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The Role of Referential Cohesion in the Process of Text Comprehension

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between middle school students' success in understanding referential cohesion devices and their reading comprehension skills and the extent to which these skills differ according to various demographic variables. The study involved 198 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. Data was collected using a Personal Information Form, a Reading Comprehension Achievement Test, and a Referential Cohesion Test. According to the findings, understanding referential cohesion devices significantly predicts reading comprehension achievement. Participants were more successful in interpreting anaphoric and exophoric references than cataphoric ones. Female students demonstrated higher reading comprehension achievement than their male counterparts. Reading comprehension achievement also increased with grade level, and students who read books regularly exhibited higher reading comprehension. However, success in understanding referential cohesion did not significantly vary by gender, grade level, or reading frequency. These findings highlight the necessity of designing instructional practices to enhance referential processing skills.

Keywords: Referential cohesion, reading comprehension, anaphoric reference, cataphoric reference, exophoric reference

Introduction

Overview

The coherence of texts, which serve as the objects of the act of reading, is established through cohesive devices. These devices are crucial in creating textual coherence and facilitating comprehension by linking sentences and ideas into a consistent and meaningful whole. By providing readers with essential cues for navigating complex information and forming a mental representation of the text's content, cohesive devices serve a fundamental function in comprehension (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Research has demonstrated that the effective use of cohesive devices enhances the readability and comprehensibility of texts (Crossley, Kyle, & McNamara, 2016; McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy, 2010; T. Sanders & Pander Maat, 2006). One explanation is that these linguistic tools influence cognitive processes and memory, extending beyond textual connectivity. When readers encounter cohesive devices, they engage in a meaning-making process that contributes to constructing a coherent mental representation (Walter Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). This mental model facilitates more profound understanding and retention of information in memory.

Cohesive devices support integrating new information with prior knowledge and play a role in inference-making (Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004). Simultaneously, they reduce cognitive load, enabling readers to allocate more cognitive resources to higher-level comprehension processes (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). Therefore, identifying the impact of cohesive devices on reading comprehension can provide significant insights into reading instruction and educational practices.

Among cohesive devices, referential expressions are linguistic elements that establish connections between different points in the text and between the text and external concepts (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Referential expressions guide readers during the comprehension process by linking ideas within the text and eliminating linguistic redundancies. These references function both anaphorically (backward) and cataphorically (forward) (Ariel, 1990). Establishing links between the processed information and preceding or succeeding linguistic units contributes not only to the overall coherence and consistency of the text but also to the formation of a unified structure. Through referential processes, readers can easily track and integrate information across sentences and paragraphs (M. A Gernsbacher, 1990). Studies have shown that referential expressions enhance cognitive

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processing and memory usage during reading (Daneman & Carpenter, 1980; Gordon, Grosz, & Gilliom, 1993; W Kintsch, 1998; Nieuwland, Petersson, & Van Berkum, 2007). These findings highlight the critical role of referential expressions in ensuring semantic coherence and textual consistency. Consequently, clarifying the role of referential expressions in the comprehension process is essential.

Theoretical Background

Cohesive devices provide critical insights into how texts are processed during reading. Reading occurs through a dynamic interaction between textual features and cognitive processes. This interaction aims to derive meaning from the text and uses cohesive devices to maintain textual coherence (Hoey, 1991). The strategic use of cohesive devices enhances the organization of the text, improves the flow of information, and supports the reader's ability to integrate information from various parts of the text (Louwerse & Graesser, 2005). Readers construct mental representations of the text based on linguistic cues, which guide interpreting and comprehending the content (Werth, 1999).

This perspective aligns with the cognitive dimension of comprehension, as emphasized by Kintsch's construction-integration model (W Kintsch, 1998). This model highlights the role of textual coherence in facilitating the integration of new information with the reader's prior knowledge. Furthermore, empirical research underscores the multifaceted ways cohesive devices support comprehension. For instance, McNamara et al. (McNamara, Kintsch, Songer, & Kintsch, 1996) found that texts with high cohesion are particularly beneficial for readers with low prior knowledge, while Ozuru et al. (Ozuru, Dempsey, & McNamara, 2009) demonstrated that the effectiveness of cohesive devices varies depending on the reader's cognitive abilities and the complexity of the text.

These findings suggest considering both reader and text characteristics for adequate comprehension. In this context, adequately using referential expressions as a specific type of cohesive device represents one of the foundational aspects of textual understanding.

Referential Devices

Cohesive devices comprise ellipses, conjunctions, substitutions, and referential expressions. Referential expressions exhibit a complex structure and function that significantly influence the reading process. Structurally, referential devices include linguistic forms such as pronouns, demonstrative adjectives, and determiners, each fulfilling distinct roles in establishing textual cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 2014). Functionally, the operation of referential expressions during reading involves a dynamic process of either forward reference (cataphora) or backward reference (anaphora), depending on the position of the linguistic antecedent within the text. These processes prompt readers to engage in active cognitive operations to resolve the references (Garnham, 2001). This resolution is essential for maintaining coherence and constructing a mental representation of the text.

For instance, anaphoric references, which refer to previously mentioned entities, help maintain topic continuity and reduce cognitive load by eliminating redundancy (Morton Ann Gernsbacher, 1989). Cataphoric references, conversely, create expectations and direct the reader's attention toward upcoming information, enhancing engagement and comprehension (Gundel, Hedberg, & Zacharski, 1993; Kush & Dillon, 2021). These processes are integral to the cognitive responses elicited during reading.

Referential expressions contribute to comprehension beyond textual cohesion by influencing both the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of reading. The ability to effectively process referential expressions is closely linked to reading proficiency and comprehension (Daneman & Carpenter, 1980). Strategic use of referential expressions facilitates information integration, supports inferential reasoning, and ensures the production of a coherent mental representation of the text (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). Moreover, different referential processes activate distinct cognitive mechanisms, requiring readers to take an active stance toward the text. For example, Nieuwland and Van Berkum (Nieuwland & Berkum, 2008) found that readers exhibit different cognitive responses when processing pronouns referring to animate versus inanimate entities. Additionally, research has highlighted cross-linguistic differences in referential processing, emphasizing the need to understand referential expressions within specific linguistic contexts (Hickmann & Hendriks, 1999). These findings suggest that referential expressions serve a multidimensional function in reading.

Referential Processing in Reading

The accurate processing of cohesion relationships, including referential links, is critical for readers to develop a consistent and holistic understanding of textual content and to improve their reading skills. Studies indicate that proficient readers adept at recognizing and using referential relationships are better able to construct stable mental representations of texts and achieve higher levels of comprehension (McNamara et al., 2010). This is particularly important for understanding complex and challenging texts, where integrating new information with prior knowledge plays a pivotal role (Ozuru et al., 2009).

When referential relationships are accurately processed, inferential operations are supported, and higher-order

cognitive processes—such as critically evaluating key points in the text—are also facilitated (T. J. M. Sanders & Noordman, 2000). Furthermore, analysing cohesion relationships within a text has been shown to enhance memory retention of its content (W Kintsch, 1998) and foster the deep-thinking skills necessary for integrating new information with existing knowledge (Cain & Nash, 2011). As such, resolving referential connections aids in adapting textual knowledge to novel contexts (McNamara, 2004).

The recognition and use of referential devices and other cohesive elements play a vital role in improving reading skills and developing age and reading experience (Cain, Patson, & Andrews, 2005). Consequently, individual differences among readers influence their ability to process referential expressions effectively.

Cohesion processes involved in reading comprehension may vary according to individual characteristics. For example, from a gender perspective, it has been found that female students use referential cohesion devices and connectives more frequently and accurately compared to male students (Anjarsari Sudirman, 2013). Since referential processes encompass both linguistic and cognitive operations, research indicates a marked increase in the variety and frequency of cohesive devices employed in text production by children aged 12–15 (Berman & Verhoeven, 2002; Crowhurst, 1987). Similarly, individuals with higher reading frequency demonstrate excellent proficiency in establishing textual connections and using cohesive elements such as ellipses and anaphoric references, which correlates with their improved reading achievement (Cain & Nash, 2011; McNamara & Kintsch, 1996). These findings highlight the need to carefully assess student profiles in teaching cohesive devices and to adopt personalized instructional approaches.

This study aims to investigate the impact of referential cohesion on reading, revealing one dimension of the complex interplay between textual features and cognitive processes. Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate the role of resolving referential relationships in reading comprehension. As reading proficiency remains a critical determinant of academic success in knowledge-driven societies, identifying factors contributing to adequate comprehension has become increasingly vital (OECD, 2019). This research aspires to provide insights that can guide the development of interventions to improve reading comprehension skills through a text-centered approach.

The findings of this study, which examines the impact of referential cohesion on reading comprehension, could serve as a foundation for developing models related to text processing and understanding. Such models could have broad implications, including designing instructional materials, developing reading assessment tools, and creating adaptive learning technologies tailored to individual differences in referential processing abilities (McNamara et al., 2010).

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the participants' levels of success in identifying referential devices and their overall reading comprehension proficiency?
2. Does success in understanding referential devices predict reading comprehension ability?
3. Does participants' success in understanding referential devices differ based on the type of referential device?
4. Do participants' success in understanding referential devices and reading comprehension levels vary by gender, grade level, and frequency of reading books?

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Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach utilizing the correlational survey model to examine the relationship between the ability to analyze referential devices and reading comprehension success and the variation of these abilities across different variables. The correlational survey model is a research design used to determine relationships and their levels between two or more variables (Creswell, 2012).

Study Group

The study's participants consisted of 198 middle school students enrolled in the 2023–2024 academic year. Among these participants, 60 (30.3%) were sixth graders, 75 (37.9%) were seventh graders, and 63 (31.8%) were eighth graders. Care was taken to ensure a balanced distribution of participants across grade levels. Additionally, the sample included 109 female students and 89 male students. Table 1 provides details on the participants' reading frequency.

Table 1: Frequency of Book Reading Among Participants.

Title 1	Title 2	Title 3
Frequency	f	%
Every day	114	57.6
Once a week	58	29.3
Once a month	15	7.6
Once every six months	5	2.5
Never	6	3.0
Total	198	100

As shown in Table 1, 114 participants (57.6%) read books daily, 58 participants (29.3%) read weekly, 15 participants (7.6%) read monthly, 5 participants (2.5%) read once every six months, and 6 participants (3.0%) reported never reading books.

Data Collection Tools

Data for this research were collected using three distinct tools:

*Personal Information Form***.** This form collected demographic data to influence participants' performance in referential processing, such as gender, grade level, and frequency of book reading.

Reading Comprehension Achievement Test. This test, validated and deemed reliable by Bayat (Bayat, 2020), assesses reading skills. Designed based on expert feedback and using Yaşar Kemal's short story Avcı (The Hunter) to match the level of middle school students, the test comprises 21 multiple-choice items based on Bloom's revised taxonomy. Item difficulty indices ranged from 0.098 to 0.772, classifying four items as easy, 12 as moderately complex, and five as brutal. Analysis of item discrimination indices revealed nine items as highly discriminative, seven as well discriminative, and one as moderately discriminative.

Referential Success Test. This instrument was specifically developed to analyze referential cohesion devices in the same short story. The test categorizes referential devices into anaphoric, cataphoric, and exophoric references. Participants were asked to identify the entity to which each referential device was referred. The test includes 38 items, comprising 32 anaphoric references, four cataphoric references, and two exophoric references. The maximum score attainable on this test is 38.

Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted during the fall semester of the 2023–2024 academic year. Necessary permissions were obtained, and participants were informed about the study's objectives. The data collection instruments were administered during regular class hours. Sufficient time was provided for participants to complete the tests, and all necessary clarifications were made during the process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using statistical software. Normality tests were first conducted to determine the appropriate statistical tests. Parametric tests were applied for normally distributed data, while non-parametric tests were used for non-normally distributed data. Based on the specific research questions, the analyses included descriptive statistics, simple linear regression, Friedman Test, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, independent samples t-test, Mann–Whitney U test, Kruskal–Wallis test, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Findings

To address the sub-problem, "What is the proficiency level of participants in identifying referential devices and their reading comprehension levels?" descriptive statistics were conducted, and the results are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics of students' reading comprehension achievement test scores according to their grade levels.

As shown in Table 2, reading comprehension achievement scores increase with grade level. While the mean score for 6th-grade students is 12.95, this value increases to 13.63 in 7th grade and 14.52 in 8th grade. Standard deviation values are calculated as 2.574, 2.173, and 1.942 for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, respectively. This finding indicates that the most significant score variation occurs in the 6th grade. Additionally, both the minimum and maximum scores increase across grade levels.

Descriptive statistics for students' scores on the Referential Success Test are provided in Table 3.

According to Table 3, the mean score of 6th-grade students on the Referential Success Test is 31.45, while the mean scores for 7th and 8th grades are 31.08 and 31.95, respectively. Standard deviation values are 4.928 for 6th grade, 5.528 for 7th grade, and 4.817 for 8th grade. These results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Reading Comprehension Achievement.

	6th Grade	*7th Grade*	*8th Grade*
N	60	75	63
Mean	12,95	13,63	14,52
Std. Deviation	2,574	2,173	1,942
Minimum Score	5	8	9
Maximum Score	17	18	18

Table 3.: Descriptive Statistics for Referential Success Test.

	6th Grade	**7th Grade**	**8th Grade**
N	60	75	63
Mean	31,45	31,08	31,95
Std. Deviation	4,928	5,528	4,817
Minimum Score	11	13	15
Maximum Score	38	37	38

indicate that the 7th grade shows more scores variability than other grades.

To address the sub-problem, "Does referential comprehension proficiency predict reading comprehension skills?" a simple linear regression analysis was conducted.

The analysis results indicate that referential comprehension is a statistically significant predictor of reading comprehension achievement ($R=0.253$, $R^2=0.064$, $F(1, 214)=14.461$, $p=0.000$). A one-unit increase in referential comprehension proficiency results in a 0.107-unit increase in reading comprehension skills.

To address the sub-problem, "Does participants' referential comprehension proficiency differ according to the type of reference?" the Friedman Test was conducted. According to the test results, participants' referential comprehension proficiency shows a statistically significant difference depending on the reference type ($X^2=34.028$, $p=0.000$). The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was performed to determine which type of reference participants were more proficient at understanding. The results revealed a significant difference between anaphoric and cataphoric scores ($Z=-3.726$, $p=0.000$, $r=0.25$) and between anaphoric and exophoric scores ($Z=-2.805$, $p=0.005$, $r=0.19$). According to the test results, participants' comprehension proficiency for cataphoric references (median=1) was significantly higher than for anaphoric references (median=0.867). Similarly, participants' proficiency in comprehending exophoric references (median=1) was significantly higher than in comprehending anaphoric references (median=0.867).

The Mann-Whitney U Test was conducted to determine whether participants' referential comprehension proficiency differed statistically according to gender. The results indicated no statistically significant difference between the scores of male and female students ($U=5029.500$, $z=-1.650$, $p=0.099$).

The Kruskal-Wallis Test was performed to examine whether participants' referential comprehension proficiency differed statistically according to grade level. The test results indicated no statistically significant difference in referential comprehension proficiency based on grade level ($H(2)=1.071$, $p=0.585$).

The Mann-Whitney U Test was also conducted to determine whether participants' referential comprehension proficiency differed statistically according to their book-reading frequency. The test results revealed no statistically significant difference ($U=4788.000$, $z=-1.789$, $p=0.074$).

To determine whether participants' reading comprehension achievement differed statistically according to gender, an Independent Samples t-Test was conducted. The test results showed a statistically significant difference between the scores of male and female students ($t(214)=4.278$, $p=0.000$, $\eta^2=0.07$). Female students scored higher on average ($M=14.29$, $SD=2.059$) than male students ($M=12.99$, $SD=2.401$).

An ANOVA test examined whether participants' reading comprehension achievement differed statistically according to grade level. The results indicated a statistically significant difference in reading comprehension achievement based on grade level ($F(2, 213)=11.07$, $p=0.000$, $\eta^2=0.07$).

The results of the Tukey test were examined to identify the grade levels where differences occurred. The results showed that the mean reading comprehension achievement score of 8th-grade participants ($M=14.52$) was significantly higher than those of 6th-grade participants ($M=12.92$) and 7th-grade participants ($M=13.65$). Similarly, the mean score of 7th-grade participants ($M=13.65$) was significantly higher than that of 6th-grade participants ($M=12.92$).

To address the sub-problem, "Does participants' reading comprehension achievement differ based on their frequency of reading books?" an Independent Samples t-test was performed. The test results indicated that reading comprehension achievement differed statistically significantly according to the frequency of reading books ($t(214)=2.009$, $p=0.046$, $\eta^2=0.018$). Students reading books daily ($M=13.95$) scored higher in reading comprehension achievement than students in the other group ($M=13.31$).

Discussion

This study examines the relationship between referential cohesion tools comprehension and reading comprehension achievement and how these skills vary across different variables. Firstly, it has been determined that participants' referential comprehension proficiency significantly predicts reading comprehension achievement. This finding aligns with studies that show referential processes activate cognitive processes and play a critical role in comprehension achievement (Kendeou, van den Broek, Helder, & Karlsson, 2014; Charles Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Facilitating a coherent mental model by referential tools, which connect information units in the text (O'Reilly & McNamara, 2007), and their support for inferential processes can explain this phenomenon.

The predictive power of referential processing extends to different dimensions supporting textual comprehension. Oakhill et al (Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2014) highlight that constructing referential links aids in the holistic grasp of the text and activates prior knowledge. Additionally, eliminating redundancies through referential tools allows for more efficient use of cognitive resources (Rapp, Broek, McMaster, Kendeou, & Espin, 2007). Nation (Nation, 2019)

also emphasizes that accurate processing of referential links facilitates the transition from the surface structure to the deeper structure of the text.

Interestingly, fewer participants successfully solved anaphoric and exophoric references more than cataphoric ones. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that anaphoric references reduce cognitive load and ensure topic continuity (Gordon, Hendrick, & Johnson, 2001a). Furthermore, the ability of exophoric references to activate prior knowledge (Richter & Rapp, 2014) supports the comprehension process. The lower success rate in resolving cataphoric references can be attributed to the cognitive load created by the need for memory retention and backward scanning (Gordon, Hendrick, & Johnson, 2001b; Warren & Gibson, 2002). Resolving cataphoric references requires more substantial memory capacity and more effective use of working memory.

The differences in processing success across reference types are closely linked to each type's cognitive processes and functions. Perfetti and Adlof (C. Perfetti & Adlof, 2012) note that cataphoric references reduce memory load and organize information flow in the text, making them easier to process. Goldman et al (Goldman et al., 2016) emphasize how exophoric references facilitate the integration of new information with existing knowledge structures by activating prior knowledge. McCrudden and Kendeou (McCrudden & Kendeou, 2014) assert that anaphoric references require more complex cognitive processing, and the greater the distance between the antecedent and the reference element, the more complex the resolution becomes.

Participants' referential and reading comprehension achievement vary significantly based on demographic characteristics. Firstly, it has been observed that female students achieve higher reading comprehension scores compared to male students, although no significant difference is found in referential comprehension achievement. This finding aligns with studies indicating that female students are more successful in reading comprehension (Logan & Johnston, 2010; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012). Watson et al (Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010) attribute this difference to girls' more frequent and qualitatively better reading habits and the earlier development of language skills, contributing to higher reading comprehension achievement.

When examining reading comprehension by grade level, it was observed that reading comprehension achievement also improved as the grade level increased. In contrast, referential comprehension did not vary significantly by grade level. Similar findings in the literature indicate that reading comprehension increases with higher grade levels (Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Nunes, Bryant, & Barros, 2012; van Bergen, Vasalampi, & Torppa, 2021). This increase is attributed to students' growing educational experiences and age-related cognitive maturation (García & Cain, 2014). Conversely, the lack of differentiation in referential comprehension by grade level can be interpreted as this skill being more closely linked to the accurate use of textual cues and the effective execution of cognitive processes (Kendeou, McMaster, & Christ, 2016).

When examining reading comprehension based on the frequency of reading books, students who read daily demonstrated higher reading comprehension achievement than those in the other group. However, there was no significant difference in referential comprehension. This finding is consistent with studies showing that regular reading habits enhance reading comprehension (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Mol & Bus, 2011; Torppa et al., 2020). Regular reading habits are believed to develop cognitive processes and metacognitive skills (Spear-Swerling, Brucker, & Alfano, 2010), enrich vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998), and positively influence reading comprehension. However, the lack of a significant difference in referential processing based on reading frequency suggests that this skill is more closely related to language proficiency and cognitive abilities than simply reading frequency (Charles Perfetti & Stafura, 2014).

The findings of this study indicate that referential comprehension plays a crucial role in reading comprehension and that this skill does not significantly differ according to gender, grade level, or reading frequency. Therefore, as suggested by Van den Broek and Helder (van den Broek & Helder, 2017), it is essential to identify the core characteristics of referential processing skills and focus on enhancing them through instruction. Additionally, following the emphasis by McKeown et al. (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009), it is recommended to incorporate texts that utilize cataphoric and exophoric references more effectively in the instructional process, as these reference types positively influence reading comprehension.

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