Abstract

This paper reviews past studies on how students create textual cohesion using metadiscursive nouns. Although it is mostly established that English metadiscursive nouns have some kind of discourse marking role, it is not known to what extent the notion is applicable to student writing. All the studies reviewed broadly use the Hallidayan notion of cohesion. They include correlations between text quality and the use of cohesive items, eclectic approaches combining other notions of cohesion, and the use of specific types of metadiscursive nouns such as carrier nouns and shell nouns. The studies cover different L1s and have different aims and methodologies. A combination of these findings shows features of textual cohesion in student writing created by metadiscursive nouns and other cohesive devices.

Keywords: textual cohesion, discourse markers, lexical vagueness, abstract nouns, metadiscursive nouns

1. Introduction

Metadiscursive nouns are abstract nouns that can play the role of pronouns or demonstratives in discourse due to their referencing role in which meaning can be recovered. The theoretical roots of metadiscursive nouns are in the lexical notion of vocabulary proposed in Halliday and Hasan (1976). The discourse roles of these nouns are proposed under varied names (e.g. Vocabulary 3, enumeratives, anaphoric nouns, advance labels, carrier nouns, and shell nouns), each of which emphasises different aspects of the role (e.g., identifying functional segments of text structures, summarizing preceding discourse, starting a new topic for succeeding discussion). The descriptions of these features are based on findings in published papers or media discourse and are at a theoretical and descriptive level. This raises the question of whether and to what extent these notions are applicable to student writing, particularly in second language writing contexts. The present paper reviews past studies investigating this aspect of vocabulary use.

As the theoretical basis of metadiscursive nouns comes from the model of general nouns in Halliday and Hasan (1976) this review follows developments in the authors’ theory of cohesion. After defining the notion of cohesion and the cohesion framework proposed by Halliday and Hasan empirical studies that tested the framework for the assessment of the quality of student writing (hereafter SW and SWs for student writers) are
reviewed, where both native speakers’ (NSs) and non-native speakers’ (NNSs) writing are included. This is followed by an examination of studies that take a more eclectic approach to the cohesion features in SW and the use of major types of metadiscursive nouns in SW. The paper concludes with a summary of findings on L1 and L2 student use of metadiscursive nouns and identifies areas of further research.

2. The Hallidayan notion of cohesion and a cohesion framework

Traditional English linguistics is concerned with rules or patterns that underlie the use of words, phrases, clauses and sentences, and accordingly with correct or incorrect use of language (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In the 1980s, attention shifted to cohesion by emphasising ‘actual instances of communicative action in the medium of language’ (Johnstone, 2008: 2). Probably because of the dominant traditions of a grammatical description of English cohesion studies were initially used to explain sentence-to-sentence connections (Harris, 1952, in Cook, 1989). Currently, however, cohesion is understood as meaning-based connections and Halliday and Hasan were early proponents of this notion of cohesion. They identified linguistic devices that can create meaning-based connections in text, and their cohesion framework allowed a major shift in the teaching of English writing, from the correct use of language to the cohesiveness of texts. Another consideration in creating cohesion in a text is a given social and psychological context. Linguists supporting this view (e.g., Carrell, 1982; Johns, 1986) argue for the importance of readers’ background knowledge, or schemata, to understand the kind of meaning which gives cohesion to a sequence of sentences. The focus in the present study, however, is on the former type of cohesion: linguistic descriptions of English language that mostly disregard social and cultural aspects of language use.

3. Correlations between the use of cohesion devices and writing quality

The Halliday and Hasan cohesion framework has been mostly applied to assess the quality of student essays. This may be because a continuing interest of researchers working with SW is to find out what internal characteristics of essays can distinguish their overall quality. The use of Halliday and Hasan’s cohesive items in SW has been investigated in diverse contexts (e.g., length of essays, student L1s, target cohesive devices). Traditional grammar-focused investigations of SW have yielded no satisfactory results, with writing ranked low having more errors but with no significant differences in syntax features between different levels of essays (Witte & Faigley, 1981: 189). The results of studies that tested the Halliday and Hasan cohesion framework are not conclusive either. Some studies find that an increased use of cohesive items is related to higher quality (Witte & Faigley, 1981; Jafarpur, 1991; Jin, 2001; Liu & Braine, 2005) but others find no significant relationship between them (Nold & Fleedman: 1977; Evola, Mamer & Lentz, 1980; Tierney & Mosenthal, 1983; Connor, 1984; McCulley, 1985; Crowhurst, 1987; Neuner, 1987; Allard & Ulatowska, 1991; Field & Oi, 1992; Johnson, 1995).
1992; Zhang, 2000; Castro, 2004; and, Chen, 2008). Some attribute non-correlation to schema theories (Carrell, 1982; Johns, 1986; Chen, 2008), arguing that the number of ties alone is not a reliable indicator of the quality of writing but rather that it is a reader’s background knowledge of a text and of the writer’s purpose that make written discourse coherent (Chen, 2008: 104).

Halliday and Hasan’s notion of cohesion also has the idea of text-spans, which refers to the number of sentences between cohesive items and referred items (1976: 339), and this notion can also be applied to investigate a correlation with the quality of student essays. However, such studies show no conclusive results either. Some, such as Witte and Faigley (1981: 196), find statistically significant differences between the distance of text span and quality of essays. They consider that immediate cohesive ties are a sign of good writing because students try to remain longer on a topic using strong cohesive bonds that extend and modify the topic. Others, such as Johnson (1992) and Zhang (2000), do not find clear differences between the two factors. For them, remote ties are as important in organising and linking chunks of ideas as immediate ties that create strong bonds (Zhang, 2000: 73).

3-1. Features of the use of cohesion devices in student writing

Studies that investigated the use of cohesion items in relation to the quality of SW have not found any clear correlations between the items and quality of writing but they have identified some tendencies in student use of cohesion devices. One is the use of vague referents through the use of grammatical referencing devices. For example, Zhang (2000) claims that the demonstrative it does not have an explicit referent or agreement with immediate previous text in SW. Another feature of SW is a limited range of lexical items despite the larger number of total lexical ties. This is mainly because many items are merely repetitions of the same word and other types of lexical devices (e.g., synonym, antonym and hyponym) are rarely used (Witte & Faigley, 1981: 197-198). A third feature of SW is an overuse of conjunctions as highlighted in many studies on NNS writing (Field & Oi, 1992; Milton & Tsang, 1993; Bolton, Nelson & Hung, 2002) which are mostly independent from Halliday and Hasan’s cohesion framework. A wider range of conjunctions used by NNSs is also reported with NNSs using conjunctions that NSs seldom use (Field & Oi, 1992: 23). These features can partly explain argumentation patterns found in SW. Witte and Faigley (1981: 198) point out that lexical repetition and a lack of lexical range indicate that student essays have little expansion and elaboration of ideas in discourse; and Chen (2008: 94) states that frequent conjunctions may suggest the creation of surface logicality without logical relations.
4. Eclectic approaches to metadiscursive nouns

There are some studies that are concerned with the use of general nouns and metadiscursive nouns, though they do not specifically follow Hallidayan or other functional approaches or any particular linguistic theories. Mojica (2006), for example, investigates general nouns as ‘text-structuring’ words in an eclectic approach combining Halliday and Hasan (1976), Carter and McCarthy (1988), Salkie (1995) and Liu (2000). Hinkel (2001) and Hinkel (2003) are other examples investigating general nouns from this type of linguistic approach.

4-1. Use of enumerative and resultative nouns: Hinkel (2001)

Using a corpus of five different L1 student essays (Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Arabic, and English), Hinkel (2001) investigates the use of two types of metadiscursive nouns with reference to their discourse marking roles. These are enumerative and resultative nouns. Enumeratives refer to nouns that can mark the elaboration and clarification which is to follow (Quirk, et al., 1985, in Hinkel, 2001) and resultative nouns function as the completion or summary of a process, activity or event (Tadros, 1994, in Hinkel, 2001: 118, 127). The results suggest that NS writers use these noun types more frequently than NNS writers (Hinkel, 2001: 126) and that NSs use these types of nouns for the purpose of generalization-marking. For example, in the following extract:

If you are a student, perhaps you have a lot of facts related to grades in your school days. I have a lot of facts related to grades, too. When I was a university student in Korea, I studied hard for some courses to give me an advantage in grades, but I didn’t study hard for some courses, and they gave me a problem. (Hinkel, 2001: 127)

The enumerative nouns facts, advantage, and problem are used without any elaboration. In the extract below the resultative nouns, result and outcome play a limited summative role and give limited contextual information which could describe how or why such a result or outcome is obtained:

In Indonesia, a lot of parents supply their children with a lot of money without good judgment what the money is for. This creates the result of many young generations who spend their time drinking and gambling. They don’t think about their future with a terrible outcome. This causes not only a gap between the older and younger generation, but also between the rich and the poor. (Hinkel, 2001: 127)

Hinkel points out that vague referents in NNS writing leave the reader with the task of inferring the circumstances that lead to the result or outcome (2001: 128), and that this is relatively rare in NS essays or
published academic texts in English.


Hinkel (2003) investigates ‘vague nouns’ as sources of vagueness and simplicity in NNS essays which contribute to the poor rating of their essays (Vaughan, 1991; Reid, 1993). For Hinkel, vague nouns are all-inclusive general meaning nouns which are ‘almost always dependent on the contexts where they are used’ and refer to ‘objects, concepts and events that are not well defined and have few clear-cut lexical boundaries in the nonlinguistic world’ (Channel, 1994, in Hinkel, 2003: 283). In the classification of Lyons (1977), they include first-order entities that have fairly constant perceptual properties (e.g., people, student); second-order entities representing events, processes and situations (e.g., learning, occurrence); and third-order entities representing concepts or ideas (e.g., affairs, maturity). Hinkel also analyses ‘general nouns’ in SW with reference to syntactic patterns containing combinations of be-verbs and public/personal/expecting verbs. These express uncertainty, indirectness or mental states and are frequent in conversational discourse and social interaction (ibid: 284).

Results show that NNSs use vague nouns and uncertainty verbs (e.g., think, understand, feel) in repetitions much more frequently than NSs but within a restricted lexical repertoire (ibid: 292). Also, NNSs make significantly more use of be-verbs combined with adjectives where adjectives express the writer’s evaluation. For example: A teacher and students must be serious and diligent or The lesson is enjoyable. Referring to Lee and Scarcella (1992), Hinkel (ibid: 295) points out that when using these patterns a writer’s position or counter-position is expressed by personal preferences and expectations without an explanation of reasons why such a position is taken. Such argument patterns hamper the production of elaborate and detailed descriptions that should be expressed in university-level essays. NS essays use less vague nouns, more abstract nouns, and significantly less be-verbs combined with adjective patterns. NS writers can account for propositions or objections with a variety of alternative nouns, verbs, and syntactic patterns.

5. Use of metadiscursive nouns in student writing

Metadiscursive nouns are categorised into two general types: ones that focus on functional segments in text patterns, as represented by Winter’s Vocabulary 3 (1977); and others that focus on discourse shifts by setting up a relation between two parts of a discourse without an association with any particular discourse pattern. These are represented by anaphoric nouns, carrier nouns and shell nouns (Francis, 1986; Ivanic, 1991; and, Schmid, 2000).

Vocabulary 3 can indicate a shift of functional segments of text patterns. The notion has been little tested for pedagogical application but a similar notion of move-structures (Dudley-Evans, 1986, 1994; Swales, 1990) has often been employed to examine the writing of research articles and dissertations. One of the few studies applying the notion of Vocabulary 3 is that of L. Flowerdew (2003) who investigates Vocabulary 3 in problem-solution patterns as ‘key words’ (Scott, 2001) which are lexical items of unusually high frequency in a given text. Using texts written by L1 Cantonese undergraduates (NNSs) and professional writers (hereafter PWs and PW for professional writing) nouns were analysed using the APPRAISAL System (Martin, 2000) which can evaluate words as either ‘inscribed’ or ‘evoking’ words. Inscribed lexis is explicitly evaluative and constitutes a superordinate category, whilst evoking lexis refers to words that are implicitly evaluative and not superordinates (ibid: 494). L. Flowerdew shows that both students and PWs use Vocabulary 3 to form problem-solution patterns but NNSs rely heavily on a small number of items of inscribed lexis for constructing both problem and solution segments. PWs predominantly use implicitly evaluative evoking lexis (e.g., impacts, noise, traffic) for the problem element and explicitly evaluative inscribed lexis for the solution (e.g., measures, proposal, recommendations, treatment). This suggests that NNSs prefer discourse signalling nouns that explicitly state what kinds of logical relationship exist between propositions. PWs, on the other hand, are more likely to let readers infer the nature of links using their encyclopaedic knowledge (or perhaps from other more subtle lexical cues).

In a more detailed analysis, L. Flowerdew investigates lexicogrammatical patterns involving the use of problem. It is noteworthy that there was quite a difference in the frequency and distribution of ‘Causal Relations’; that is, the relation between a cause and an effect, created by a combination of problem and various verbs (e.g., create + problem, problem + derives from). Problem occurs far more frequently in SW than in PW but only about one third of examples are used to create some kind of Causal Relations; whereas in PW, occurrences are far less than in SW but most of them (95%) are used to create Causal Relations (ibid: 499, 501). Also, the use of implicit cause/result verbs in ‘problem + verb’ collocations indicate another difference between the two corpora. Explicit verbs are used in a similar way ‘[indicating] some type of adverse happening’ (e.g, create a noise problem: Stubbs, 2001, in ibid.: 500). Implicit verbs are used in PW for positive semantic prosody indicating things will get better (e.g., alleviate the problem) but they are sometimes used incorrectly or uncollocationally in SW (e.g., the problem will be worsened) (ibid.: 502). This seems to suggest that, along with an increased use of Causal Relations, knowledge of implicit verbs is an important factor in constructing well-organised text.
6. Metadiscursive nouns in student writing focusing on discourse shifts

Metadiscursive nouns that highlight discoursal relations between two sections are extensively described but only a few studies have tested these theories using SW. J. Flowerdew (2006; 2010) and Caldwell (2009) are the major exceptions.

6-1. Use of signalling nouns by NNSs as shown in errors: J. Flowerdew (2006)

J. Flowerdew (2006) calls metadiscursive nouns ‘signalling nouns’, and identifies four major types of signalling noun errors in L1 Cantonese argumentative essays: 1) colligation errors; 2) incorrect signalling nouns (wrong selection of nouns, and confusion of word forms such as adjectives and nouns); 3) collocation errors; and, 4) omission of signalling nouns. The most frequently occurring type of error is that of colligation, primarily of prepositions, followed by the incorrect use of nouns, and collocation errors. J. Flowerdew considers that these types of errors are not so problematic because they show that students partially understand signalling nouns and how they work (ibid.: 353) but that the omission of signalling nouns is a problem. Although omissions account for less than 2% of total errors, they are a sign that ‘the writer either does not know that a signalling noun is needed here or, if they do, do not know one which would be appropriate’ (ibid.: 353). It is not clear from this study how problematic omissions by NNSs are because there is no comparison with NSs or PWs; but it does suggest that NNSs may have only a general or partial understanding of signalling nouns.

6-2. Use of signalling nouns by NSs and NNSs: J. Flowerdew (2010)

J. Flowerdew (2010) compares the use of signalling nouns between L1 Cantonese NNSs and NSs from five aspects: 1) frequency of signalling nouns; 2) referencing functions (e.g., anaphoric, cataphoric, in-clause patterns); 3) frequently occurring signalling nouns; 4) range of signalling nouns; and, 5) eight types of ‘in-clause’ realisation patterns (e.g., \(SN + of + noun\) phrase, \(SN + to + non-finite, SN + that-clause\), where SN stands for signalling noun). The results show that the use of signalling nouns (1, above) in NS writing is more frequent (as much as 2.7 times per individual text) than in NNS writing, but the top 20 most frequently occurring signalling nouns (3) are similar in the two subject groups. This is suggestive of NNS general competence in the most important signalling nouns, and at the same time, a lack of knowledge of non-core signalling nouns. The ranges of nouns used (4) are also small in NNS writing, whilst NSs use a wide variety of nouns. NNS lack of knowledge is also shown in their use of signalling nouns’ referencing types (2) and in-clause syntactic patterns (5). NSs used a greater variety of functions including anaphoric, cataphoric and in-clause patterns than NNSs, and more varied and different types of in-clause syntactic patterns.
6-3. Lexical vagueness in student writing: Caldwell (2009)

Caldwell (2009) investigates the use of metadiscursive nouns as abstract nouns that are possible sources of vagueness in SW.¹ NSs, NNSs and PWs in South African English learning contexts are compared. Carrier nouns, shell nouns and other second- and third-order entities in Lyons’ tripartite taxonomy (1977: 442-443) are investigated. Second-order entities are included as they have the potential to form ‘shell-content relations’ (Schmid, 2000: 41). Nouns are analysed in terms of frequency, noun syntactic patterns, and noun specification patterns.

The frequency of metadiscursive nouns are estimated in two ways: the proportion of 33 carrier noun items out of the total number of nouns; and, the proportion of the 100 most frequent nouns out of 670 shell and second- and third-order entity nouns. In either investigation, students used abstract nouns with rather a high frequency (ibid: 98) but this was still less than PWs. Caldwell claims that less use of abstract nouns in SW makes the writing less vague and that the mere presence of abstract nouns, let alone their overuse, is not a cause of vagueness in SW (ibid.: 77). In the analysis of noun syntactic patterns, Caldwell investigated noun lexicalisation in 13 types of syntactic pattern, including those that are not typical shell or carrier patterns (e.g., N + in + which). The result showed that ‘student writers…utilise many of the syntactic pattern said to house ‘shell/carrier’ nouns along with other patterns’ (ibid.: 87). An exception is the use of the-be-N pattern which is preferred by PWs and L1 writers but was not used at all by the L2 writers (ibid.: 89). The pattern the-be-N has a strong textual function in discourse, creating cross sentential anaphoric links and has a conspicuous characterization pattern (Schmid, 2000). Little use of this pattern by L2 writers may suggest an area of deficiency in their structuring of English texts and a need for pedagogical intervention. In general, however, SWs used shell/carrier nouns in typical syntactic patterns that host nouns. In theory shell/carrier nouns should have fulfilled the functions attributable to them and there should be little vagueness in the way that these nouns are used.

In a further attempt to locate sources of vagueness, Caldwell shifts her focus to whether or not a reader can successfully identify the intended referents of nouns. In other words, she switched her focus from shell nouns’ ‘syntactic host’ to ‘shell contents’ (ibid: 133). The approach used was a manual qualitative analysis of the first 200 words of all texts. Caldwell examines the specification patterns of a definite ‘micro’ noun phrase (NP) (ibid: 116), which is a combination of ‘a definite article (the)/demonstrative determiner (e.g., this, that)/possessive (e.g., his, her) + a NP’. After identifying several noun specification patterns occurring in the corpora, she argues that ESP (expansion/specification) and ‘A’ (anaphoric) patterns are two areas where vagueness of SW is indicated, as explained in the following sections.²
6-3-1. ESP (expansion/specification)

In the analysis of the opening extracts, ESP relations often represent first-mentioned definite noun phrases followed by expansions specifying them. ESP patterns are significantly preferred to other specification patterns and are much more frequent in SW, particularly by NNSs, than in PW (Caldwell, 2009: 123). This finding may seem to contradict the view that SW is underspecified; however, Caldwell shows that ESPs in SW often do not allow the reader to identify the meaning of a micro NP. This is mainly due to the way micro NPs are specified as they feature longer and seemingly more complex phrases that often embed several ESP relationships within one clause (ibid.: 129). In other words, specifying phrases often contain nouns that are considered second or third-order entities. Here are two NS examples from Caldwell (2009: 134). (Co-indexed and underlined are expanded phrases, NFS means no further specification.)

(1) … link (ESP) the information (ESP) contained in (NFS) the theory …

(2) … use of (ESP) its own interpretation (ESP) of (NFS) the research situation …

The ESP cataphoric specifications of the head nouns the information and interpretation include theory and situation, which are not first-order entities and would require further specification. This does not mean that ESP referents of vague nouns in PW never include shell nouns. Some nouns in ESP expansions are first-order entities as shown by plants and animals in example (3) (ibid: 134):

(3) (ESP) … the variety (ESP) of human uses for plants and animals

Vague nouns are also included in the expansions as shown with analogy in example (4) (ibid.):

(4) (ESP) … the notion (ESP) that very young children are unable to reason by analogy

Whether or not analogy is a more familiar term than second- or third-order entities, if not a first-order entity and its meaning is more recoverable without the context, is not as clear-cut as Caldwell suggests but she points out that PWs expand the meaning of abstract nouns by using easier words to understand than in SW.

6-3-2. ‘A’ (anaphoric) pattern

An ‘A’ (anaphoric) specification pattern is established ‘when the specifying description of a definite NP is an antecedent in the preceding text’ (ibid: 117). Caldwell investigated the ‘A’ patterns between two types of
nominal anaphor (hereafter NA) (which is a micro NP in ESP, but called NA in an ‘A’ specification pattern following Maes, 1995): repeated and alternative NAs. These are combined with either the definite article (*the*) (called DefNA) or demonstrative pronouns (e.g., *this*, *that*) (called DemNA). The combinations of repeated/alternative NAs and article/demonstrative pronouns form four patterns: ‘repeated DefNA’; ‘alternative DefNA’; ‘repeated DemNA’; and, ‘alternative DemNA’.

Caldwell claims that PWs use a significantly higher proportion of alternative DemNAs, particularly *this*, such as ‘*this* + alternative NA’ compared to SWs who prefer repeated DefNAs such as ‘*the* + repeated NA’ (ibid.: 177). It is suggested that a student preference for repeated DefNAs can lead to vagueness in their writing. This may be because DefNA noun phrases are not as strong anaphoric devices as DemNAs; demonstrative pronouns are identificationally stronger as deictic elements in a demonstrative determiner and act as a much stronger anaphoric device (Maes, 1995: 65, in Caldwell, 2009: 154). Also, they are repetition nouns where definite micro NPs do not function as strong characterization markers of information, as ‘with the repetition of the noun, the “shell NP” does not characterise, categorise, or in some way qualify the referent of the previous NP’ (ibid.: 159). While ESP patterns suggest a need for proper and improved specifications in SW, at issue with the ‘A’ pattern is the more frequent use of alternative DemNAs because SWs can mostly use alternative DemNAs properly when they do choose them (ibid: 154).

7. Summary: Student use of metadiscursive nouns

This paper reports on a review of previous studies that have investigated the use of metadiscursive nouns in SW. The review included studies that focused on the use of grammatical and lexical cohesion devices in Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) framework and also those that took a more eclectic approach to Halliday’s notion of cohesion such as Hinkel (2003) that analysed the use of ‘vague’ nouns. A major finding from the review is that nouns used as cohesive devices have common features even if students’ L1s are varied. These features which overlap and are correlated with each other include: a limited range of vocabulary; generalization without elaboration; vague referents by cohesion devices; and, more use of repetitions and less use of nouns that can evaluate and characterise the referents.

Regarding the limited range of vocabulary, SWs had general competence in the use of core metadiscursive nouns but lacked competence in the use of non-core and synonymous nouns. For example, the general competence of SWs was indicated by the similar use by both NSs and NNSs of the top 20 most frequently occurring signalling nouns (J. Flowerdew, 2010) and by NNS use of superordinate type nouns in the construction of problem-solution patterns (L. Flowerdew, 2003). At the same time, a more detailed analysis
revealed a lack of vocabulary in SW. Superordinate nouns in problem-solution patterns in SW (L. Flowerdew, 2003) were repetitions of only a handful of Inscribed type, or explicit superordinates; and the high proportions of wrong selections of signalling nouns (J. Flowerdew, 2006) were also suggestive of a small selection of signalling noun items. The feature of generalization without elaboration was illustrated through the NNS use of enumerative and resultative nouns in Hinkel (2001). Generalised information can give limited contextual information, and the nouns cannot make clear the main point of an argument. A related feature of SW vague referents of metadiscursive nouns was shown most clearly in one specification type of a ‘definite micro NP’, where the NP is a shell/carrier noun: the ESP (expansion/specification) (Caldwell, 2009). In the ESP pattern, the specifying segment in SW often included 2nd- and 3rd-order entities which caused vagueness in the writing, whilst PWs specified the NP in more familiar terms than students. Vague meaning of metadiscursive nouns may be damaging to the argumentation of student essays, as this class of nouns can play a discourse summarisation and characterisation role. The use of ‘A’ (anaphoric) pattern (Caldwell, 2009), another specification type of a ‘definite micro NP’ in Caldwell (2009), suggested less evaluation and characterisation roles in the referring nouns in SW. The students predominantly preferred a repeated DefNA (the + repeated NA), indicating the weak characterisation and evaluation role of the NP in SW. In contrast, PWs preferred the alternative DemNA (this/that + alternative NA) which has a strong summarisation and characterisation function. Less use of alternative nouns may decrease the effectiveness of any assessment and evaluation that should be expressed in the writing.

These findings concerning the features of SW indicate a need for students to increase their knowledge of the vocabulary range of metadiscursive nouns, and also to learn how to write more detailed explanations in the referencing using this class of nouns in English essays.

8. Identification of further research areas

A major limitation of the present paper is that the research environments of individual studies reviewed (e.g., aim, number and type of subjects, methodology) are varied, and so findings are less comparable with each other and more tentative. To reach any conclusive findings, more studies with different research environments are required. For example, types of L1s should be expanded as the study of SW in the Hallidayan notion of metadiscursive nouns is still limited to only several types of L1s. As a research approach, the review indicated the benefit of combining a manual qualitative analysis with a quantitative corpus analysis (e.g., L. Flowerdew, 2003; Caldwell, 2009). Automated corpus techniques can ensure, to a large extent, the objectivity and reliability of a study by categorising target items into various types and counting frequencies but do not provide detailed information about target aspects. Therefore, the inclusion of a qualitative analysis would be ideal for research that investigates cohesion and other linguistic aspects.
References


Caldwell also approaches the vagueness of abstract nouns in terms of teacher-student relations in the classroom but this social aspect is not of concern in the present paper.

See Caldwell (2009: 117-118) for other referring expression patterns.