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Assessing cohesion in children's writing: Development of a checklist

Lynda Struthers*, Judith C. Lapadat[1], Peter D. MacMillan[2]

University of Northern British Columbia, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Cohesion in writing is achieved through the use of linguistic devices that tie ideas together across a text, and is an important element in the development of coherent writing. Research shows that inter- and intra-developmental differences may appear in how children learn to use these devices, but cohesion is commonly overlooked in the evaluation and instruction of writing. In this study, we developed a checklist to assess cohesion in the writing of children in Grades 4–7, with the purpose of informing instructional practices. Following the procedure outlined by Crocker and Algina (1986), we developed and evaluated a checklist designed to assess the types of cohesive devices present in the writing of children. The checklist items showed fair to good discrimination between high and low scoring writers as demonstrated by a classical item analysis. We also found good interrater reliability, and evidence for discriminative validity. As internal consistency was weak, however, further research is needed to refine the instrument. Implications for the assessment of cohesion and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Written language is an important form of communication. Consequently, learning to write well is an important educational goal, and one that requires the development of a complex variety of skills.

* Corresponding author at: University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada V2N 4Z9.
Tel.: +1 250 614 0309; fax: +1 250 960 5744.
E-mail addresses: struther@unbc.ca (L. Struthers), judith.lapadat@uleth.ca (J.C. Lapadat), peterm@unbc.ca (P.D. MacMillan).
[1] Present address: University of Lethbridge, 4401 University Drive, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada T1K 3M4.
Tel.: +1 403 332 4418; fax: +1 403 329 2112.
[2] School of Education, University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada V2N 4Z9. Tel.: +1 250 960 5828; fax: +1 250 960 5536.

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Among these are fluency with transcription (spelling and letter formation/keyboarding), language based skills such as word choice and construction of grammatically correct sentences, and mechanical skills such as the appropriate use of capital letters and punctuation. However, for children to effectively communicate their ideas in writing they need to do more than write correctly; they must learn to construct coherent texts.

In order for educators to effectively teach composition skills, they must be able to systematically assess writing. Assessment of the mechanical aspects of writing is well established; teachers are adept in detecting errors of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure. However, when it comes to examining coherence, assessment typically involves teacher judgment or holistic ratings. Holistic judgments are useful for gaining an overall impression of a written piece, but are less useful for examination of specific text features and skills (Walcott & Legg, 1998). Analysis of the features of students' writing is important because it allows teachers to detect strengths and weaknesses, and subsequently design differentiated instruction that addresses specific skill deficits (National Commission on Writing, 2003; Rousseau, 1990). Thus, in order to design differentiated or remedial instruction that helps students learn to write coherently, assessment of the text level features that contribute to coherence is warranted.

Aspects of a text that contribute to coherence include topic coherence and local connections among sentences (McCutchen & Perfetti, 1982). Topic coherence refers to the integrity and overall semantic unity of a written text, and is achieved when each sentence provides a relevant contribution to the topic. Local connections involve the explicit and implicit connections between neighboring sentences. Explicit connections, referred to as cohesive devices, can bolster the reader's ability to make inferences (Irwin, 1988; O'Reilly & McNamara, 2007; Palmer, 1999) and errors in cohesion can get in the way of a reader's efforts to understand the message of the writer (Hedberg & Fink, 1996; Watson Todd, Khongput, & Darasawang, 2007). It is these cohesive devices that are of interest here as they represent tangible aspects of a text that can be observed for the purposes of assessment and feature analysis.

However, the analysis of cohesion is not well addressed in assessments of written language commonly used in education. The purpose guiding this study, therefore, was to develop an instrument that would allow for the analysis of cohesion in the writing of school-aged children with the aim of informing differentiated instruction for those who struggle with creating cohesive texts.

1.1. Definitions of cohesion

Cohesive devices are lexical and grammatical structures that support the formulation of coherent texts (Mortensen, Smith-Lock, & Nickels, 2009). Halliday and Hasan (1976) described five linguistic devices that are used to establish cohesion in both spoken and written English: reference, conjunction, lexical cohesion, substitution, and ellipsis. Reference involves the use of pronouns, articles, and demonstratives to refer to information previously mentioned in the text (e.g., John sniffed the air. *He* could smell smoke), and thus contribute to local connectedness. Conjunction involves the use of additive (e.g., and), temporal (e.g., before), causal (e.g., because), adversative (e.g., but), and continuative (e.g., now) conjunctions, as well as adverbial phrases to link ideas across phrases and sentences. Conjunction also supports local connectedness. Lexical cohesion occurs when semantically related words are used throughout the text. As such, lexical cohesion captures aspects of both local connectedness and topic coherence. Reiteration is one type of lexical cohesion, which includes repetition of the same word (e.g., dog – dog) or the use of superordinates (e.g., dog – animal), synonyms (dog – canine), or near synonyms (dog – beast) to refer to the same item, person, or event. Collocation, another form of lexical cohesion, involves the use of antonyms, complementary terms, and converses throughout the text (e.g., hot – cold, sand – beach, asked – answered). Substitution involves the use of a generic term to replace a redundant element (e.g., He really wanted *a red ball*. Finally he found *one*) and ellipsis involves the elimination of redundant elements altogether (e.g., I was going to go but [I] didn't [go]).

In addition to the cohesive devices described by Halliday and Hasan (1976), Perera (1984) indicated that consistent use of tense markers across a text also supports connectedness in writing. As well, in a small exploratory study of writing from students in Grades 3, 5, and 7, the first author found that the use of organizational structures like paragraphs and logical sequencing enhanced the topic coherence of a written text.

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