

# Use and Relationship of Shell Nouns as Cohesive Devices in the Quality of Second Language Writing

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**Abstract**—The current study is a comparative analysis of the use of shell nouns as a cohesive device (CD) in an English for Second Language (ESL) setting in order to identify their use and relationship in the quality of second language (L2) writing. As these nouns were established to anticipate the meaning within, across or outside the text, their use has fascinated writing researchers. The corpus of the study included published articles from reputable journals and graduate students' papers in order to analyze the frequency of shell nouns using "highly prevalent" nouns in the academic community, to identify the different lexicogrammatical patterns where these nouns occur and to the functions connected with these patterns. The result of the study implies that published authors used more shell nouns in their paper than graduate students. However, the functions of the different lexicogrammatical patterns for the frequently occurring shell nouns are somewhat similar. These results could help students in enhancing the cohesion of their text and in comprehending it.

**Keywords**—Anaphoric-cataphoric, cohesive device, lexicogrammatical, shell nouns.

## I. INTRODUCTION

DESPITE the preponderant research on cohesion in a text, it continues to fascinate writing experts because of their complexity and evolving functions in academic writing. In fact,

"cohesion does not depend on a single item or class and is based on a complete set of relationships in a text which in turn communicate with the help of various overt and covert types of signals to attribute a text its meaningfulness" [2].

Thus, no research would ever claim that CDs are equal in importance with other types of devices in achieving proper communication. It is therefore, a focal point in many writing researches because there are many factors that can make a text quite different, as it may range from simple to complex. Some of these factors are described through "cohesion or ties and connections within the texts" [3] where cohesion is "the way certain words or grammatical features of a sentence can connect that sentence to its predecessors (and successors) in a text" [4]. This was emphasized by when it was posited that,

"To write cohesively means doing many things at once- wrestling with ideas, balancing form and function.... attending to syntax and diction" [5].

There are several types of CDs and one of these is nouns. Nouns may act differently from each other as they create ties in a text since they "can be employed interchangeably as lexical substitutes for other nouns with specific meaning" [1].

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Nouns, therefore, become one of the lexical items that rouse the interest of many researchers involved in the study and teaching of writing in the early 90s and they have been labeled as: *enumerative* [6], *signaling* [7] and *shell nouns* [8], [9], among others. Though these nouns are called differently by researchers, the concept behind them still remains the same [9]. For example, enumerative nouns (e.g. *advantage, aspect, class and consequence*) and resultative nouns (e.g. *finish, end, outcome and result*) function as referential markers that present new ideas (cataphoric) or refer back to the previous ideas discussed (anaphoric) [6]. Francis stated that cataphoric words allow "the reader to predict the precise information that will follow" and anaphoric words indicate to the reader

"exactly how that stretch of discourse is to be interpreted, and this provides the frame of reference within which the subsequent argument is developed" [10].

These nouns, therefore, create contextual ties between ideas in the text to help readers to collect information and comprehend the text. Another study sees coherence as the link between ideas that make the flow of thoughts meaningful and clear for readers [11]. It was therefore concluded that ESL students have higher frequency on sentence transitions when he studied their writing cohesion [6].

Another study examined their functions to signal in order to establish relationships or links across and within clauses to determine the background knowledge. He mentioned that previous studies on nouns as CD emphasized on cataphoric and anaphoric functions. Hence, he added one function to investigate on, which is the exophoric function [7]. The inclusion of exophoric function implies that signaling nouns have also been examined not just across or within the clauses, but also in their use in determining background knowledge since they are essential in the comprehension process [7].

A more recent study on nouns as CD was examined the structure and function of nouns as CD, which they called as shell nouns, in published articles and research articles written by international students. They found out that students used shell nouns differently from published articles/ authors. Hence, students have to be taught these nouns not only as vocabulary items but as a CD and they have to be exposed to the appropriate lexicogrammatical patterns to guide them in conveying the communicative purpose of their paper [9]. Another study, which is believed to have established the importance of shell nouns, concluded that "shell nouns are used as CD within text, and studying them and becoming familiar with their functions and patterns can help both learners and writers to comprehend and write better

respectively” [5].

Based on the aforementioned studies, it should be noted that knowing and using the different nouns as CD do not just ensure cohesiveness of a texts. They can also “enclose or anticipate the meaning of the preceding or succeeding discourse” [9]. Thus, it is not surprising that in their study, students used some of these nouns more frequently than published authors. The results “provide valuable information that can be directly applied to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction” since these nouns help them improve their ability to comprehend and recall information from the text they are reading [9].

Indeed the importance of nouns as CDs is undeniable, for shell nouns are the most frequently used word class in the English language [5]. Thus, this study wished to examine the cohesion of Filipino published articles and graduate students papers through the use of shell nouns and how they function in different lexicogrammatical patterns. The present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Which of Hinkel’s [1] “highly prevalent” nouns with cohesive function are frequently used in both published articles and graduate students papers?
2. Which of the lexicogrammatical patterns can be found in the most frequently used shell nouns?
3. How do these commonly used shell nouns function in different lexicogrammatical patterns as CDs?

#### A. Framework of the Study

This study adopted the structural and functional classification of shell nouns. In the structural analysis, the concept of four lexicogrammatical patterns,  $N + cl$ ,  $N + be + cl$ ,  $th + N$  and  $th + be + N$  [8], and five lexicogrammatical patterns, the + noun, a(n) + N, the + N + of, a(n) + N + of, the same + N, with their anaphoric and cataphoric referential positions in determining the behavior of shell nouns as CD [9] were employed.

In recent study on shell nouns, reference [9] used the lexicogrammatical pattern on the study by reference [8] of shell nouns in published and ESL writing; however, five more patterns were found and these patterns have not been identified before in the use of shell nouns [9]. Thus, the researchers incorporated these lexicogrammatical patterns in the current research since these patterns might likely emerge and can potentially broaden the scope on how shell nouns behave or function in the texts of published authors and graduate students. In the functional analysis, Schmid’s functional classification of the recurring shell nouns was adapted. These functions were

“the semantic function of characterizing complex chunks of information, the cognitive function of temporary concept-formation, and the textual function of linking these nominal concepts with clauses which contain the actual details of information” [9].

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study analyzed the usage and functions of shell nouns in Filipino published articles and graduate students papers

with topics on Education and Applied Linguistics. The researcher examined 10 published articles and 10 graduate students paper with a length of 15-30 pages in each article or paper. The former were taken from *Philippine ESL Journal* and *The Asia Pacific Education Researcher* which were published on the year 2005-2009 while the latter were collected from graduate students taking up Masters in Teaching English (MATEL) and Masters in English Education (MAELED). List of 35 “highly prevalent” abstract nouns [1] acting as a CD was used in analyzing published articles and graduate students papers.

A frequency count was conducted first to determine the most common shell nouns used in published articles and graduate students paper through the use of “Find and Replace” function of Microsoft word and the words that match the aforementioned nouns were highlighted for easier analysis. Some of the words that were highlighted function as a verb, proper noun or terminology were eliminated and nouns found in the tables or examples of articles or papers were eliminated. Therefore, a recount for each noun was done. In addition, nouns with exophoric functions were not included in the study for they did not “conceptually carry the content of the noun and/ or the noun phrase in the text” [9].

The five frequently occurring shell nouns in both published articles and graduate students papers were identified and categorized according to the nine lexicogrammatical patterns:  $N + cl$ ,  $N + be + cl$ ,  $th + N$  and  $th + be + N$  (Schmid, 2000), the + noun, a(n) + N, the + N + of, a(n) + N + of and the same + N [9] and for the final analysis of the data, the functions of shell nouns in [8], *characterization*, *temporary concept formation* and *linking*, were adapted in categorizing on how shell nouns behave in this particular study.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question was addressed and the results show that the prevalent shell nouns in published articles totaled 205, while the students’ papers have only about half of the published articles’ shell nouns. Additionally, the frequency distribution of shell nouns used by the published authors is distributed in various shell nouns compared to the frequency distribution of the graduate students. Though it is easy to suggest that authors in published articles are more familiar in using various nouns as CDs, it may also signify that authors in published articles may have already mastered organizing ideas between sentences that signals relationships among them. This skill allows the use of more CDs in order to form a unified whole. The summary is shown in Table I.

Published authors and graduate students may have different frequency in using shell nouns. However, it can be noted that both groups prefer the shell noun, *result*. This finding is quite similar to the results in the study of [7] and [9] on nouns as CDs. In their studies, the shell noun “result” is one of nouns with high frequency. Thus, the shell noun, *result*, is the most commonly used shell noun in the academic writing. However, the similarities end here, the rest of the nouns that are found in this study are totally different from the list of nouns with high occurrences in [7] and [9]. This may be attributed to the

reason that though the studies focused on academic writing, this present study solely focused on articles and student papers of teaching education and applied linguistics, while the other studies analyzed the different writing genres in the academic community.

TABLE I  
SUMMARY OF THE PREVALENT SHELL NOUNS FOUND IN PUBLISHED ARTICLES AND GRADUATE STUDENTS PAPERS

Shell nouns	Published articles		Graduate students papers	
result	34	15.12%	26	25.00%
form		2.93%	7	6.73%
type	17	8.29%	9	8.65%
task	14	6.83%		0.96%
subject		5.37%	10	9.62%
topic	19	9.27%	7	6.73%
item	20	9.76%		0.96%
TOTAL	101/205	49.27%	59/104	56.73%

In terms of the frequency distribution of shell nouns, published authors and graduate students frequently used any of the shell nouns in the patterns *the + noun* and *the + N + of*. Published authors and graduate students make use of the pattern *the + noun* over 50% and about 40%, respectively, of the total number of shell nouns found in both published articles and graduate papers. This pattern usually brings new information in the text and emphasis. They also make use of the pattern *the + N + of* approximately 25% of the total number of shell nouns the graduate students papers. The result on the preferred lexicogrammatical pattern by both groups is similar to the findings of [9] on frequently occurring patterns. Thus, it could be presumed that these two patterns are prevalent in academic writing. The third pattern that is regularly used by the published authors and graduate students is the *th + N* pattern.

It is worth mentioning that out of nine lexicogrammatical pattern, only seven patterns were used by the published authors and graduate students. The patterns *N + be + cl* and *th + be + N* were not found in either published articles or graduate students papers and this finding coincides with [9]. This contrasts the study of [5] which had *N+be+cl*, conveying cataphoric reference, in the published research articles in the field of Education. This is an interesting disparity since their study and the current research partly used the same type of corpus. A probable reason for this could be ESL students and even authors in the Philippines are not as accustomed with these two patterns.

With the use of functional analysis, it was found that published articles and graduate students papers have only three shell nouns in common out of five frequently occurring shell nouns in both texts. Accordingly, characterization is the use of shell nouns "to characterize a piece of experience in a general way", while relying on the context for details of information [9]. The lexicogrammatical patterns, *N+cl* and *N+be+cl*, belong with this function and these two patterns express cataphoric reference. Though in this study, *N+be+cl* was never used by either published authors or graduate students, but *N+cl* was used with the nouns *result* and *topic*.

However, only graduate students used the shell noun *topic*. Below are the examples from published articles and graduate students paper.

- The results that indicate improvement of students writing skills... (Published articles)*
- They also indicated in the results that the development from "simple knowledge of socio-linguistic principles for politeness (Students' paper)*
- The topic that they were discussing for them to practice their English communication skills. (Students' paper)*

Published authors used the noun *result* only once in this pattern, *N+cl*, while the graduate students never used the noun *result*; however, they employed the noun *topic* in this pattern. Seemingly, these two groups have their own preference in using shell nouns in cataphoric function. In addition, published authors and graduate students do not often make use of this lexicogrammatical pattern in their writing. The pattern *the + N + of* and was used by published authors and graduate students with noun *result*, *topic* and *type*, while *a(n) + N + of* was use only by the published authors with the noun *result*. Examples are shown below:

- the results of the current study are also in consonance with (author name) finding. (Published articles)*
- the types of cohesion used in the oral narratives between students (Students' paper)*

The aforementioned patterns have the attributes of the characterization function, as they add information on the noun phrase preceding it [9]. The high usage of the *+ N + of* may be because these two groups are more familiar and comfortable in using this pattern.

In terms of temporary concept-formation, it was claimed that this function is "created by the repeated use of a word to refer to a certain experience" [9]. In general, this function is integrated with characterizing the pattern *the + N + of*. An example is shown below:

*The results of the manual coding and counting of errors in college freshmen diagnostic essays are shown in order from the most frequent to the least frequent errors (Published articles).*

In the sentence above, the shell noun *result* refers to the manual coding and counting of errors in college freshman diagnostic essay, thus it creates added information to form a more stable concept. Among the three shell nouns, *result*, *topic* and *type*, only the shell noun *result* has a concept-formation function.

Linking is the interpretation of two linguistic elements which are dependent or related to each other [8]. The *th-N* is the pattern which is solely closely connected with this function [9]. Examples of this pattern from the shell nouns *result* and *topic* are given below:

- These results are consistent with earlier findings that bilinguals outperform their matched monolinguals in metalinguistic abilities. (Published articles)*
- They comprise more than half of the total obligatory occasions of each structure. This result could be attributed to the interference of the first language in the acquisition (Students' paper)*

- c. **This type** of cohesion is regarded by Halliday and Hasan as the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary. (Published articles)
- d. Writers may need to reduce using strong words like establish, cause and validate. **This type** can be achieved by making use of “soft” (Swales and Feak 1994, p. 87) verbs (Students’ paper)

The usage of *result* and *type* in texts with the pattern *th-N* in published authors and graduate students papers is similar. The nouns referred back to the previous sentences and created a relationship between sentences. In this type of function, it is worth mentioning that graduate students have a preference in using this pattern in creating a link between sentences and that both published authors and graduate students usually use the pattern *th-N* in supporting a claim or in making a claim. In the functional analysis of shell nouns as CD, one of the differences on the usage of shell nouns between published authors and graduate students are the number of shell nouns being used as CD and the

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the use of shell nouns as CD in published articles and graduate students papers revealed that published authors and graduate students used shell nouns in different lexico-grammatical patterns as CDs similarly though published authors used more shell nouns compared to graduate students and the frequency distribution of these shell nouns is scattered. A similar observation was posited when it was claimed that the field of education is concerned with lots of theories, methods and educational practices and implementing and applying methods and practices are often longitudinal and could be the reason for the frequent use of the word *processes* [5].

It may also be safe to imply that graduate students have to be more exposed to the different shell nouns as used in academic writing and to the usage of shell nouns as a CD, since they should be well thought-out in order to lessen the hasty use that might lead to difficulty in teaching it [12]. With the help of the lexico-grammatical patterns of these shell nouns, it will enhance the organization of their texts but then it should also be emphasized that this is only one type of lexical device [7]. Moreover, knowing the different shell nouns and their functions does not only bring benefits in writing, but it also benefits reading;

“Mature readers use cohesion in text and showed that the increase in the number of CDs, in turn, can improve readers’ comprehension” [13].

Thus, knowledge on lexical cohesion will result to better comprehension, whether in reading or writing, and a wrong or insufficient use of such may affect or break coherence in a text [14].

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