** to see how they do it (AM 2015-58).*

Slide 9 Anaphors are seen as ‘an essential pillar supporting the overlay of [coherence] relation in fleshing out and integrating their discourse values’ (Cornish, 2009). **Slide 10.** So this work aims to compare the use of anaphoric expressions in two corpora: the corpus of research proposals written by fourth-year management students of the National Research University Higher School of Economics and the corpus of articles from leading journals in Management. The corpora amount for approximately 130,000 and 694,000 words respectively. Since the study takes into account normalized frequency rates per 1,000 words, it is

assumed that the differences in the size of corpora do not distort overall tendencies identified during the analysis.

After the compilation of the papers, the first step entailed the preparation of the texts for analysis. Thus, all tables, formulas, graphs, charts and reference lists were removed from the texts. All texts were first processed with the help of the AntConc concordance programme, which is typically applied as a text analysis tool for processing corpus data. Nevertheless, it has also been necessary to examine the texts manually in order to achieve both qualitative and quantitative results because some of the language means under consideration can perform functions other than those under examination.

Contrastive interlanguage analysis (CIA) (Gilquin, 2000/2001; Granger, 1996) was employed to identify specific features of the use of anaphoric expressions in the L2 learner corpus. This methodology involves comparison of learner language and a professional speaker reference corpus.

Slide 11. The language units selected for the analysis were: personal (e.g. it, they), object (e.g. him, them), reflexive (e.g. himself), demonstrative (e.g. this) and indefinite (one, ones) pronouns, auxiliary verbs functioning as substitutes (e.g. do, have) and the adverbs here and

there. However in this report we'll present data only for the personal pronouns he, she, they and the auxiliary verbs do and did.

Slide 12. The corpus data are presented in the table.

Anaphor	Absolute and normalized frequency (per 1000 words)	
	Learner Corpus	Reference Corpus
he	52 (0.4)	280 (0.403)
she	11 (0.084)	113 (0.162)
they	208 (1.6)	2453 (3.534)
do	3 (0.023)	75 (0.108)
did	1 (0.007)	20 (0.029)

As it is clearly seen from the table, anaphors are more frequently used by professional writers than by learners. This difference varies from quite negligible (he) to very significant (the auxiliary verbs). Students tend to avoid using auxiliary verbs as substitutes. They prefer to repeat the main verb which results in bad style and a lack of coherence. **Slide 13.** For example,

Many organizations strive to reduce production loss to gain an advantage over their main competitors or to reduce costs, but only few companies gain it and reduce their costs (M 2015-45).

The sentence would look much better with verbal anaphora:

*Many organizations strive to reduce production loss to gain an advantage over their main competitors or to reduce costs, but only few companies **do**.*

We assume that the analysis of the other anaphors will show similar results. So we hope that our research findings will allow us to work out some recommendations on achieving better referential text coherence which will be used for teaching English for Academic Purposes.

Slide 15. Thank you for your attention!