

## Written Discourse Analysis and its Application in English Language Teaching

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### Abstract

Discourse analysis is the study of language in either spoken or written form. Written discourse is considered an imperative aspect that needs to be analysed. Cohesion, coherence, clause relations and text patterns are all parts of written discourse. This paper, therefore, aims to shed some light on the analysis of several written texts by discussing the possibility of applying written discourse analysis in English language teaching contexts. The paper starts by reviewing related literature about the meaning of cohesion, coherence, cohesive devices and text patterns, followed by reasons for choosing written discourse analysis in particular. Following this, an analysis of several written texts, together with the possibility of applying written discourse analysis in English language teaching, is presented. Before concluding this paper, an evaluation of the proposed application is provided. It is found that applying written discourse analysis in teaching written texts via the use of a problem solution pattern (SPRE) can increase what to expect in reading texts and the ability to write coherently. Although the author did not have the opportunity to apply this task, generally speaking, most text patterns involving SPRE are highly recommended for students when it comes to shaping their writing and this therefore makes students' writing coherent and easily readable.

**Keywords:** cohesion relations, discourse analysis, English language teaching, text patterns, written texts.

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## Introduction

Discourse analysis in terms of both spoken and written language is believed to be helpful for both linguists and language teachers. It is simply “the study of language in use” (Gee & Handford, 2013:1). Written texts are considered an important aspect that needs to be analysed. Doing so means that writers gain the ability to make their writing more cohesive and easier to read. Cohesion, coherence, clause relations and text patterns are all parts of written texts.

This paper, therefore, aims to shed some light on the analysis of written texts. The paper consists of three parts. In the first part, the literature regarding the meaning of texts and discourse analysis is briefly reviewed. An illustration of cohesion and coherence is presented. After this, grammatical and lexical devices and text patterns that help written texts to be understood are presented and discussed. The rationale for choosing to analyse written texts is addressed. The second part provides an analysis of several written texts, with a focus on the cohesion devices and text patterns discussed in the first part. The third part offers some suggestions and an evaluation of one of the written texts analysed in the second part, and suggests how to apply the analysed discourse in the classroom in such a way as to help teach written texts.

## Literature review

If you are studying the relationship between language and the context it is utilised in, then you are analysing the discourse. Discourse can be either written, such as in books, essays, newspapers, magazines, road signs or invoices, or spoken, such as in conversations, verbal interactions and TV programmes. Discourse analysts study language in either spoken or written use. According to Gee and Handford (2013:5), the importance of discourse analysis “lies in the fact that, through speaking and writing in the world, we make the world meaningful in certain ways and not in others”. Although Coulthard (2014) makes a distinction between spoken discourse and written texts, this distinction is by no means universally accepted. Recently, the scope of linguists has switched from analysing single sentences to the distribution of linguistic elements in extended texts and the relationship between texts and social situations. This paper’s focus will be devoted to written texts in order to afford an understanding of how natural written discourse looks and sounds. This understanding will boost the production of teaching materials (McCarthy, 1991). By taking the scope of this paper into account, discussing written texts normally includes the consideration of cohesion, coherence and text patterns. Thus, each aspect will be discussed in the following sections.

### *What do we mean by texts?*

The term “text” refers to “a passage, either spoken or written, that does form a unified whole” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:1). In other words, a text is the ability to distinguish a particular sequence of sentences, whether connected or not. It is also a semantic unit of meaning in the language. For instance, Halliday and Hasan (1976) coined the term “ties”, which refers to a single instance of cohesion. Such ties mean that written texts can be analysed by investigating the relationship between cohesion and the organisation of written texts into sentences and paragraphs.

Failure to make writing fully understood, even on the part of advanced learners, due to either the overuse of conjunctions or the inability to achieve cohesive texts, is a common problem among non-native speakers of English (Basturkmen, 2002).

*Cohesion and coherence*

A text's cohesion and coherence are pivotal. The more coherent a sequence of sentences, the better they are understood (Todirascu et al., 2013). According to Bublitz (2011:37), cohesion and coherence are "(linguistically encoded or just assumed) connectedness of spoken as well as written discourse or text". However, they are "descriptive categories which differ in kind". In detail, cohesion relates to "inter-sentential semantic relations" whereas coherence is a "kind of textual prosody" (Bublitz (2011:37). Cohesive texts could be partly coherent (Grabe, 1984). Cohesion means the relationship between meaning within a particular written text and the way the reader interprets several elements in the discourse (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). According to Martin (2015), the term "cohesion" is inspired by the work of Halliday (1964) and Hasan (1968).

Cohesion befalls through "the stratal organisation of language" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:5). It is the means through which ideas and content are linked and ordered (Basturkmen, 2002). In simple terms, cohesion is explained by meaning, form and expression. By the same token, Grabe (1984:110) states that it is "the means available in the surface forms of the text to signal relations that hold between sentences or clausal units in the text". Cohesion occurs "where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another". Because cohesion is articulated either through grammar or vocabulary, Halliday and Hasan (1976) divide it into grammatical and lexical devices.

*Cohesion relations*

There are five cohesive devices: reference; substitution; ellipsis; conjunction; and lexis. In this section, four types of grammatical cohesion will be discussed in turn. After that, lexical cohesion will be addressed.

*Grammatical cohesion*

## 1- Reference

In any language, there are some items that refer to something else for their interpretation rather than being interpreted on their own. This process is called "reference" in that the information is signalled for retrieving the referential meaning. Reference can be personal (including pronouns - possessive adjectives - possessive pronouns), demonstratives (verbal pointing) and comparatives (deictic or non-deictic) that function as cohesive ties (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). For instance, "*Three blind mice, three blind mice. See how they run! See how they run!*" is an example of personal reference, where the pronoun *they* refer to *three blind mice*. An example of demonstrative reference is "*Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain. He stopped in a puddle right up to his middle and never went there again*". *There* in this example refers to *Gloucester*. A comparative reference is "*There were two wrens upon a tree. Another came, and there were three*", where *another* refers to *wrens* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:31).

Reference could be established either with a textual endophoric within the text, such as "*Doris likes him very much*" or with a situational exophoric outside the text, such as "*Would you like to join me for a cup of tea this afternoon?*" (Bublitz, 2011). Endophora may be anaphoric or cataphoric. The most important issue with reference and whether a word is endophoric or exophoric is that "the thing referred to has to be identifiable somehow" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:33).

## 2- Substitution

This cohesive relation is in contrast with the former (reference), in which reference is a relation in terms of the meaning (semantic) while substitution is a relation in terms of the wording (grammatical). In other words, this is a relationship between linguistic items. It is “the replacement of one item by another” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:88). Substitution is used instead of repeating a particular item; for example, “*My axe is too blunt. I must get a sharp one”*, in which *one* is the substitute for *axe* (Halliday and Hasan, 1976:88).

There are three types of substitution: nominal, verbal and clausal. The substitute of one, ones or the same is a nominal substitution. For instance, “*I have heard some strange stories in my time. But this one was perhaps the strangest one of all*”, where *one* is a substitute for *stories* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:92). The second type is the verbal substitution (*do*). For instance, “*the words did not come the same as they used to do*”, where *do* is the substitute for *come* (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:112). The third type is the clausal (*so* - *not*). For example, “*Is there going to be an earthquake? – it says so*”, where *so* presupposes the clause *there is going to be an earthquake*.

## 3- Ellipsis

Ellipsis is similar to substitution as it “can be interpreted as that form of substitution in which the item is replaced by nothing” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:88). Nevertheless, ellipsis and substitution differ in terms of their structural mechanisms. It is substitution by zero, as it is not articulated or written and something is left unsaid. It is a presupposition at the level of words and structures (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Just like substitution, ellipses can be established within the nominal, verbal and clausal groups.

## 4- Conjunction

The fourth cohesive device is an anaphoric relationship as it expresses particular meanings that presuppose the existence of another component in discourse. It is employed to connect clauses using conjunctive relations whether additive (*and*), adversative (*yet*), causal (*so*) or temporal (*then*) (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

### *Lexical cohesion*

In order to cover all types of cohesion relationships, this section will address lexical cohesion. Lexical cohesion can be achieved through reiteration—that is, saying something again or multiple times for the purpose of emphasis or clarity. Pedagogically speaking, it is the most common element to be learned by language learners and taught by teachers. Consequently, it is a must for language teachers. Yet McCarthy (1991) argues that it is negligent to consider lexical cohesion out of their discourse. Although lexical cohesion play an important role in verbal interaction, they are mostly abandoned in English description. Lexical cohesion includes repetition, synonym, near-synonym, antonym, superordinate, general words and metonymy. For instance, “Henry’s bought himself a new Jaguar. He practically lives in the car” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976:278); the word “car” refers to “Jaguar”, which is the superordinate of Jaguar. However, Stotsky (1983) argues that Halliday and Hasan (1976) do not provide a consistent reason for combining types of reiterated items together in one category. This argument is not adequate because Halliday and Hasan declare that reiterated items are linked via a common referent.

In addition, lexical cohesion can be achieved through collocation. Lewis and Conzett (2000) define collocation as the words that are placed or found together in a predictable pattern. The functions of general nouns are similar to reiteration. A lexical item is an open set, while a grammatical item is a member of a closed system. For instance, in the following example, the cohesive function of the general noun goes together with the reference “the” in “We all kept quiet. That seemed the best move” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976:275).

#### *Clause relations and text patterns*

It is worth noting that when we talk about grammatical and lexical cohesion, clause relations and macro text patterns should be considered. One clause or sentence’s relation to another can be interpreted through either matching relations or logical sequence relations (Winter, 1994). Additionally, the most common macro patterns in a text are those that Hoey (2001) identifies as follows:

- 1- Problem solution
- 2- General particular
- 3- Hypothetical real (claim-counterclaim pattern)

The problem solution pattern is the most common pattern (Hoey, 2001). Due to the limited space in this paper, only problem solution patterns will be discussed in detail. This pattern includes four functions: situation, problem, response and evaluation (SPRE). The first function should afford background information. The second function raises a particular problem. The third function is to provide a response (counterclaim) to the problem that has arisen. Finally, an evaluation deals with whether the response to the problem is positive or negative. If a negative evaluation is achieved, the pattern should be repeated until a positive evaluation (result) is attained. An example of this pattern, which McCarthy (1991:30) mentions, is as follows:

“(1) Most people like to take a camera with them when they travel abroad. (2) But all airports nowadays have x-ray security screening and x-rays can damage film. (3) One solution to this problem is to purchase a specially designed lead-lined pouch. (4) These are cheap and can protect film from all but the strongest x rays”.

The example above covers the four functions of a problem solution pattern. The first sentence presents a particular situation; the second raises a problem; the third provides a response to the problem raised; and the fourth sentence positively evaluates the proposed solution. They are the ‘situation, problem, response and evaluation pattern (SPRE)’.

To conclude this section, all the cohesion devices, clause relations and text patterns mentioned above afford means for connecting the apparent text structure. As Grabe (1984:110) notes, they “reflect both the communicative intents and choices by the authors”.

#### *Reasons for choosing written discourse analysis*

Written texts need to be properly connected and linked. Cohesion is the most important property of writing quality. The author agrees with Witte and Faigley (1981:201) who state that, “if cohesion is better understood, it can be better taught”. Nonetheless, cohesion is not employed in the English language teaching (EFL) classrooms with which the author is familiar. Hence,

teachers ought to teach learners how to utilise cohesive devices (references, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctions) and lexical ties (repetition, synonyms, antonyms and superordinates) both explicitly and implicitly (Basturkmen, 2002). Most classroom exercises are not designed to teach cohesion but they do demand that students form cohesive ties (Witte & Faigley, 1981). It has been argued that teaching often concentrates on conjunctions rather than on any other cohesive device, such as lexical cohesion (Liu, 2000). Some studies that have been conducted regarding the use of conjunctions in written texts have revealed that non-native learners tend to use them more than they should. Basturkmen (2002) examined the writing of two non-native advanced learners with a focus on the use of conjunctions. She found that both students misused conjunctions. Therefore, the author would argue that this dilemma could be resolved by teaching this aspect in the classroom. Neglecting this issue will result in more fragmented texts.

Similar to cohesion devices, Basturkmen (2002) recommends that English language teachers should make their students aware of typical clause relations and macro text patterns in English. Needless to say, that problem solution is the most common pattern. It is important to ensure that “questions spell out the relationship between sentences” (Hoey, 2001:123). Moreover, the dialogue ought to be properly connected and meaningful.

### The analysis of several written texts

Written discourse analysis is a growing field of study. It allows researchers to follow different lines of investigation. Grabe (1984:101) states that the analysis of discourse involves “the study of literary texts” and “the study of form-function relationships within language segments”. In other words, it is the study of both oral and written language.

In this section, several written discourses will be presented and analysed. The analysis will consider references in the first extract, conjunctions in the second, lexical cohesion in the third and both references and problem solution macro patterns in the fourth extract.

- 1- “Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him ... That, as it happens, is the opening of Brighton Rock, but turn up the opening lines of the rest of his books and they won't disappoint you. Graham Greene, who died yesterday, rich in years and rich in honour, was first of all a storyteller...” (Thornbury, 1997:122).

2-

In the above text, reference has been employed seven times. In the first line, “he” refers to Hale and “they” in the same line is a forward reference. “Him” in the second line refers to Hale and “that” in the same line refers to the preceding sentence. In the third line, “his” refers to Graham Greene, “they” refers to Greene’s books and “who” refers to Graham Greene again. The use of these references helps the text to be more cohesive.

- 3- “These two forms of dissent coalesced in the demand for a stronger approach to the Tory nostrum of tariff reform. In addition, trouble threatened from the mercurial figure of Winston Churchill, who had resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in January 1931 in protest at Baldwin's acceptance of eventual self-government for India” (<http://www.uefap.com/reading/exercise/refer/refer.htm>).

The above extract contains two sentences. In line two, the second sentence starts with “in addition” in order to link the second sentence to the first. This conjunction makes the whole extract more cohesive.

- 4- “The clamour of complaint about teaching in higher education and, more especially, about teaching methods in universities and technical colleges, serves to direct attention away from the important reorientation which has recently begun. The complaints, of course, are not unjustified. In dealing piece-meal with problems arising from rapidly developing subject matter, many teachers have allowed courses to become over-crowded, or too specialized, or they have presented students with a number of apparently unrelated courses failing to stress common principles. Many, again, have not developed new teaching methods to deal adequately with larger numbers of students, and the new audio-visual techniques tend to remain in the province of relatively few enthusiasts despite their great potential for class and individual teaching” (<http://www.uefap.com/reading/exercise/refer/refer.htm>).

In this extract, the term “complaint” has been used twice. In the fourth line, “complaint” is repeated again as it is the focus of the extract. The other phrase “teaching methods” has been used as a collocation. This collocation has also been repeated. Also, the phrase “audio-visual techniques” has been employed as a synonym for “teaching methods”.

- 5- “(1) Tony and Sheila’s first home was a terraced house, one of a line houses all connected. (2) But several years later when they had a small child, they found it rather cramped for three people. (3) They wanted something more spacious and so decided to move. (4) They went to an estate agent and looked at details of the houses he had to offer. (5) They looked at a semi-detached house (one of a pair attached to each other), liked it, and asked a surveyor to inspect it for them. (6) He said that it was in good condition and they therefore decided to buy it. (7) Luckily, they sold their house quickly and soon a removals firm was taking all their furniture and other possessions to their new home. (8) But already, after a couple of years, they are hoping to move again. (9) Tony’s business is doing well and they want to get an architect to design a modern, detached house for them, and a builder to build it” (Thomas, 1995:13).

6-

In the above extract, as expected, references are the most cohesive devices employed in the passage. For instance, Tony and Sheila are referred to nine times by the pronoun “they” as they are the focus of the passage. It is used in sentences two (twice), three, four, five, six, seven, eight and nine. Likewise, “their” is used three times in sentence seven. The first time this refers to their current house, the second time this refers to the furniture and the third time this refers to the new home. “It” is used six times in sentence two, which refers to the current house, in sentence five (twice) as a reference to the new house, in sentence six (twice) referring to the new house and in sentence nine, which refers to their future house. “Them” is used twice in sentences five and nine. “He” is used twice in sentences four and six as a reference to the estate agent.

In addition to the reference cohesion device analysed in the above passage, the text pattern will be analysed. The above passage is a good example of a problem solution pattern (SPRE). The first sentence begins by providing a background to the situation. Then, a problem is

raised in the second sentence. An outline of the problem, along with several recommendations, is presented before the response. After that, a response is offered in the seventh sentence as a reaction to the problem that was raised in the earlier sentences. A negative evaluation is achieved in the eighth sentence, because Tony and Sheila want to move again. This negative evaluation prompts a recycling of the pattern until they achieve a positive evaluation in the ninth sentence, in that they are going to consult with an architect in order to build another house. The problem solution pattern in the text above, according to Hoey's (2001) diagram, is as follows:

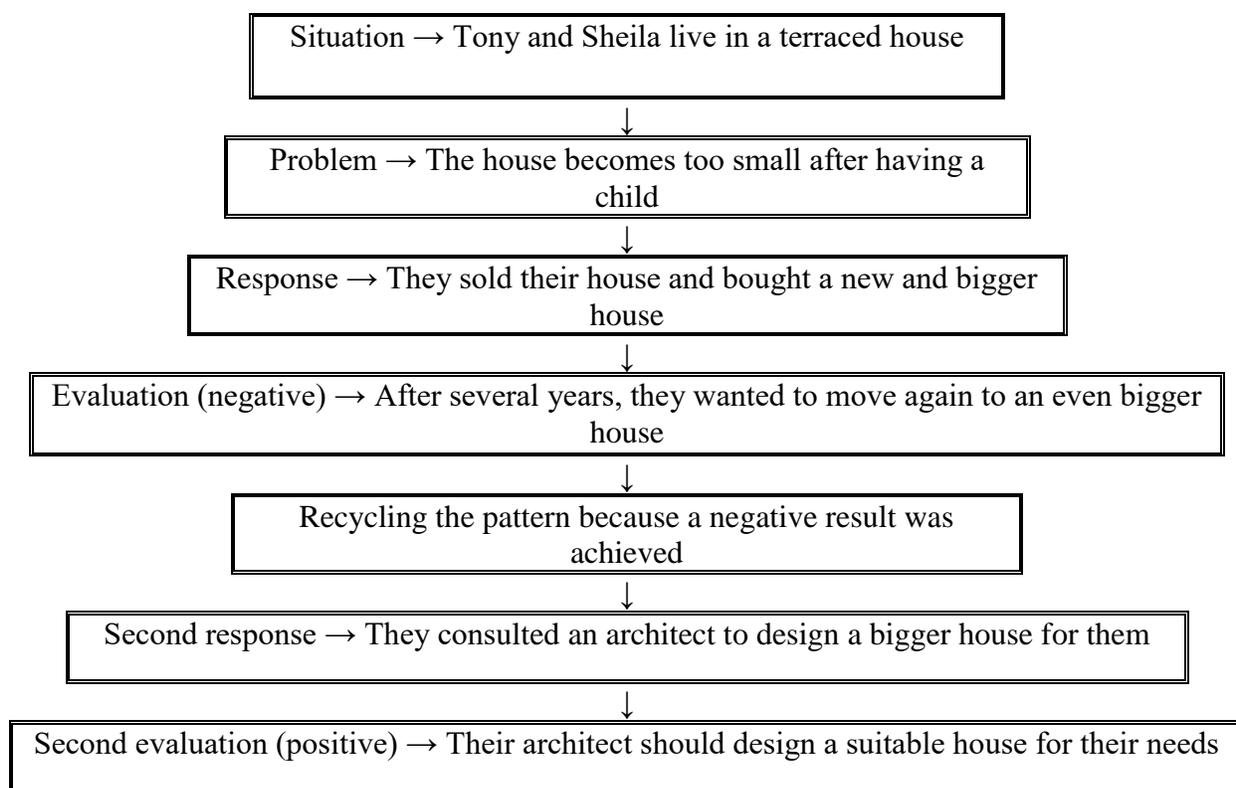


Figure 1: The problem solution pattern (SPRE).

### Application of written texts in ELT

It is believed that the main purpose of language teaching for students is the understanding of the communicative value of linguistic items in a discourse (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 2001; Candlin & Hyland, 2014). It has been argued that cohesion is an indispensable part of written texts. Therefore, the reader's knowledge, the writer's aim and the information delivered should all be considered and taken into account. Witte and Faigley (1981) argue that clause and sentence structure are taught out of their discourse and out of context. By the same token, Cook (1989) states that cohesion is almost mistreated in language teaching. He argues that students' difficulties arise from their difficulties with cohesion. This negligence has resulted in cohesive problems for students. Cook (1989) stresses that this mistreatment is due to a lack of awareness and, although it has been considered recently, this issue has not been given much prominence in language pedagogy. In addition to cohesion devices, clause relations and text patterns should also be analysed. Writers should take readers into account when writing.

Although not everything that discourse analysis describes can be employed in language teaching, teachers should have the ability to “create authentic materials and activities for the classroom” (McCarthy, 1991:147). To do so, teachers should teach learners how to make use of the cohesive devices and text patterns they encounter in written discourse. By doing so, learners can identify references, synonyms and antonyms in reading texts and can then make use of the devices. Moreover, task-based language teaching activities are one of the teaching methods that can be employed to teach text patterns. In a context that the author is familiar with, students always struggle with lexical cohesion and text patterns. A course book entitled “Intermediate Vocabulary” has been employed to teach novice undergraduate students. The book is split into topics that are familiar to students. Each topic has several passages that include new vocabularies. Students are asked to read these passages, which contain gaps, and discover new lexical items from a group of words given above each passage. However, these exercises do not give any clue as to how to make use of the context (the passage) that they are reading.

According to the author’s experience, students, due to a lack of knowledge, totally neglect the context, which can be very informative. Teachers can teach students how to analyse written discourse using cohesion devices and problem solution macro patterns to help them thoroughly understand the passage. The fourth passage, which was presented and analysed above, is an example of how one of the cohesive devices can be taught. Moreover, the same text can also teach a problem solution macro pattern. One of the implications of this is that “conformity to the pattern when writing is likely to make organising and reading the text easier” (Hoey, 2001:167). Hoey (2001:123) believes that a problem solution pattern (SPRE) can be presented in “a short fabricated text”. Therefore, a problem solution macro pattern is proposed below to show how it can be taught in the classroom. To do so, a task-based language-teaching (TBLT) lesson can be divided into six phases. The rationale behind choosing a TBLT lesson is because it focuses on the meaning, the real world process of language use and on communicative outcomes. These features of TBLT seem suitable for teaching students the relationship between the language and the context in which it is used (Ellis, 2003). The task can be a combination of reading and writing practice through discourse analysis.

**1<sup>st</sup> phase:** The teacher encourages students by starting a discussion regarding houses and how to buy one or when you might move from one house to another. This discussion is in the form of brainstorming and acts as an introduction to the topic.

**2<sup>nd</sup> phase:** The teacher asks the students to skim or scan the whole passage with a focus on the cohesion devices that they may encounter. A handout should be given to the students containing the meaning of new words and further information about the topic.

**3<sup>rd</sup> phase:** The teacher asks the students to read the passage again carefully and try to find any problems in the text that might arise regarding buying a house or moving to a new house and if there is an answer to such problems.

**4<sup>th</sup> phase:** The teacher asks the students to analyse the text by explaining the solution problem macro pattern (SPRE) and shows them Hoey’s diagram on the whiteboard.

**5<sup>th</sup> phase:** After the students have learned the SPRE pattern, the teacher asks them to identify the parts of the pattern in the text as a practical part of the lesson and to make sure they understand how the pattern works.

**6<sup>th</sup> phase:** Subsequently, students should move to the writing part where they are asked to write a short passage about any topic they like. In their writing, students should start with a particular

situation with a problem that has to be solved. Then, a response or solution should be provided. Finally, an evaluation of the proposed solution, whether positive or negative, should be presented. If a negative evaluation is attained, a repetition of the pattern should be implemented until a positive evaluation is achieved.

The same task could be extended to the next lesson as a second part by focusing on analysing cohesion devices and the above phases can be repeated. By doing so, students can revise the SPRE pattern together with learning certain cohesive devices (e.g., references).

### Evaluation

This is an example of applying written discourse analysis to teaching written texts. In doing so, teachers and learners can increase what to expect in reading texts and help students learn how to write in a coherent way. One of this method's merits is that it is a ready-made template. However, it cannot be applied to every written text; it is "only part of the answer to the question of how texts are organised" (Hoey, 2001:145). To conclude this section, the author has not yet had the chance to apply this task. But, generally speaking, most text patterns involving SPRE are very helpful for students when it comes to shaping their writing and they help make students' writing coherent and easily readable.

### Conclusion

Due to its natural occurrence, written discourse analysis is a supportive function when it comes to teaching languages. The goal of most learners of English is to gain the ability to use the language either in spoken or written form; therefore, applying written discourse analysis lessons in the classroom is very helpful. By doing so, learners will have the ability to make their writing coherent and readable. Moreover, the analysis of text patterns will help students in terms of both writing and reading in the ELT context. To conclude, although written discourse analysis has some shortcomings, as mentioned above, its merits and valuable outcomes are very appealing.

### About the author

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