



COHESION AND COHERENCE IN LITERATURE REVIEWS OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS MPhil THESES AT GCUF: AN SFL-BASED STUDY

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Abstract

This exploratory case study investigates the realization of coherence and cohesion in the literature review sections of Applied Linguistics M. Phil theses at Government College University, Faisalabad (GCUF) as a representative case of postgraduate academic writing in the Pakistani university context. The study is based on the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) in relation to the theory of cohesion and Danes (1974) in relation to the theory of thematic progression as the theoretical models to analyse the construction of textual meaning by the postgraduate writers by using grammatical and lexical cohesive devices. A purposive sample of five M. Phil theses submitted to the Department of Applied Linguistics at GCUF from 2021 to 2022 was chosen. The theses were on various topics in Applied Linguistics, such as the relationship between vocabulary skills, metadiscourse, speech act analysis, and stylistic analysis. The sections on literature review were abstracted and analyzed for cohesive ties such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, and for patterns of thematic progression. The results show that the most frequent cohesive device is lexical cohesion, especially the exact repetition, while the substitution and ellipsis are barely used. The main means of achieving coherence are through the repeated patterns of constant theme progression; the most prevalent problems encountered involve abrupt topical shifts, formulaic conjunctive use, and source stacking. Given the exploratory nature of this single-institution case study (N=5), findings are preliminary and institution-specific. Replication across departments and universities in Pakistan is necessary before broader generalizations can be drawn. The study is significant for the academic writing pedagogy and thesis guidance at the postgraduate level in Pakistani universities.

Keywords: *Academic Writing, Applied Linguistics, Coherence, Cohesion, GCUF, Literature Review, MPhil Theses, SFL, Thematic Progression.*

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1. Introduction

Academic writing at the postgraduate level (especially in M. Phil thesis production) requires an advanced ability to build textual structure, follow disciplinary conventions, and craft rhetorical argumentation. One of the several parts of an M.Phil thesis that is especially important is the literature review section. It serves as a conceptual roadmap of the current scholarship on the topic, a critical appraisal of previous studies and a rationale justifying the current study. The quality of a literature review is strongly influenced by the writer's ability to produce a text that is coherent in communicative purpose, unified in argumentative structure, and cohesive through grammatical and lexical connections.

The task of writing a coherent and cohesive academic prose is difficult in Pakistan, as English is the medium of academic teaching and writing at the university level and the majority of postgraduate students are not native speakers of English. This challenge is explored here through a focused case study of one institution.

Writers need to learn and adhere to the conventions of an academic discourse community that may be partly unfamiliar, while building complex, multi-sourced arguments in a language in which their rhetorical resources are less developed than required by that community's conventions. As many studies on academic writing in Pakistan have shown at the undergraduate and early postgraduate levels, the outcome is often disorganized literature reviews that are formulaically structured, showing only some degree of genre awareness and limited control of the resources necessary for more sophisticated academic writing. Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF) is one of the leading public sector universities of Punjab, Pakistan and it has a well-established Department of Applied Linguistics, which generates a significant amount of M.Phil theses annually. Even so, there has been no systematic research examining the coherence and cohesion of M.Phil writing practices in Applied Linguistics at GCUF from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This is the task of the present study, which examines the literature review sections of five Applied Linguistics M.Phil theses from the Department of Applied Linguistics at GCUF (2021–2022).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Although there is a large body of literature on academic writing in Pakistani universities, systematic, SFL-based analyses of coherence and cohesion in M.Phil. literature reviews remain rare, and no such study has been conducted at GCUF specifically. No systematic, SFL-based analysis has been performed on these in Applied Linguistics at GCUF. According to the faculty observation at the department, there are repeated recurring problems among students in writing literature review, such as: a lack of coherent development of the topics, mechanical use of connecting words or phrases, a lack of synthesizing information from the sources into a coherent and argumentative framework, and abrupt transition from one topic to another and from one source to another (personal communication). From these observations, it can be inferred that the discourse competence of M.Phil writers at GCUF is still lacking.

Previous studies have offered valuable insights into the difficulties of academic writing in Pakistani universities (Haroon, 2013; Ali, Kazemian, & Mahar, 2015; Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016), but these studies did not specifically focus on GCUF, nor have they employed a fine-grained, SFL-based analysis of cohesive mechanisms in M.Phil literature reviews. The present study tackles this narrower gap.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following specific objectives:

1. To explore the range and distribution of cohesive devices employed in the literature review sections of the selected GCUF M.Phil theses using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy.
2. To analyze the thematic progression patterns in these literature reviews and assess their contribution to textual coherence and to identify recurrent coherence and cohesion challenges in the academic writing practices of M.Phil writers at GCUF.
3. To draw pedagogical implications for postgraduate writing instruction and supervision at GCUF, thereby contributing an exploratory institutional case study that can serve as a basis for comparative research across Pakistani universities.

1.3. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of cohesive devices are most frequently employed in the literature review sections of the selected GCUF M.Phil theses, and how are these distributed across Halliday and Hasan's (1976) five cohesive categories?
2. What thematic progression patterns predominate in these literature review sections, and how do these patterns contribute to or detract from textual coherence?
3. What recurrent challenges in coherence and cohesion characterize the academic writing practices of M.Phil writers in Applied Linguistics at GCUF?

1.4. Ethical Considerations

The five selected theses are publicly accessible records within the degree programme of Applied Linguistics at GCUF, and they were physically retrieved from the departmental library. Thesis writers did not provide any personal information. The roles of all writers are only identified by anonymous codes (T1–T5) for the entire analysis and reporting process. The study was carried out on the basis of the general principles of research ethics used in the analysis of publicly available academic texts. Consistent with GCUF's research ethics policy for text-only analysis of publicly archived student theses, formal IRB approval was not required; nonetheless, the anonymization protocol was applied as a precaution to ensure writers' privacy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics: Theoretical Overview

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (1985, 1994) is a social-semiotic theory of language developed mainly by Halliday, which views language as a tool for meaning-making

in social contexts. SFL is an approach to language that highlights the link between language, context and meaning-making, and assumes that each language choice is both constrained by and constrains the social context in which it is made (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). At the heart of SFL are three simultaneous metafunctions: ideational (the representation of experience), interpersonal (the enacting of social relationships), and textual (the organising of the message into coherent discourse). The textual metafunction is of foremost importance for the present study since it is via this dimension of meaning that cohesion and coherence are realised most directly. In the textual metafunction, Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal work *Cohesion* marked the beginnings of a systematic taxonomy of cohesive devices, which are grammatical and lexical patterns that develop linkages between the parts of a text, thereby creating a cohesive texture. They have the basic idea that a text is not simply a series of sentences but a semantic unit whose constituents are related semantically rather than syntactically. As such, texts require relations that traverse sentence boundaries; these relations do not exist in the syntactic structure of individual sentences but in the semantics of the text as a whole.

2.2. Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion Taxonomy

Halliday and Hasan (1976) identified five major types of cohesive devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Reference involves the use of personal pronouns, demonstratives (this, that, these, those), and comparatives (the same, similar) to refer to entities within the text (anaphoric or cataphoric) or beyond the text (exophoric). Substitution involves replacing a linguistic item with a pro-form (one, ones, do, does, so, not). Ellipsis is the null variant of substitution: it is the omission of a presupposed element rather than its replacement. The conjunctions add an additive (furthermore/moreover), adversative (however/nevertheless), causal (therefore/consequently), and temporal (then/subsequently) relationship between clauses and sentences. Lexical cohesion, the most widespread category in academic writing, comes in many forms: reiteration (repetition, synonymy, superordination, general noun) and collocation (semantic co-occurrence of associated lexical items). Later researchers have added to and elaborated on this taxonomy: Hoey (1991) identified lexical patterning as one of its main mechanisms of text organization, whereas Martin and Rose (2003) developed an extensive discourse semantic framework that complements Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy.

2.3. Coherence and Thematic Progression

Cohesion refers to the formal, surface-level connections within a text achieved through grammatical and lexical devices, while coherence refers to the global property of a text being unified by a communicative purpose and perceived as meaningful by readers. In a dense, cohesive text, the cohesive devices are well distributed, but if they are not connected to a single communicative goal, then the text will not cohere (Carrell, 1982). Coherence (Danes, 1974; Halliday, 1994) is analyzed in SFL by means of the pattern of how Theme and Rheme connect across clause boundaries. The theme is the starting point of the clause, and the Rheme is the

new information that is developed or elaborated. Danes (1974) distinguished three main types of theme patterns: the linear theme pattern (where the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the next); the constant theme pattern (where the same Theme is repeated in successive clauses); and the derived theme pattern (where successive Themes are derived from a larger hyperrheme). Balancing the use of these patterns is important for coherence: too many theme patterns will lead to a repetition of effects and may lead to an argumentative development that is static, while an adequate mixture of these patterns will lead to a dynamic and progressive argumentative development.

2.4. Academic Writing in Pakistani Universities

These challenges of academic writing have been documented in Pakistani universities at all levels of education. Haroon (2013) studied cohesion in the essays of undergraduates and established that there was overreliance on lexical repetition and underuse of grammatical cohesive devices. Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015) examined the rhetorical structure of research articles in Pakistani journals and found that research articles do not follow the three-move CARS model as proposed by Swales (1990). Fareed, Ashraf and Bilal (2016) carried out a detailed investigation to find out the problems associated with ESL writing among the students of universities in Pakistan, and problems of coherence and cohesion were highlighted by them among the problems. The studies were not done specifically in GCUF, but they set a trend in the academic writing challenges in Pakistani universities, which can be placed in the light of the present findings. Other studies in EFL from other South and Southeast Asian countries offer valuable comparative insights: for example, Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015) identified that Vietnamese M.Phil writers tend to use constant theme patterns. Lexical repetition with fewer references and conjunctions was observed by Cao and Hu (2014) as more frequently used in theses written by Chinese writers compared with those by English-first-language writers.

2.5. The Literature Review as Genre

The genre-analytic framework of Swales (1990, 2004), in particular the Create a Research Space (CARS) model, is an important macro-level tool for the analysis of the rhetorical structure of literature reviews. According to the CARS model, there are three key moves: Establish Territory, Establish a niche, and Occupy a niche. Kwan (2006) adapted Swales' definition of literature review sections of applied linguistics doctoral theses in Hong Kong and found that applied linguistics literature reviews varied in terms of their degree of rhetorical sophistication and that there were a variety of citation functions, including reporting, forwarding, countering, and synthesizing. As the results of her research indicate, the quality of literature review is closely related to the writer's knowledge of the mechanisms used in the literature in order to build an argumentative framework, which is the dimension that is studied in the current study.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on two complementary theoretical frameworks. The primary analytical framework for the micro-level analysis of cohesion is provided by Halliday and Hasan's (1976) five categories taxonomy: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion, and is complemented by Martin and Rose's (2003) discourse semantic model for the analysis of global cohesive patterns. Secondly, Danes' (1974) model of thematic progression, which was developed in SFL by Fries (1994) and Thompson (2014), is used to analyse the coherence of information flow and discourse organization. Using Halliday's (1994) criteria, the first experiential element of each declarative clause is considered as theme, and the first experiential element of each declarative clause may be preceded by any number of textual themes (conjunctive adjuncts) and/or interpersonal themes (modal adjuncts). Three types of thematic progression are discussed: linear, constant, and derived (Danes, 1974). They are linked to Swales' (1990, 2004) genre analytic model so as to allow for a multi-level analysis covering micro-level cohesion mechanisms and macro-level rhetorical purposes in the literature review genre.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design, which draws on the tradition of corpus-based discourse analysis. There are two types of analysis used: qualitative (using interpretive texts) and quantitative (frequency-based), with the frequency-based data giving a systematic and comparable distribution of cohesive devices and thematic patterns within the corpus, while the qualitative analysis by close reading of representative extracts in the texts gives interpretive depth. The use of these approaches is similar to what is typical in SFL-based corpus discourse analysis (Biber, Connor and Upton, 2007). As a single-institution case study with a purposive sample of five theses, this research is exploratory rather than generalizable. The findings represent a snapshot of writing practices within a specific departmental context and are intended to generate hypotheses for larger-scale investigations.

4.2. Corpus and Data Collection

The corpus consists of the literature review sections of five M.Phil theses in Applied Linguistics, physically accessed from the departmental library of GCUF during 2021–2022 (see Table 1). The five theses selected form a thematically diverse corpus, which lessens, albeit not completely, the effect of topic-specific lexical patterning on the overall results, and include the following categories: vocabulary and language skills, metadiscourse, speech act analysis, and stylistic/metaphor analysis. To ensure anonymity of the writers, each thesis was given a code (T1–T5). The literature review corpus is approximately 18,000–22,000 words combined.

4.3. Data Sources: GCUF M.Phil. Theses Analyzed

The following five M.Phil. theses, physically accessed from the departmental library of Applied Linguistics at GCUF, constitute the data corpus of this study. The theses were analyzed solely for textual features; no personal data were collected, and all writers are identified by anonymized codes (T1–T5) in accordance with standard research ethics practice.

Code	Author	Title	Reg. No.	Year
T1	Mir Muhammad	The Relationship Between Receptive Vocabulary Size and Receptive Language Skills: A Study of IELTS Test Takers in Pakistan	2019-GCUF-01118	2021
T2	Arbia Abdullah	The Relationship Between Vocabulary Depth and Argumentative Essay Writing Proficiency Among IELTS Test Takers in Pakistan	2020-GCUF-01155	2022
T3	Warda Eman	Gender Differences in the Use of Interactive Metadiscursive Features in Pakistani English Newspapers: A Corpus-Based Study	2016-GCUF-02332	2022
T4	Arfan Ahmad	An Analysis of Speech Acts Used in Pakistani Parliamentary Discourse	2020-GCUF-01131	2022
T5	Arslan Abbas	Metaphorical Constructions in My Seditious Heart by Arundhati Roy: An Ideo-Stylistic Analysis	2020-GCUF-01058	2022

Table 1: GCUF M.Phil. Applied Linguistics Theses — Data Corpus

5. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was carried out in three steps. All annotations were conducted manually by the researcher, with each cohesive device and thematic pattern identified through close reading and marked on printed copies of the texts. In stage 1, cohesive devices were identified and categorized according to Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy (1976), and each type and subtype of cohesive devices was counted for its frequency. The Theme and Rheme of each declarative clause were identified in accordance with Halliday (1994)'s criteria, and the thematic progression patterns were mapped within paragraphs based on the criteria of Danes (1974) for Stage 2. During Stage 3, some extracts from the corpus were chosen for qualitative analysis in order to demonstrate the important patterns and problems found in the quantitative stages.

6. Findings

6.1. Distribution of Cohesive Devices

Table 2 presents the overall distribution of cohesive devices across the five literature review sections.

Cohesive Category	Mean %	Range (%)	Most Common Sub-type	Example from Corpus
Lexical Cohesion	53.1	45.2–62.4	Reiteration (exact repetition)	'discourse'...'discourse analysis'...'discourse features' (T3)
Reference	27.9	21.3–34.7	Anaphoric personal (they, it, these)	'researchers...they argue' (T1, T2, T4)

Conjunction	14.3	9.8–20.1	Additive (furthermore, moreover)	'Furthermore, Halliday (1994) argues...' (T3, T5)
Substitution	2.8	0.5–5.1	Nominal (one/ones)	Rare; mainly in T3 and T5
Ellipsis	1.9	0.3–3.8	Verbal ellipsis	Very rare across all five theses

Table 2: Distribution of Cohesive Devices Across the GCUF Corpus (T1–T5)

Lexical cohesion is the most prevalent cohesive category in the five theses, with a mean of 53.1% of the cohesive ties. The strong terminological orientation of the literature reviews is also indicated in this manner, as all five theses use important technical terms — vocabulary, discourse, speech acts, metaphor, metadiscourse — over and over again in the literature review section, keeping the topics of the literature review consistent. Anaphoric personal reference (they, it, these) is the most common cohesive tie, accounting for a mean of 27.9% of the ties in reference accounts. In T3, T4 and T5, the demonstrative reference serves as an encapsulating device, such as 'This suggests that...', 'These findings indicate...', which allows one to thematise the preceding cited material. Cohesive ties include conjunctions, which make up 14.3%, with additive conjunctions being the most common type in all five theses. Cohesive devices of substitution and ellipsis have been categorized separately. These types are found in less than 5% of the cohesive ties, which is in line with previous studies conducted by Haroon (2013) and Hinkel (2001) in L2 academic writing. It should be noted that the relative rarity of the substitution/ellipsis phenomenon in academic literature reviews is partly genre-appropriate; lexical repetition means that the student will be able to detect ambiguity when following multiple sources later in the review, and it is therefore not always a lack or a failure per se, but a cause of verbosity in the present corpus.

6.2. Thematic Progression Patterns

Table 3 presents the distribution of thematic progression patterns across the five theses.

Theses	Author / Topic	Constant Theme %	Linear Theme %	Derived Theme %	Coherence Assessment
T1	Mir Muhammad (Receptive Vocabulary & IELTS)	69	22	9	Moderate
T2	Arbia Abdullah (Vocabulary Depth & Writing)	71	20	9	Moderate
T3	Warda Eman (Metadiscourse & Newspapers)	52	35	13	Good
T4	Arfan Ahmad (Speech Acts & Parliament)	74	18	8	Weak–Moderate

T5	Arslan Abbas (Metaphor & Stylistics)	55	32	13	Good
Mean	—	64.2	25.4	10.4	—

Table 3: Thematic Progression Patterns Across GCUF Corpus (% of clauses per text)

Note: Coherence Assessment ratings were assigned by the researchers based on the balance of thematic progression patterns within each text: Good = relatively balanced distribution of constant, linear, and derived themes, with linear progression $\geq 30\%$; Moderate = predominantly constant theme with some linear progression (20–29%); Weak–Moderate = high constant theme dominance ($\geq 70\%$) with minimal linear and derived patterns (<20% combined).

The constant theme pattern is dominant in all five theses with a mean value of 64.2%, which is an elaboration of the same theme for several consecutive clauses without the change of the theme with new material. T3 and T5 had the most balanced distribution and were considered the most coherent texts, with more linear theme progression. T4 has the greatest percentage of constant theme pattern and the least percentage of linear and derived patterns. The theme pattern for which the least number of occurrences can be found in all five theses is the derived theme pattern (mean 10.4%). M.Phil writers at GCUF have yet to internalise the conventions of academic literature reviews, which are organised in terms of paragraphs – where the topic sentence introduces a hypertheme developed through specific sub-themes.

6.3. Coherence Challenges: Qualitative Analysis

Three recurrent coherence challenges were identified across the corpus. Based on the frequency of problematic clause sequences identified during manual annotation, abrupt topical transitions accounted for a mean of 32.2% of coherence-disrupting instances, formulaic conjunction use for a mean of 26.8%, and source stacking for a mean of 25.7%. These challenges are discussed qualitatively below.

6.3.1. Abrupt Topical Transitions

The most common coherence problem is a sudden change of topic or source (new topic or source at paragraph shifts without enough signposting/bridging). It is especially noticeable in paragraphs T1 and T4, where new paragraphs often start with a quotation from a new source, which is not related to the thought about which the previous paragraph was written. From an SFL perspective, this means that the information presented in a new paragraph is not managed using the Given/New information structure and that the Theme in the opening clause of a new paragraph provides information that is totally new to the preceding paragraph's Rheme, thus increasing the interpretive load on the reader.

6.3.2. Formulaic Conjunction Use

In T2 and T4, the frequent use of additive conjunctions as default continuative markers rather than as functional indicators of logical relations is most striking. In these texts, additive conjunctions are used at the start of about 40-50% of all non-opening sentences, and form a 'false' sense of cohesion without providing the logical links intended. This result is in line with what Crossley, Kyle, and McNamara (2016) have found: that the overuse of explicit

connectives can be indicative not only of their lower writing quality but also of their lack of principle in using explicit connectives to organise discourse.

6.3.3. Source Stacking

In particular, there are instances in which the citations from different sources are presented consecutively without synthesizing them, which are referred to as source stacking (T1, T2, and T4). Often, paragraphs are made up of multiple reporting sentences, with one reporting sentence referencing a different source, and no analytical commentary linking the sentences to each other. The end product is a literature review that collects literature, but does not make an argument — as Kwan (2006) has called it: a 'list-like' instead of 'argument-driven' literature review. As far as Halliday's metafunctions are concerned, source stacking can be linked to the predominance of the reporting processes in the ideational metafunction over evaluative and mental processes.

7. Discussion

The findings of this exploratory case study should be interpreted within the boundaries of its institutional scope. While the patterns observed align with broader trends in L2 academic writing research as reported in previous studies (Cao & Hu, 2014; Haroon, 2013), the specific frequencies and distributions reported here are likely influenced by local pedagogical practices, supervisory expectations, and the particular disciplinary subfields represented in the corpus. The overall results of this study are generally in line with the previous studies conducted on cohesion and coherence in L2 academic writing. The results of lexical cohesion dominance, namely exact repetition, are consistent with the findings of Cao and Hu (2014) with Chinese writers and Haroon (2013) with the Pakistani undergraduate students. The constant theme patterns found in the study (mean 64.2%) are consistent with Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015), who also found high percentages of constant theme patterns (65–74%) in Vietnamese master's theses. The high percentage of constant theme patterns among M.Phil writers suggests that this may be a cross-linguistic feature of L2 postgraduate writing in South and Southeast Asian EFL contexts. A high percentage of linear theme progression in T3 and T5 is correlated with high overall coherence assessments, which lends some support to Fries' (1994) theoretical argument that the theme progression of linear is a primary element of the overall coherence of the argument in academic discourse.

The topical shifts (abrupt shifts in topic), formulaic conjunctions (repetitive conjunctions), and the use of source stacking (the use of multiple sources in one sentence) all indicate limited genre knowledge among M.Phil writers. These challenges indicate that writers have yet to fully internalize the discourse organizing principles of the literature review genre, which are: that it is not a descriptive summary; that it requires writers to engage with the cited texts; and that it requires writers to use the text(s) to develop a progressive intellectual argument. It is important to note the differences between the more coherent texts (T3 and T5) and T1, T2 and T4. The authors of T3 and T5 show greater thematic evolution patterns, more conjunction selection, and more effective use of demonstrative reference as an encapsulating

device. The reasons for this may be attributed to the differences in supervisors' feedback, prior exposure to genre models, or the influence of the specific disciplinary sub-fields (the disciplines of discourse analysis and stylistics would be closer to the metalinguistic concerns of the study itself), which would have to be determined with complementary methodologies.

8. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

8.1. Summary of Findings

This exploratory case study has examined the literature review sections of five Applied Linguistics M.Phil. theses from GCUF (T1--T5, 2021--2022) using an SFL-based analytical framework, offering a detailed snapshot of cohesion and coherence practices at one Pakistani institution. The key findings are: (1) Lexical cohesion, specifically reiteration through exact repetition, is the most dominant type of cohesion (mean 53.1%); (2) The second most dominant type of cohesive device is reference (mean 27.9%) with anaphoric personal and demonstrative reference predominating; (3) Conjunction is the third largest cohesive device (mean 14.3%) with a clear predominance of additive conjunction; (4) Substitution and ellipsis are significantly underused (mean < 5%); (5) The dominant thematic pattern is constant theme progression (mean 64.2%); and (6) Recurrent coherence problems include abrupt topical shift (mean 32.2%), formulaic conjunction (mean 26.8%) and source stacking (mean 25.7%).

8.2. Pedagogical Implications

The results have implications for teaching academic writing in GCUF and other Pakistani universities and for supervising theses. First, postgraduate writing courses need to expressly teach the range of cohesive devices, and to pay special attention to those which are not being used: ellipsis, substitution, and the more sophisticated types of lexical cohesion, collocation and superordination. Second, explicit consideration of theme progression as a tool to develop arguments should be included in instruction so that writers learn how the contribution of theme progression to coherence or lack of it can be used to further develop arguments. Third, supervisors at GCUF should be supported to create feedback practices to address discourse-level organization, not just content and argumentation. The five GCUF theses examined in this study could be used as the basis for teaching materials, with appropriate anonymization and institutional ethics approval for pedagogical use, so that students can gain critical metalinguistic awareness by analyzing texts produced in their own institutional context.

8.3. Limitations and Future Research

The present study is limited due to the small number of these (five) and the single department and institution. Findings are not universal in their application to other institutional contexts; they need to be investigated further. Future studies could be expanded to include more theses from other cohorts and departments. Longitudinal studies of writers' cohesive competence over successive drafts would give insights into postgraduate academic writing development. Comparative analyses of the challenges identified in different disciplines, such as Applied Linguistics and English Literature, would add to the illumination of the nature of the challenges, either discipline-specific or general.

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