Written Cohesion in Children with Language Learning Disabilities across two Genres

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Introduction

- Cohesion is defined as the linguistic elements of a text that contribute to its continuity and is achieved through the use of cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).
- Halliday and Hasan (1976) identified 5 categories of cohesive devices: reference, conjunction, lexical, substitution, and ellipsis; of which, elementary school children predominately use referential and conjunctive ties (e.g., Bae, 2001; Fitzgerald & Spiegel, 1986).
- Reference ties, which are generally pronouns.
- Conjunctive ties, which specify relations between different units such as phrases, clauses, utterances, or sentences.
- Few studies have examined cohesion in the discourse of elementary school children, most of which focus on spoken language samples. An empirical question is how does cohesion affect writing and does cohesion use differ by genre?
- Children with Language-Learning Disabilities (LLD) are children whose language difficulties negatively impact academic function, specifically with reading and writing. Studies comparing cohesion between children with LLD and children with typical language (TL) are limited to the spoken modality and have suggested between-group differences (Finestack et al., 2006; Liles, 1987; Liles 1985; Merritt & Liles, 1987; Ripsch & Griffith, 1988).
- The purpose of the present investigation is to identify differences in the frequency and type of cohesion used in written narrative and expository samples between children with LLD, compared to peers with TL; in doing so we pose the following research questions:

1) Do children with LLD produce fewer overall referential and conjunctive cohesive ties and fewer complete ties than peers with TL? Does this differ by genre?
2) Are there differences in the proportions of subtypes of referential and conjunctive cohesive ties used between children with and without LLD?
3) Is there a relationship between measures of cohesion and quality of writing? Does this relationship differ by genre?

Sample

- The data presented are a subset of data from a larger study examining reading efficiency and written discourse in 4th and 5th grade children.
- Writing samples were:
  1) segmented into minimal terminable units (T-Units; Hunt, 1970);
  2) scored using the six-traits writing rubric; and,
  3) coded using a combined computer/person system that identified and categorized referential and conjunctive cohesive ties.

Procedures

- Sample size: N = 20 (TD = 10; LLD = 10)

| Age in Years | TD (n = 10) | LLD (n = 10) | p
|--------------|-------------|--------------|---
| 10.35 (5.58) | 10.88 (7.5) | .25
| Mother’s Ed. | 13.80 (1.40) | 14.44 (1.42) | .12
| Girls : Boys | 7 : 3 | 4 : 6 | .32

- There were no significant between group differences on either dependent measure; in fact, the groups demonstrated similar use of both types of cohesive ties across both genres.

Results

- There were no differences in the proportion of subtypes of referential and conjunctive ties used by group or by genre in this sample.
- There was a significant positive relationship between the total number of cohesive devices used and the quality writing score on expository samples suggesting the use of cohesive devices adds to the quality of expository writing.
- These findings veer from the literature on cohesion in the spoken modality suggesting that the written modality may lend itself to more efficient use of cohesive devices.

Discussion

- This preliminary study examined two types of cohesion (referential & conjunctive) in children’s narrative and expository writing to better understand the microstructure of written discourse in school age children.
- There were no significant between group differences in cohesion, though there were significant variations on the six-traits writing rubric score.

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References


