

## **Thorny Issues in the Use of Cohesive Devices in the Written Discourse of Polytechnic ESL Learners in Nigeria: An Assessment of the Federal Polytechnic, Idah and Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi**

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### **Abstract**

*Students' written discourse can only be coherent and readable through the correct use of basic grammatical and lexical cohesive devices. These are transitional words which learners of English as a Second Language use in writing to connect phrases, clauses and sentences, making the quality of their text meaningful and whole for a reader. The proper and effective use of these grammatical transition elements, provide the structural framework that allows the intended meaning to be understood without ambiguity, whether in written or spoken form. However, many polytechnic learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) today, still struggle with the correct and varied use of these grammatical elements, leading to their incorrect selection/meaning, overuse, underuse, selection errors and grammatical mistakes. These interconnected issues stem from their mother tongue interference (L1), poor linguistic background, insufficient learning materials, inadequate instruction and practice, and negative attitudes of ESL learners towards learning of English Language. This makes the overall quality of their essays unclear meaning and a hard-to-read academic writing. This also makes the teaching and learning of the English language in the polytechnic a very cumbersome task. Consequently, if the polytechnic ESL learners continue to have issues with the correct use of these basic grammatical and lexical elements in their writings, it will jeopardize the very essence of teaching and learning of the English language in the polytechnic. It is against this background that this study highlights the thorny issues hindering the effective use of grammatical transition elements and acting as strong barriers to the understanding of written discourse of the ESL learners in The Federal Polytechnic, Idah and Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi. It recommended the adoption of viable strategies for the polytechnic policy makers like the NBTE on the need to enrich the ESL syllabus and the ESL teachers need to do more on ESL learner's use of these basic grammatical transition elements that make their writing coherent, logical, readable and meaningful.*

**Keywords:** *Thorny issues, Polytechnic ESL-learners, Writing skill, Misuse, Cohesive devices, Meaningful whole*

### **Introduction**

The teaching and learning of English language as a Second Language (ESL) in the Nigerian Polytechnic are basically to help improve the students' oral and written communication since the English language is the only official language of instruction and examination for virtually all the academic courses in the polytechnic system. According to Baba and Adakonye (2016), English language is taught in the Polytechnic: to attain a higher level of communicative competence. The ESL learners in the polytechnic learn English for specific purpose (ESP). It is on this basis that National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) included English Language and Literature as a general course in the polytechnic curriculum.

Communicative competence here, refers to users' grammatical knowledge of rules of syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics, as well as, knowledge about how and when to use transitional words correctly in English language within social and grammatical context. According to Elegba (2012), "...the need to acquire competence in English as a second language is becoming highly necessary in the age of high technology when equipment is becoming more sophisticated and computerised..." This is why Polytechnic ESL-Learners in Nigerian need to attain grammatical competence to avoid 'incoherent text as a result of their limited understanding and exposure to well-structured cohesive texts.

More so, scholars and teachers of linguistic studies identify writing as one of the basic and essential language skills necessary for ESL learners to attain grammatical competence and improving performance in the use of a language. Writing is one of the output skills that enables individuals to express themselves convincingly and coherently in a well-structured and organized manner. This entails the ability to clearly articulate thoughts and ideas without difficulty for a reader. It is on this bases that National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), made "Essay writing task" mandatory in GNS courses like GNS 201, 302, OTM-422, etc. in the polytechnic curriculum. According to McNamara, Crossley and McCarthy (2010), "Writing constitutes a substantial challenge for students, yet it is of crucial and importance for achieving in an extensive diversity of circumstances and profession." Crowhurst (1990), aligned with this view and states that in order to communicate convincingly with others such as peers, colleagues, teachers and the community, effective writing is apparently crucial.

A written text enables the polytechnic ESL learners to transfer their ideas, expressions, and thoughts in written form, which is essential in all aspects of learning as it inspires their thinking and helps in developing their ability to analyse, criticise, as well as, strengthens their reflective-thinking. More so, writing challenges their knowledge and necessary skills needed to build coherent texts. Effective writing requires clear organization, including introduction, body (paragraphs) and conclusion. To achieve this, a great deal of both grammatical and lexical relationships between sentences must be tactically achieved through the application of the right grammatical rules' knowledge as well as applying them in a way that creates a coherent and unified text. It has been discovered by many scholars in linguistic research that writing quality positively correlates with the use of cohesive devices (Hanata & Sukyadi, 2015). According to McNamara, D. S., Crossley, S. A., & McCarthy, P. M. (2010), cohesive writing helps students convey their arguments more convincingly by ensuring clarity and logical progression. Conversely, lack of cohesion can confuse 'readers' and weaken the overall impact of the essay.

Again, most studies on ESL learners correct use of transitional words in their writing task revealed that most of their written discourse are replete with disjointed and fragmented due to lack of connectedness of the words which is purely a lack of cohesion. Liu (2000), affirms this, when she observed that, "It is difficult, if not impossible to make a sense of a text that lack cohesion no matter how capable the reader may be". In the same vein, Lee (2001) observes that, "ESL writers do not attend to issues of cohesion unless explicitly instructed". He further explained that, "the near absence of cohesive features in a written text is a problem that plagues many ESL learners". Olateju (2006), in her study reveals that, "a lack of competence in the use of cohesive devices despite the fact that the subjects had been exposed to intensive teaching of English for six years in the secondary school. The fact is the lack of cohesion in polytechnic ESL learners writing can impede clarity and effectiveness, undermining their overall academic performance and preparedness for future professional endeavours. To this end, if the aim of teaching and learning of the English language in the polytechnic must be achieved, polytechnic ESL learners need to have sufficient knowledge in applying the basic grammatical and lexical elements that make their writing "hang together" semantically, hence making sense to readers. It is against this backdrop that this study examines thorny issues that hamper polytechnic ESL learners' inability to efficiently and correctly use cohesive devices in their writing task.

## Conceptual Clarification

Cohesive tie was first introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976) to refer to a single instance of linguistic cohesion. It is a term that occurs when the full realization of meaning has been achieved between two or more related structures or linguistic components in such a manner that one aspect of a text is dependent on another for its full meaning to be realized, for example. *Tom sold his pair of shoes to Jane. He had no need of it anymore.* The cohesive tie between the two sentences has been achieved by the logical reference to *Tom* and *shoes* using the pronouns *he* and *it*. The two sentences above constitute two ties. The two ties make a text. Cohesive tie is fundamental in creating interconnectivity among the various elements in any textual discourse.

Cohesion can be interpreted as a link that unites text and gives meaning. It refers to devices that we use to unite text the way we connect ideas and sentences together. According to Halliday and Hasan in Othman (2023) cohesion “refers to how words and various parts of a text are associated with the use of devices such as conjunctions, references, substitutions, ellipsis and lexical cohesion.” To Connor in Rahman (2013), it is the “use of explicit cohesive devices that signal relations between sentences and parts of a text.” Widdowson in Tajiddin (2017) see it as “...formal links that bring parts of a text together”, while Renkema in Swastami (2014) defines it as “a connection that is produced when the interpretation of textual elements depends on other elements in the text”.

Coherence in writing on the other hand, refers to the logical bridge between words, sentences and paragraphs. Coherent writing is the correct use of devices to connect ideas within each sentence and paragraph. Oshima and Hogue (2007) describe coherence in writing as “the seamless flow of sentences, where each sentence logically connects to the next without abrupt transitions.” This means that a coherent essay consists of an introduction, a thesis statement, rhetorical support and a conclusion. Coherence is one of the constitutive traits of discourse that arises in the communication process where participants gain meaning from a text and try to achieve their specific communicative goals while relying on their background, knowledge and context to deduce missing relationships and components of meaning. The fact is, the extent to which readers can understand a given context through proper idea placements can cause confusion. This is because the main ideas and meaning can be difficult for the reader to follow if ESL learner’ writing lack coherence.

It is very pertinent to know that the terms cohesion and coherence are independent, as well as, interwoven. They both play important roles in ESL learners’ organization and clarity in their written discourse in the polytechnic. Cohesion is what happens when a text is linked by linguistic context, while coherence is the overall sense that makes meaning and flows logically. While cohesion helps to achieve coherence, coherence is sometimes required to achieve cohesion. Tanskanen (2006) argues that “cohesion and coherence are terms related to discourse analysis and text linguistics; they are set to describe the properties of written texts. However, a text may be cohesive but not necessarily coherent and cohesion does not generate coherence. More so, cohesion is determined by grammatically and lexically definite intersentential relationships, whereas coherence is based on semantic relationships. Moreover, cohesion refers to the intra-text connectedness of the items, while coherence refers to the suitability of the contextual occurrence of the text which conveys the message appropriately.

Again, cohesion, refers to the outer connected elements within a text, whereas, coherence relates to the conceptual connectivity and sense formed by the information. Coherence is set by the reciprocal interaction between the writer and the reader in order to make sense of the text based on their shared background knowledge outside the text. Coherence, a crucial aspect of writing which is not formed by cohesion alone. It is both text based and reader based with a

number of factors to take into consideration. In addition, cohesion contributes to coherence; it signals coherence in texts. On the one hand, cohesion is a more formal, grammatical and explicit property. It is easily divided into different sub-dimensions.

According to Halliday (1994), one of the ways of dealing with the problems associated with writing quality is by attaining cohesion and coherence in arranging texts in such a way that will be easy to understand by the readers. This is further supported by Gerot and Wignell (1994) by emphasizing the importance of cohesion to provide continuity in a text which helps a text to hang together. It has been found by many scholars in linguistic research that writing quality positively correlates with the use of cohesive devices (Hanata & Sukyadi, 2015). For this study, coherence can be created and evaluated through the organization of the writing production, including an introduction, a body and a conclusion, as well as, the topic sentence, the supporting sentences and the concluding sentences which could clearly be identified in paragraphs. These explain the reasons why the Polytechnic ESL learners need sufficient knowledge on how and when to apply these basic grammatical elements.

### **Key Reasons for the Correct Use of Grammatical and Lexical Cohesive Devices**

The essence of the correct and efficient use of grammatical and lexical devices is to ensure clarity, precision and credibility in communication. Proper and effective use grammatical transition elements provide the structural framework that allows the intended meaning to be understood without ambiguity, whether in written or spoken form. The ability of a text to exhibit texture is due to the fact that every aspect of the text is functioning as a unified whole with respect to the linguistic environment surrounding them. Texture in a written discourse is therefore the basis for unity and semantic interdependence visible within a text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Cohesion and coherence are two major factors in the realization of texture in a text, the one leading to the other. While cohesion will form the basis for the logical relationship among the constituents in the text, Coherence will create the impression of a meaningful construct to both the listener or reader of a text. Together, texture is achieved. Polytechnic ESL learners' knowledge of correct application of grammatical and lexical devices is crucial for producing a clear and logical prose.

In addition, students' sufficient knowledge on how to apply a variety of cohesive devices helps to bridge sentences and paragraphs, making writing clear, orderly and logical flow and overall quality of their written English, enabling them to communicate effectively and achieve academic or professional success. These "glue word" bind a text together into a unified whole meaning. Halliday and Hasan (1976) lend credence to this that cohesion exists in the language for making texts 'hang together': the potential that the speaker or writer has at his disposal." Gohar Rahman (2023) also in their article, "A Study of Cohesive Devices in Students' Academic Writing", add that, "The inappropriate use of these devices hampers the overall coherence and clarity of their writing. It leads to confusion and difficulty in following the intended message, as the logical progression of ideas is disrupted." The key reasons for ESL learners correct use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices are to ensure clarity and comprehensibility, create logical flow and professional credibility, avoid redundancy and promote conciseness, strengthens argumentation or persuasion and to improve reading comprehension.

From the forgoing, it is obvious that the polytechnic ESL-learners' proficiency in the use of the basic grammatical and lexical elements to enhance coherency in their essay writing is inestimable. This is because without the proper use of grammatical connectors, their writing would appear fragmented, unorganised and difficult for the reader to follow or comprehend. This breaks the flow and logical progression of ideas. Similarly, when cohesive devices are

misused or omitted entirely, the semantic relationships between sentences become unclear, making the text confusing for a reader and compelling him/her to infer the relationship between them and potentially missing the authors message entirely. This forces the reader to stop and re-read, leading to frustration. More so, the students' inability to link ideas logically in their written discourse means a students' argument may not build effectively on one another, thus, the knowledge of appropriate application of these required grammatical elements to make the polytechnic students' writing meaningful remains a very significant. It is pertinent to say that ESL learners' correct use of cohesive devices in their writing is not advanced stylistic choice but a fundamental requirement for functional effective communication in English written discourse. In fact, a mastery of these devices is often a criterion in language proficiency tests (like IESL) and (TOEFL) and for success in English medium and academic settings.

### **Factors Hindering Polytechnic ESL Learners' Correct Use of Cohesive Devices**

Polytechnic ESL learners' ability of the correct use of grammatical devices is imperative as it directly impacts the clarity, logical flow and overall quality of their written or spoken English, however, this has been hampered by some salient interconnected factors. Including ESL learners' native language (L1), weak foundation/poor linguistic background, insufficient explicit instructions/training (like contrast or causation), limited vocabulary, general weakness lack of motivation, lack of functional understanding, negative attitude towards learning of the English language as a second language and among others. Thus, reading of their essays have become laborious and frustrating as a result of the fact that their essays are fraught with incorrect selection/meaning (using instead" when in addition is needed), overuse (making writing mechanical), underuse (fragmented text), selection errors (using the wrong word like "whenever" for "however") and grammatical mistakes (incorrect form or wrong placement especially with conjunctions/references). These are discussed below.

#### **First Language (L1) Interference**

The polytechnic ESL learners' native language structures have serious tendencies to influence their written discourse. Thus, students often carry over the rules and conventions of their native language into the target language writing. The rules for creating cohesion and coherence in their L1 may not translate to English, leading to incorrect or awkward use of cohesive devices. This linguistic interference usually occurs when the linguistic features of one language (mother tongue) influence the production or comprehension of another language in a case of bilingualism and multilingualism at all the levels of linguistic description. In most cases, the Polytechnic ESL-learners transfer their native language conventions which do not always align with English. In fact, most often, they impose the lexico-semantic structures of their indigenous languages on English as a result of the ignorance of the rules guiding the target language. The thorny issue here is that the ESL students' direct transliteration of first language into the target language can cause a variety of grammatical errors in a second language, including the misuse of cohesive devices that are essential for creating smooth and logical text.

#### **Polytechnic ESL Learners' Poor Linguistic Background**

This is another significant thorny issue hindering the polytechnic ESL learners from correct use of important cohesive devices in their written discourse. It involves the polytechnic ESL-learners' poor knowledge foundational grammar, vocabulary and writing skills needed for advanced academic work. This is also a deficiency in word knowledge, making communication less precise, impactful and nuanced. Polytechnic ESL students' poor knowledge of how a word or phrase's meaning is determined by the other linguistic elements within a text leads to a fragmented text. This also include their knowledge of the relationships between different parts of a text, achieved through grammatical and lexical devices like pronouns, conjunctions and

repetition that create connections between sentences and paragraphs. These linguistic devices provide continuity and help the reader follow the logical flow of ideas and ensuring that the text is readable. However, the Polytechnic ESL learners' limited word limits their ability to the use of words correctly and freely. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), "Cohesive effect achieved by the selection of appropriate vocabulary". Kennedy (2003), also lends his voice that, "Lexical cohesion is achieved through the selection of vocabulary". The fact is, most polytechnic ESL learners have poor vocabulary leading to difficulty in expressing complex thoughts and use of repetitive language, struggling to find the right words and having a weaker reading and writing skills today.

### **Insufficient Learning Materials in the Polytechnic**

Insufficient provision of learning materials to guide polytechnic ESL learners towards teaching and learning of effective use of cohesive devices is another thorny issue. This is as a result of the failure of NBTE to emphasised on the need for effective teaching of these aspects of grammar in the teaching and learning of essays writing in the polytechnic, as well as, her inability to provide some basic technological tools like automatic writing evaluation tool in the polytechnic to help solve ESL learners' cohesion and coherence problems. More so, most of teaching materials used in the polytechnic do not cover a wide range of teaching cohesion and coherence skills to help the ELS learners improve on their different proficiency level. Thus, the ESL learners and many teachers do not see the need to teach or learn how to use these devices correctly. These lead to their weak grasp of how grammatical cohesive devices such as 'references, conjunctions, substitution, ellipse and lexical cohesion to connect their ideas and create a logical flow leading to problems of overuse of simple devices, selection errors/inappropriate use, omission of necessary devices and redundancy in their essays.

### **Inadequate Instruction and Practice**

Inadequate instruction and practice is another thorny issues besetting the polytechnic ESL learners from the correct use of grammatical cohesive devices. Studies have shown that more complex cohesive devices such as substitution and ellipses are often underutilised by most ESL learners. The fact is not enough practice and training with diverse texts or explicit teaching on semantic roles and specific functions of various types of connectors and their communicative meanings, (e.g. signalling contrast, adversative, causal or additive), leading to ESL learner's not to know "why or when" to use them. More so, most of them are unaware of the grammatical function of cohesive devices beyond simple conjunctions like "and/but" so, they focused on these basic devices neglecting less common but equally important ones. The underutilisation of more complex devices like substitution, ellipses, reiteration and collocation by most polytechnic ESL learners are possibly due to their lack of exposure to these basic grammatical elements in their daily life. The fact remains that most polytechnic ESL learners limited exposure to the uses of cohesive devices due to inadequate teaching and their attitudes of not being voracious in the appropriate use of words in English language. this unenthusiastic attitude towards learning and use of English language by the polytechnic ESL learners seriously affect their ability to understand how to use grammatical and lexical cohesive devices work correctly. This is evident in the errors committed by the ESL learners in Federal Polytechnic, Idah and Auchu Polytechnic, in their application of references, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, reiteration and collocation in their writing task as extensively discussed below.

### **ESL Learners' Issues with the Use of References**

Reference is a way of referring back to something mentioned before in a sentence or paragraph. It helps connect ideas and shows how they relate to each other. When we use reference, we use a word to represent the whole idea instead of repeating the same words over and over again.

This way, we can make our writing smoother and easier to understand. According to Johnson, (1992), understanding how to use references correctly shows our ability to make connections and create coherence in our writing. In most cases, polytechnic ESL learners face difficulties in distinguishing whether to use a reference item as the subject or object in a sentence, resulting in a serious confusion. In fact, they struggle to determine the appropriate grammatical role of the reference item, leading to errors unclear pronoun reference, misusing, or omitting cohesive devices in their sentence structure and potentially impacting the clarity and coherence of their writing, as recorded in the asterisked sentences below:

**\*The man chased the boy and it ran upstairs.**

*Instead of the man chased the boy and he ran upstairs.*

The above sentence is an errors of unclear reference due to the students' insufficient understanding of using pronoun like "it, they or that" without a clear noun antecedent making it difficult for the reader to understand what the pronoun refers to, leading to vague reference as seen in the student's sentence. The pronoun "it" in the second clause does not clearly refer to a specific noun in the sentence making the meaning ambiguous.

**\*Speeding, the boy on the bus listened to his headphones.**

The above sentence sounds like the boy was speeding but the modifier in the sentence might be intended for the bus. Thus, leading to a "dangling modifier". This happens where a clause or phrase is not clearly attached to the word it is meant to modify often because the intended subject is missing as seen in the sentence.

**\*A student would left to his or her choice whatever they want to do**  
 or  
 would study...**Parents** don't need to impose **his** will on their children.

In the above sentence, the plural pronoun "they" is used to refer back to the singular subject "a student," and in the second sentence, a singular possessive pronoun "his" is used to refer to the plural subject "parents."

\* a student is allowed to study the subject of his own choice, it will help  
**them** become an independent and successful person. Moreover, a student  
 who selects a subject on **their** own excels in the field, and those who select  
 a subject for the scope of the subject may not be helpful to **him**.

The above sentence shows that, in many instances, the student is confused about the use of third-person singular and plural pronouns. In the first sentence, "them" is incorrectly used instead of the correct word "him/her". Similarly, in the second sentence, "their" is used instead of his/her while referring back to a singular subject, "a student." Moreover, in the third sentence, "him" is used instead of the correct word "them" when referring to more than one person, "those who." Obviously, the fourth sentence show that the students did not have enough knowledge about how to use references correctly. Dastjerdi and Samian (2011), lend his voice to this, when he asserts that, "insufficient practice and lack of exposure to authentic examples in the target language contribute to students' mistakes in using cohesive devices." The fact is when ESL learners do not have adequate opportunities to practice early enough to real-life

language usage, they are more likely to struggle with employing the appropriate cohesive devices.

### ESL Learners' Issues with the Use of Substitution/ Ellipses

Substitution is the replacement of words or sentences or items with others. This is similar to ellipsis. Tajeddin and Rahimi (2017), defines substitution as “the action of replacing a word or words by another word or group of words”. To Jabeen, Mehmood, and Iqbal (2013), it “This is the replacement of one item by another. It is a relation in the wording rather than in the meaning. This implies that as a general rule, the substitute item has some structural function as that for which it substitutes”. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), substitution is often used to avoid repetition in the text “a substitute is sort of counter which is used in place of the repetition of a particular item”. They further explain that, “Unlike reference, which represents a relation between different meanings, substitution represents a relation between different linguistic items like words and phrases i.e. it refers to a grammatical relation in the wording, not the meaning”. In addition, Halliday and Hasan (1976) declare that, “Since substitution is a grammatical relation, a relation in the wording rather than in the meaning, the different types of substitution are defended grammatically”. Hence, there are three types of substitution: nominal, verbal, and causal.

Cohesion through ellipsis on the other hand, can be thought of as the omission of an item in which the form of substitution is replaced by nothing. In other words, it can be regarded as substitution by zero. It also the omission of an item. Ellipsis is omitting words that are understood from the context, making the sentence more concise and easier to read. McCarthy (1991), defines ellipsis as “the omission of elements normally required by the grammar which the speaker/writer assumes are obvious from the context and therefore need not be raised” In other words, ellipsis is often when the structure of a text misses some element or it is when an item is omitted. However, he adds that what is special about ellipsis is that the meaning is not affected by the omission because this does not have an effect on the whole meaning of the text. Hence, it is easy for the reader to deduce the meaning from the rest of the text”. Nunan (1993) also indicates that, “ellipsis occurs when some essential structural element is omitted from a sentence or a clause and can only be recovered by referring to an element in the preceding text. Jabeen, Mehmood, and Iqbal (2013) also declare that, “The idea of omitting part of sentences on the assumption that an earlier sentence will make the meaning clear is known as ellipsis”.

It is pertinent to say that in the use of these two grammatical cohesion is problematic to most polytechnic ESL learners. They display little or no use of substitution and ellipsis in their writing. In fact, they misapply substitution or ellipsis in their writing which could confuse a reader. Alarcon and Morales (2011), lend credence to this when he says, “without substitution and ellipsis in writing, the text can become repetitive and less concise. Without utilizing these devices, we may end up using the same words or phrases repeatedly, which can make the writing monotonous.” This is evidence in the asterisked sentences below:

\*Some people think that students should choose to study whatever they like. On the other hand, some people think that they should only be allowed to study subjects that will be useful in the future.

\* The purpose of writing this is to tell or explain how **one** can obtain Admission into HND Program in Auchi Polytechnic.

From the above examples, the phrase “some people think” is repeated in the second sentence which makes the text less coherent. The student could substitute the phrase “some people” in the second sentence with “others” to read “some people think that students should choose to study whatever they like. On the other hand, others think that they should only be allowed to



study subjects that will be useful in the future. More so, the use of “one” as a pronoun reference has been adopted for the use of “you” as a substitute in the second sentence is also incorrect. This incident of substitution seems to be one of the most likely instances when students turn to the use of substitution to replace other words with similar meanings and referents which results in the monotonous use in their writing. Again, the students’ incorrect use of ellipses is recorded in the asterisked sentences below:

\*It is not only limited to interest, but **it** is also limited to scope.

\*Most **people** infected with cholera do not develop any symptoms, although the bacteria are present in their faeces... Among **people** who develop symptoms, **the majority** have mild or moderate symptoms.

The first sentence, shows that the students’ improper or incorrect use of ellipses. The phrase “it is” and “limited” could be omitted in the second sentence and be correctly be written as, “It is not only limited to interest but also to scope.” In the second sentence, there is a deliberate intention by the student to avoid the repetition of people after the majority. Otherwise, the correct sentence could have read thus, “Among people who develop symptoms, *the majority (of the people)* have mild or moderate symptoms”. Here, *of the people* has been omitted by the student having already occurred twice within the text. Apparently, from the students’ writing, the absence of “ellipsis” shows that it can result in unnecessary repetition of verbs or other elements, leading to wordiness and reduced clarity. No doubt, substitution and ellipsis play crucial roles in maintaining coherence, avoiding redundancy and enhancing the overall flow of a written text.

### ESL learners’ Issues with the Use of Conjunctions

In English language conjunctions are seen as one of the clearest ways to connect ideas and make writing flow smoothly. Generally, conjunction is the use of transitional words phrases like “**and**”, “**so**”, “**but**”, “**because**”, “**in addition**”, “**however**”, or “**therefore**” to show the logical relationship between clauses or sentences. These devices functions as “glue” of writing, improving readability and comprehension by showing how different parts of text relate to one another. According to Chanyoo, (2013). “This is popular among language learners because they help link thoughts and make writing easier to understand”. McCarthy (1991) also described it as, “A conjunction does not set off a search backward or forward for its referent, but it does presuppose a textual sequence and signals a relationship between segments of the discourse”. Halliday and Hasan (1976) further argued that, “Conjunctive elements are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse”. In contrast to those cohesive ties which accomplish their meaning by backward or forward for their reference in the text, conjunctions do express their own meaning. Halliday and Hasan (1976), further identify three different types, including additive, adversative and temporal. Most polytechnic ESL students find it difficult to efficiently use these connecting devices to connect their ideas in a logical way. Consequently, they make mistakes when trying to use conjunctions as recorded in the asterisked paragraph below:

\* Literature means a lot to me. It serves as a means for entertainment **and** as a means of expressing my feelings through writing. It helps to describe **and** expose event happening within the society through acting or drama., Literature also helps to educate members of the society **and** nation. It also helps to develop the mind **and** body of the individual through study **and** expression of feelings.

In the above sentences, “**and**”, the additive conjunction occurs up to five times within a short paragraph of the student, with six lines demonstrating the student’s weak knowledge of other

lexical conjunctions that can perform the same grammatical function and express the same meaning in the instances where it has been repeatedly used. Similarly, in the sentences, the use of ‘and’ is not only used to link phrases and clauses alone, transitional paragraphs are also linked with previous paragraphs using “and”, as seen in the sentence below:

\*To obtain admission into the Polytechnic HND programme, you should have done one-year I.T. for those with Upper, Lower grades, and two years for those with Pass grades in **there** OND levels. **And** then, the next thing to do is go to a cybercafé for registration.

Furthermore, the combination of “and” and “then” in the second sentence of the above sentence, suggests the student’s poor knowledge of application of such cohesive elements evidenced in the redundant role of “then” which could function as a substitute for “and” to read thus; And the next thing to do is or Then the next thing to do is ...”. In the above text the student’s use of ‘there’ for the pronoun referent ‘their’ due to wrong spelling error also suggests that the students’ self-perception of cohesion is hampered by their application of wrong spelling. It is pertinent to say that conjunction is one of the polytechnic ESL learners’ major issues with correct use of cohesive devices, this is evident in the asterisked sentences with the supposed correct sentences italicized.

\*Cohesion is about the grammatical structure of the text; coherence also is considered as the semantic property of a particular discourse.

**Instead of,** *Cohesion is about the grammatical structure of the text. Whereas, coherence is considered as the semantic property of a particular discourse.*

\*The academic writer should be objective without mentioning his opinion however plagiarism is a way of bringing information of someone else and consider as yours.

**Instead of,** *The academic writer should be objective without mentioning his opinion. However, plagiarism is a way of bringing information of someone else and consider it yours.*

\*When a writer is writing an academic essay taking information from the encyclopedia, he should mention the citation for it.

**Instead of,** *when a writer is writing an academic essay **and** takes information from the **encyclopedia**, he should mention **its** source.*

\*Plagiarism is stalling other people’s work and put your name on it sometimes you take as it is.

**Instead of,** *Plagiarism is stealing other people’s work and put your name on it, **and** take it sometimes you as **it** is.*

\*Academic writing refers to the process of presenting information in a reasonable, original, systemic objective way.

**Instead of,** *Academic writing refers to the process of presenting information in a reasonable, original, systematic, **and** objective way.*

The above revealed ESL learners’ misuse, underuse, overuse, incorrect due to poor linguistic background and lack of sufficient knowledge in the use of cohesive devices in their written discourse. The first sentence in the first example is without additive conjunction “whereas” which makes it incoherent while the second sentence, is without “adversative conjunction

“however and personal Reference “it”. The third sentence is also without the additive conjunction “and” and personal reference “its”. The fourth sentence is also without the additive conjunction “and” and personal reference “it” in the second clause. More so, in the fifth sentence, is without the additive conjunction “and”. Darweesh and Kadhim (2016), attribute the reasons to these kinds of errors in the students’ use of conjunctions in writing as:

Firstly, they might have limited exposure to well-written texts or lack sufficient practice in identifying and using conjunctions effectively. Secondly, there could be a lack of explicit instruction on conjunction usage in language learning materials or curricula. Thirdly, students may have difficulties understanding the nuanced meanings and appropriate contexts for different conjunctions.

The above excerpt also revealed why polytechnic ESL learners have the ‘propensity of misusing or misapplying’ conjunctions in their essays. This shows their ignorance of the wide range of cohesive devices that could choose as options at each strategic point of operation.

### **ESL Learners’ Issues with the Use of Lexical Cohesion**

According to Mc Charty (1991) lexical cohesion is "related vocabulary items occurring throughout the clauses and boundaries of sentences in written texts". On the other hand, according Chanyoo (2013), lexical cohesion is the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary. In addition, Lexical cohesion does not deal with grammatical and semantic connections, but connections are based on the word use (Renkema, 1993). Thus, it can be concluded that lexical cohesion is a connection that builds on the chosen word used in written discourse which requires a significant contribution to vocabulary selection. In English, there are two types of lexical cohesion, reiteration and collocation. It also observed in this that the Polytechnic ESL-learners have a lot of issues with handling such grammatical cohesive devices in their writing task discussed below.

### **ESL Learners’ Issues with the Use of Reiteration**

Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves the repetition of a lexical item or the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item. According to Mc Charty (1991) reiteration means either restating an item in a later part of the discourse by direct repetition or else reasserting its meaning by exploiting lexical relations. To Halliday and Hasan (2019). “Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves the repetition of a lexical item, at one end of the scale; the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item.” Reiteration is a type of lexical cohesion where words are repeated or restated to link ideas and maintain a text flow to create a sense of unity and coherence. It is also a cohesive device that refers to the repetition of sentential elements in a sentence that have similar or close meanings, or share one lexical relationship. This involves using the exact same word, (a synonym or words with similar meanings) to create a cohesive relationship between different parts of a text or a general word (like “thing or animal”) or a superordinate/hyponym (i.e. repeating “dog” with animal) to refer to refer back to a previous mentioned lexical item. ESL learners in an attempt to emphasize on a point, create a sense of unity and flow between their sentences and paragraphs, repeat the same sentence leading to redundancy and monotony. This is done while repeating a key term in their writing in order to reinforce a point and doing it too often makes their writing sound dull and unsophisticated as recorded in the asterisked sentence below:

\*The report outlined the findings. The report was then sent to the committee. The committee discussed the report.

**Instead of** *The report outlined the findings. It was then sent to the committee for discussion.*

The second version of the sentence replaces the repeated noun “report” with a pronoun “it” to maintain flow without sounding repetitive. Using reiteration as a lexical cohesive device is meant to create a cohesive and clear text but it can cause errors if not correctly used. The ESL learners’ common mistakes are the use of reiteration redundantly, selecting inappropriate synonyms or general word or failing to match the stylistic tone of the text. The truth is most polytechnic ESL learners’ lack of variety and sufficient vocabulary which is the underlying cause of many of their reiteration mistakes. This is because when a student has limited vocabulary, he/she tends to either overuse the same word or use thesaurus to select synonym inappropriately. In the inappropriate use of synonym or near synonym, the student may select a synonym that does not fit the context or carries an intended connotation which can confuse or irritate the reader as seen in the asterisked sentences below:

\* The researcher wrote a detailed examination data. Her questioning was through and well received.

**Instead of** *The researcher wrote a detailed examination data. Her analysis was thorough and well received.*

\* I have to get to the bank. I have to go to the market.

**Instead of** *I have to get to the bank and go to the market.*

The text above exposes the polytechnic ESL learners’ over dependence on the use of repetition to link ideas previously mentioned in preceding sentences or paragraphs to subsequent sentences and paragraphs to reiterate view points earlier mentioned. These instances of repetition are in bold fonts to aid easy identification. Other types of **misused reiteration** observed in the essays of the students are the incorrect use of synonyms and antonyms. Most of the ESL learners neglect the Use of Synonyms and Antonyms in their writing. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), “Without using synonyms and antonyms in writing, language becomes limited and less expressive. Without incorporating different words with similar or opposite meanings, writing may lack variety and depth”. Synonyms help learners to avoid repetitive language and add nuance to learners’ descriptions, while antonyms allow them to highlight contrasts and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. By neglecting synonyms and antonyms, the ESL learners’ writing may appear monotonous and less engaging, and it may fail to capture the full range of meaning and complexity. This can be as a result of the nature of the written discourse of essays compared to the spoken discourse where most unspoken terms can be retrieved from previous knowledge shared by the interlocutors on the subject matter under discussion.

### **ESL Learners’ Issues with the Use of Collocation**

Collocation is a form of lexical cohesion achieved through the association of lexical items that regularly co-occur. This does not only bring extension to the basis of the lexical relationship that features a cohesive force but also indicates that cohesion lies between any pair of lexical items that relate to each other in some recognizable lexico semantic (word meaning) relation. Bahaziq (2016) writes that “collocation is a set of vocabulary items which occur simultaneously. It is composed of a collection of adjectives and nouns like ‘fast-food’, verbs and nouns like: ‘run out of money’, and other different items like: men, women”. Renkema (2004), also adds that collocation is concerned with the relationship between words because these words often occur in the same setting. For example: “Red Cross helicopters were in the air continuously. The blood bank will soon desperately in need for donors”. This would include not only synonyms and near synonym and super ordinate, but also pairs of opposites of various kinds, complementary words.

Collocation errors are mistake in the combination of words in ESL learners' writing. This is a mistake in word combinations where words that are not naturally used together are paired making the language sound unnatural and potentially confusing, as well as causing misunderstandings. For instance, using the word verb with a noun like "do an effort, instead of make an effort". Using the wrong adjectives like "big mistake", instead of "huge mistake" or using wrong preposition. More so, the errors also often committed when ESL learners use the wrong word from similar category such as; "Do a mistake, instead of make mistake." In addition, using an incorrect preposition like "Apply to Microsoft, instead of Apply at Microsoft." The underlying cause of many reiteration errors in ESL learners' written discourse is lack of variety and insufficient vocabulary. The fact is when students have limited vocabulary, they tend to either overuse the same word or use a thesaurus selected synonym inappropriately.

## **Conclusion**

The fact is competence in the four basic skills of Language in which the Polytechnic teachers of the English language intend to achieve in the teaching and learning of English language as Second Language (ESL) will continue to be a wishful thinking, if those thorny issues acting as barriers of understanding of students' written discourse are not urgently and properly addressed. The thorny issues making the polytechnic ESL learners to write poorly organised, disconnected and incomprehensible must be taken seriously. This is because the polytechnic students' failure in the main medium of education (English Language) is a serious threat to the entire polytechnic system. It therefore behoves the polytechnic teacher of English language and NBTE to strictly adhere to the viable recommendations provided in this study to avoid making the teaching and learning of the English Language in Nigerian polytechnic a cumbersome task.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- i. The polytechnic teachers of English need to prioritize and focus on application of different grammatical and lexical devices in essay writing, so that the Polytechnic ESL learners will be exposed to practice od varieties and varied use of different cohesive ties like reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion in order to improve on the overall quality and clarity of their academic writing.
- ii. There is urgent need for the polytechnic teachers of English as a Second Language to emphasize on the factors which acts as barriers to the students' understanding of different of different varieties of cohesive devices available and correct use.
- iii. The teachers of English as a Second Language in the polytechnic should also emphasize the precise meaning, function and grammatical rules recommended and focusing on using a variety naturally and critical role of these basic grammatical elements to the ESL learners' effective communication and writing.
- iv. More education technological tools like software or apps that offer interactive learning experiences can be introduced in the polytechnic essay writing task to provide students with immediate feedback on cohesion and coherence in their essays. Researchers have discovered a development instrument such as Tool for Automatic Cohesion Analysis (TAACO), which presents encouraging paths for methodically evaluating and resolving cohesion concerns. These insights can be used by NBTE and polytechnic teachers of the English language to create coherence and cohesiveness-enhancing tactics for the polytechnic ESL learners. This tool can be accessed by ESL-learners for free via internet. TAACO's instructions and explanations, along with the software itself, can be found at

[www.kristopherkyle.com/taaco.html](http://www.kristopherkyle.com/taaco.html).

- v. Assessment of polytechnic ESL students' essays needs to be reviewed to regularly integrate more practical steps at ensuring quality assessment of students' essays at all levels. In addition, the current use of CBE in the polytechnic to assess performance of ESL learners can be programmed to create room for practical demonstration of knowledge gained on cohesive devices.
- vi. More peer review activities within and outside the classroom should be encouraged to enable students undertake personal learning and critique on the use of cohesive devices in their essays writing task. This is because a text is cohesive only if its elements are tied together in way that makes sense to the reader.
- vii. There is also need for more systematic assignments on the use of discourse features of cohesion and coherence so that it is applied and regular practiced until teachers are sure that there is an improvement in ESL learners' use of the basic grammatical elements in their written discourse.

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