Substitution and Ellipsis in the First Year University Students' English Essay Writing

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Abstract

Without doubt, cohesion plays a significant role in writing, and therefore a considerable amount of research has been done on cohesive devices in students' writing. All these studies have had a common finding that substitution and ellipsis, two grammatical cohesive devices, are the least employed cohesive items in ESL/EFL students' written work. However, much of this research investigated substitution and ellipsis along with other cohesive devices. As a result, studies done on substitution and ellipsis independently of other cohesive devices are very rare. This stresses the need for further research to delve into these two grammatical cohesive devices. The current study is done to address this need and investigates the use of substitution and ellipsis in the first year university students' essay writing. The mixed methods study done on five participants from a university in the UAE administers a written test to collect data and performs a textual analysis to identify different types of substitution and ellipsis and their respective functions in students' essays. A frequency count is also performed to measure the frequency of different kinds of substitution and ellipsis in comparison to personal pronouns used as reference in students' writing.

Keywords Cohesion; cohesive devices; substitution; ellipsis; textual analysis; frequency counts.

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1. Introduction

Cohesion is the action of connecting spoken or written texts through lexical and grammatical means (Thornbury 2006). Cohesion plays a significant role in the teaching of English language (Mahlberg 2006) since an awareness of cohesive devices is necessary for better construction and comprehension of written texts (Cox, Shanahan & Sulzby 1990). The two main types of cohesive devices are (1) grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion (Thornbury 2006).

As mentioned earlier, cohesion is a substantial element in writing (Crossley, Kyle & McNamara 2016). Therefore, there have been a number of studies on ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' use of cohesive devices in their writings thus far (Abdul Rahman 2013; Abid & Ridha 2008; Abu-Ayyash 2017; Alarcon & Morales 2011; Bahaziq 2016; Khalil 1989; Saud 2015; Yang & Sun 2012). All these studies share a common finding that the two grammatical cohesive devices, substitution and ellipsis (See sections 4.1. & 4.2.), are the least used cohesive items in writing, and this finding also confirms the observation of Halliday and Hassan (1976) and Halliday (1977) that substitution and ellipsis are more commonly found in speaking or informal contexts than in written texts. Furthermore, almost all of these studies have analyzed substitution and ellipsis along with other cohesive devices, not separately. Therefore, studies focusing solely on the instances of substitution and ellipsis in students' writings are very scarce. At the same time, it is also important to note that none of these studies have examined the functions of substitution and ellipsis in students' writings. This scenario therefore demands more research on different uses of substitution and ellipsis in writing.

In response to the above needs, the current study will be done to examine the types and functions of substitution and ellipsis and their frequency in relation to personal pronouns in the first year university students' essay writing. The findings of the current study will be of great significance to educators, course material writers and academic researchers. Based on the findings, teachers can help their students use substitution and ellipsis effectively in order to improve the quality of their writing. The findings will also encourage material writers to give equal importance to substitution and ellipsis as other cohesive devices in their course books or other learning materials. Researchers can build on the findings of the current study and conduct large scale studies with the aim of exploring more types and functions of substitution and ellipsis in students' writings.

The following section presents the purpose of the study and the three research questions that the current study seeks to answer.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the use of two grammatical cohesive devices, substitution and ellipsis, in the first year university students' essay writing. In order to achieve this purpose, the current study will answer the following questions.

1. What types of substitution and ellipsis do students use in their writing?
2. What functions of substitution and ellipsis are found in students' writing?
3. How frequently do the instances of substitution and ellipsis occur in their writing in comparison to references represented by personal pronouns?

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory relevant to this study is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by A.K. Halliday in 1985 (Eggins 2004). SFL is based on five important principles: structure, system, stratification, instantiation and metafunction (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). For the purpose of this study, only two of these five principles were chosen: System and metafunction.

3.1. System

System is defined as any set of choices including its entry conditions. It is the paradigmatic ordering in language, and pragmatic ordering refers to the substitution of one word with the other. The principle of system regards text as the result of continuing choice in a very large system network (Halliday &

Matthiessen 2004), and therefore, this principle is significant for this research as this study analyzes the text as a whole, not at the sentence level.

3.2. Metafuntion

Metafunctions are of three types: ideational, interpersonal and textual. However, it is the third, the textual metafunction, that is relevant to this study since textual metafunction is concerned with constructing texts (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014), connecting texts with their contexts and making texts cohesive (Thornbury 2006). More importantly, substitution and ellipsis were first pinned in the textual metafunction according to Halliday (Halliday & Hassan 1976).

4. Conceptual Framework

Halliday and Hassan's (1976) framework for cohesion serves as the basis for the textual analysis of this study. This framework divides cohesion into two categories: grammatical and lexical. Table 1 lists different types of grammatical and lexical cohesion.

Table 1: Grammatical and lexical cohesion

Two categories	Types of Cohesion
Grammatical	reference, ellipsis, substitution and conjunction.
Lexical	repetition, collocation, Hyponymy, synonymy, antonymy and meronymy.

However, the present study deals with three grammatical cohesive items, substitution, ellipsis and reference represented by personal pronoun. These are explained below.

4.1. Substitution

Substitution refers to "the replacement of one item" (Halliday & Hassan 1976, p.88), such as a noun phrase or a complete clause by using a single word (Thornbury 2006). Three types of substitutions are: Nominal, verbal and clausal.

4.1.1 Nominal Substitution

Nominal substitution refers to the replacement of a noun or noun group using substitutes 'one', 'ones' or 'same' in a sentence (Halliday & Hassan 1976). In the example below, the substitute 'ones' was used to replace 'curtains' in the first sentence.

*e.g. A: we need some new **<u>curtains</u>**.*
*B: Yea, the **<u>ones</u>** we have are old.*

4.1.2 Verbal substitution

This refers to the substitution of a verb phrase using the substitutes 'do' or 'do so' (Halliday & Hassan 1976). In the example given below, the word 'done', the past participle of 'do', was used to replace the verb 'finished'.

*e.g. 'Haven't you **finished** cleaning the kitchen yet? You should've **done** by now'.*

4.1.3. Clausal substitution

This type of substitution replaces a clause using the substitutes 'so' or 'not' (Halliday & Hassan 1976). The substitute 'not' is used to replace the whole clause 'you should work hard' in the example below.
*e.g. 'You should work hard. **If not**, you will fail'.*

4.2. Ellipsis

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Ellipsis is the omission of "elements in a sentence", but what is left out is understood from the immediate environment (Thornbury 2006, p.73). Ellipsis is of three categories: Nominal, verbal and clausal.

4.2.1 Nominal Ellipsis

Nominal ellipsis refers to the omission of nouns or noun groups in a sentence (Halliday & Hassan 1976). In the example given below, the noun (bag) is elided.

*e.g. Which bag would you like?' This is the best **(bag)**.*

4.2.2 Verbal Ellipsis

Verbal ellipsis deals with leaving out of verbal groups in a sentence (Halliday & Hassan 1976). The verb (talk) is elided in the conversation below.

e.g.　A: *I won't talk to her.*
　　　B: *But, I will (talk).*

4.2.3 Clausal Ellipsis

This leaves out a clause (Halliday & Hassan 1976). For example, in the conversation below, the whole clause in the brackets (I didn't meet him yesterday) is elided.

e.g. *A: Did you meet Sam yesterday?*
　　 B: No (I didn't meet him yesterday)

4..2.4 Personal Pronoun

Personal pronoun refers to a person, people he / she is talking to, or people or things he /she is talking about (Collins Cobuild 1990). English has two sets of personal pronouns: subject pronoun (I – you – we –　they – he – she – it) and object pronoun (me – you –　us – them –　him – her –　it). In the example below 'he' is the subject pronoun and 'me' is the object pronoun.

e.g. **He** likes **me**.

5. Related Studies

Alarcon and Morales' (2011) mixed methods study examined the use of grammatical cohesion in the argumentative texts written by undergraduate students. They analyzed a corpus of 61 essays, and performed a frequency count to find out the number of times each cohesive device used in students' essays. The results revealed that the most frequently employed cohesive item was reference, whereas the least used one was substitution. However, there was no occurrence of ellipsis in all the 61 essays analyzed. Abid and Ridha's (2008) study found the same results.

In her study on cohesive devices, Bahaziq (2016) defined and described cohesive features using Halliday and Hassan's (1976) taxonomy. Like Alarcon and Morales (2011) and Abid and Ridha (2008), Bahaziq (2016) also discovered that reference topped among the most frequently used grammatical cohesion. She also discovered evidence of ellipsis in the student's writing although it was the least used cohesive item. However, no instance of substitution was found in her study, which contradicts Alarcon and Morales' (2011) and Abid and Ridha's (2008) findings.

In her mixed methods study, Saud (2015) dealt with the use of cohesion in Saudi female EFL undergraduate students' descriptive writing. Her study unveiled that personal pronoun was the most frequently used type of reference. However, unlike Alarcon and Morales (2011), Abid and Ridha (2008) and Bahaziq (2016), Saud found (2015) instances of both substitution and ellipsis, although few in number.

In a different study, Ali (2016) investigated the roles of lectures in terms of using cohesive devices in their regular lectures. The researcher observed eight different lectures, and the results revealed that the most used cohesive items were conjunctions and references. Substitutions and ellipsis were used by lecturers in just two out of eight lectures observed, and interestingly these two lectures were given by a native speaker. The

study also suggests that teachers have to understand the need for using cohesive devices in their lectures as students need exposure to develop a better understanding of cohesive devices. The study also urges teachers to design better activities to improve their students' writing, while devising strategies and techniques for teaching and providing feedback.

Abu-Ayyash (2013) adopted a micro-analytic approach in order to find out the roles of cohesive features and the interplay of theme and rheme in strengthening arguments present in newspaper editorials. The study found that clausal ellipsis was also used along with other cohesive devices to consolidate the argument of the articles.

6. The Current Study

6.1. Setting and Participants

The study was done in the English language center of a university in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The center runs various English language courses, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Exam Preparation, in order to support the needs of its students. Five first year Business Management students who were doing an intensive upper-intermediate EAP course at the English language center of the college were chosen as participants for the study, and they were all between the ages of 19 and 23. This was a multicultural but monolingual (Arabic speaking) group hailing from four different countries: Syria, Yemen, Jorden and Sudan. All these five students were offered conditional admission to university. They, therefore, were required to obtain an overall band score of 5.5 to continue their education at the university. These students were doing the EAP program in order to be ready for their IELTS test. Of these five participants, only two, students A and B, were male students, while the rest, C, D and E, were female. The participants were selected through convenience sampling, and the consent of all five participants and their class teacher had been sought before the commencement of the study (See Appendix 1).

6.2. Method

This exploratory study employed a mixed method approach, and performed both qualitative and quantitative data analysis based on Halliday and Hassan's (1976) taxonomy. Although the study utilized both these forms of data, it was majorly qualitative. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, and a pre-study questionnaire was administered in order to collect the basic information about the participants (See Appendix 2). A writing test was administered in order to obtain data on the students' use of substitution and ellipsis in their writings. All five essays written by the students were selected for the analysis. A qualitative textual analysis was done to discover what types of substitution and ellipsis the students used in their essays, and also to examine the functions of substitution and ellipsis found in their writings (Research questions 1&2). A quantitative frequency count was performed in order to find out the frequency of different types of substitution and ellipsis in the students' essays in comparison to personal pronouns used as reference (research question 3), and a table was used to display the descriptive data.

6.3. Material and Procedure

An academic IELTS task two discussion essay question was used for the purpose of the test. The essay question was taken from Cambridge English IELTS 10 (See Appendix 3). The students were provided with all the necessary information about the test prior to its commencement. They were informed that the test would last only for an hour, and they had to write a 250-word essay on the topic given within this time frame. They were also given separate question papers and answer sheets. The test was invigilated by both the researcher and the students' class teacher, and the test was conducted in the last period of the day as this was the only free slot. Although all five students were fasting during Ramadan, they managed to finish the writing test within the given time, one hour (See Appendix 4 for a sample of students' answers).

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7. Findings

This section deals with the results of the study in detail, and shows the types of substitution and ellipsis used by the participants in the study. This section also provides information on how frequently the cohesive devices, substitution and ellipsis, are used in participants' writing in comparison with their use of personal pronoun as reference.

Table 2. Students' use of cohesive devices

Participant	Substitution			Ellipsis			Personal Pronoun
	NS	VS	CS	NE	VE	CE	
A	1	-	-	-	-	-	26
B	-	-	-	-	-	-	16
C	-	-	1	-	-		9
D	-	1	-	-	-	-	26
E	-	-	-	-	-	-	11
Total	3			0			88

Table 2 above displays the results of the analysis of the students' use of cohesive devices: substitution, ellipsis and personal pronoun. As can be seen from the table that not all students involved in the study used substitution as a way of achieving cohesion in their writing. Only three out of five students employed substitution as a cohesive device: students A, C and D. Each one of these students used substitution just once in the essays they wrote. While the only instance of nominal substitution was found in student A's writing, Clausal substitution occurred just once in student C's writing. At the same time, student 'D' used verbal substitution once in his writing. However, students B and E did not use any type of substitution as a cohesive device as the other three students in the study did. It is also important to note that none of the participants used ellipsis in their writing.

Table 2 also shows the students' use of personal pronoun as reference. It is clear that, unlike the use of substitution, all 5 students employed personal pronouns a total of 88 times as references. This figure is far greater than that for substitution (only 3) used by them. Looking at Table 1, it can be understood that students A and D employed the highest number of personal pronouns in their essays, and both of them used this cohesive device the same number of times (26). The second highest use of personal pronoun as reference was seen in the writing of student B who used this 16 times. While participant E used personal pronouns 11 times, it was participant C who used this cohesive item the least number of times in her writing (just 9 times).

To sum up, substitution was used by only three students, students A, C and D, in order to achieve cohesion in their writing, but each one of them used three different types of substitutions: nominal, verbal and clausal substitutions. However, none of the essays analyzed included any instances of ellipsis. On the other hand, all five who participated in the study used personal pronoun as reference. The frequency of personal pronoun as reference occurred in the participants' essays is far higher than that of substitution. These findings of the study will be discussed in detail in the next section.

8. Discussion

Substitution and Ellipsis

The findings of the study revealed that three out of five students used three different types of substitution in their essays, namely nominal, verbal and clausal substitutions. This section discusses these three types of substitution and their functions in the students' essays followed by a discussion on the frequency of substitution and ellipsis in comparison to references represented by personal pronouns.

8.1. Three Different Kinds of Substitution and Their Functions in Students' Writings.

8.1.1. Nominal Substitution

(a) *A good **job*** is very important in our life. (b) So, to get *a decent one* with good salary, we must focus subjects like science and technology and we have to also study very well hard to pass exams with a high mark.

The above text, which is taken from Student A's answer, provides a clear instance of Nominal substitution in writing. Looking closely at the text, it can be understood that the word '*job*' underlined in sentence (a) is the head of the nominal group '*a good job*', and in sentence (b), the underlined word '*one*' is the head of the nominal group '*a decent one*'. The word 'one' is a nominal substitute, and as the head of a nominal group, it substitutes for the head of another nominal group, which is the noun 'job' (Halliday & Hassan 1976). The nominal substitute 'one' has an important cohesive function as it points to the presupposed noun (job) present in the preceding text. This is, therefore, a good example of anaphoric substitution. The nominal substitute 'one' has two purposes here. The first is to avoid repetition (Thornbury 2006) and, therefore, to make the text more interesting (Ziwira 2015). The substitute 'one' is also used in sentence (b) in order to clarify what the student means by *a good job* in sentence (a): 'a decent one with good salary'.

8.1.2. Verbal Substitution

(a) Furthermore, if students *study their favorite subjects*, they do not feel depression or loss. (b) Also, if they *do so*, they will also get a high mark.

The above extract taken from student D's answer contains an example of verbal substitute. In the conditional part of sentence (b), the verbal substitute 'do so' is employed to replace the presupposed item '*study their favorite subjects*' present in sentence a. Here, 'do so' replaces not only the lexical verb (*study*) but what follows it (*their favorite subjects*) as well. Like the nominal substitute 'one', as discussed above, the verbal substitute 'do so' also contributes to cohesion by linking two separate sentences (a & b) anaphorically (Halliday & Hassan 1976). The verbal substitute "do so" is used in this text by the student to mean "perform the action just mentioned" (Collins Cobuild 1990, p.392), and to emphasize the action of 'studying their favorite subjects' in order to achieve a positive outcome.

8.1.3. Clausal Substitution

(a) I also think that *Universities should make all useful subjects mandatory*. (b) *If so,* Students will be able to deal with real problems in real life situations.

An instance of clausal substitution is seen in the above text taken from student C's answer. The example given is of a conditional clause substitution. The conditional clause in sentence (b) is replaced by the clausal substitute 'so' which follows 'if' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). The word 'so' substitutes for the entire subordinate clause (*universities should make all useful subjects mandatory*) presupposed in sentence (a). The clausal substitute 'so' used in this text by the student also acts as a cohesive device with an anaphoric relation, like the nominal 'one' and the verbal 'do so' as discussed above. In this context, another function of 'so' is to present the writer's recommendation that will have positive results if considered.

8.2. The Frequency of Substitution and Ellipsis in Comparison to References Represented by Personal Pronouns.

As presented in the finding's section, the current study revealed that all five students who took part in the study used personal pronouns as references in their essays, and they used these a total of 88 times. This might be because students are more exposed to personal pronouns both inside and outside the classroom in comparison with substitution and ellipsis. Furthermore, personal pronoun being the most frequently used reference item might be another reason for the high occurrences of them in the students' writings. This observation is supported by the finding of Saud (2015) which revealed that personal pronoun was the most frequently used reference item in students' writings.

Instances of substitution were found in three out of five students' writings, but it occurred only once in each of these three students' essays. However, the study found no evidence of ellipsis in any of the essays written by the participants. It is interesting to note that Alarcon and Morales' (2011) and Abid and Ridha's (2008) studies also revealed the same findings. As Alarcon and Morales (2011) observe, a reason for the limited use of substitution in the students' writings may be that the students might have preferred to use words rather than substitution as this would help them to support their arguments with more evidence. The low frequency of substitution and zero occurrence of ellipsis in students' writings might also have been due to their ignorance as to how to use these two cohesive devices in their writings (Abid and Ridha 2008).

Furthermore, students' lack of exposure to substitution and ellipsis, especially in the classroom, might have been another reason for the very low frequency of substitution and complete absence of ellipsis in the students' writings. It can be understood from the study by Ali (2016) that instructors' use of substitution and ellipsis in the classroom is very limited. This finding gives the impression that if students are not exposed to substitution or ellipsis in the classroom, they might not be able to use these effectively in their speaking or writing.

Apart from the reasons mentioned above, students might also find it difficult to use substitution and ellipsis in their writing as they are not provided with sufficient practice on these two cohesive devices in the classroom. Moreover, students might not have used substitution and ellipsis as frequently as other cohesive devices since these are less common in writing (Halliday & Hassan 1976; Halliday 1977). However, it is also important to note that although the current study did not find any evidence of ellipsis, it should not be inferred from the findings that ellipsis does not occur in students' writing. Bahaziq (2016) and Saud (2015) found instances of ellipsis in their studies, but very low in number compared to other cohesive devices.

9. Implications for Teaching

The findings of the current study offer some useful implications for instructors in terms of teaching substitution and ellipsis. According to the study, having no exposure to substitution and ellipsis might be one reason why these are not found commonly in students' writings. An important step that can be taken in order to solve this issue is that, as suggested by Ali (2016), instructors should use different types of substitution and ellipsis in their lessons or lectures in order to help students to get used to these cohesive devices. If students are exposed to natural examples of substitution and ellipsis provided by their instructors, and they get familiar with them, students will be able to use these cohesive items more naturally in their writings.

Furthermore, findings of the study also inform that students' lack of awareness as to how to use substitution and ellipsis in their writing might be another factor that prevents them from employing these devices in their writings. An effective solution might be that substitution and ellipsis should be given equal importance as other cohesive devices in the classroom, and these two should be taught to students with a focus on their functions by proving sufficient examples so that students will be able to use these cohesive devices more effectively along with other cohesive items in their writings.

Students also need to be provided with sufficient practice opportunities to use substitution and ellipsis in writing. Activities that are used to provide practice to students should be both interesting and meaningful, and these activities should also be designed in a way to be done individually or in groups. It is also very important to provide feedback to students on the use of substitution and ellipsis in their writings as this will help them understand their mistakes and correct them accordingly (Ali 2016). These measures will encourage students to use substitution and ellipsis in their writings with more confidence.

10. Limitations

The current study is not devoid of limitations. One of the shortcomings of the study was that it sought to examine the frequency of substitution and ellipsis in the students' writings in comparison to only personal pronouns. The study could have compared the occurrence of substitution and ellipsis with that of other grammatical and lexical cohesive items so that it would have been possible to examine whether there were any other cohesive devices that were less frequent or unused in the students' writings apart from substitution and ellipsis. Whether the students' use of substitution and ellipsis had any positive effects on their writing quality could also have been investigated in the current study.

Another limitation might be that the study did not conduct a cohesive knowledge test. Conducting this would have provided the researcher with a thorough understanding of students' current knowledge of substitution and ellipsis. Furthermore, the participants took the writing test in the last period of the day while fasting during Ramadan. Students were tired while taking the test, and therefore, they might not have been able to write as well as they usually do. However, due to the schedule changes during Ramadan, it was not possible to change the test timing.

11. Conclusion

To conclude, the study discovered very minimal use of substitution by students, whereas no evidence of ellipsis was found in the students' writings. The students used personal pronoun as reference far more frequently than substitution and ellipsis. Apart from the basic function of avoiding repetition, the study also found three other functions of substitution in the students' essays: (1) to clarify the meaning, (2) to emphasize an action and (3) to present a recommendation. The study concluded that students' preference for words over substitution and ellipsis, their lack of exposure to these two cohesive devices, their ignorance as to how to use them and a lack of practice opportunities might have been the major reasons for the limited or no use of substitution or ellipsis in their essays. However, in order to encourage students to use substitution and ellipsis in their writings, it is necessary to expose them to natural use of these cohesive devices in the classroom, and to teach substitution and ellipsis with a clear focus on their functions along with other cohesive devices by providing adequate examples. However, comparing the frequency of substitution and ellipsis only with personal pronoun while ignoring other grammatical and lexical cohesive items, not conducting a cohesive knowledge test and a lack of focus on the effects of substitution and ellipsis on the students' essays were the limitations of the study. Any future research on substitution and ellipsis in students' essay writing need to take these limitations into consideration.

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