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Developing Students' Writing and Awareness through Autobiographical Life Stories using  
Journals in the EFL Classroom

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Research Report submitted

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### **Abstract**

This action research study was conducted with sixteen beginner students at a private university in Bogotá. The aim of this study was to inquire into the raising of awareness and the enhancement of written cohesion, with specific regards to the use of connectors, through writing autobiographical, journal-based life stories. Data was collected from the implementation of journals, a mid-study questionnaire, and a final semi-structured interview. The findings allowed the researcher to conclude that: Students' writings exhibited an increase in the use of connectors, specifically of addition and time at the end of the study, compared to their frequency of use at the initial stage. Besides, students were able to tackle their writing strategically with a focus on form to deal with the construction of the text itself, and with a focus on content, choosing a topic within the genre of life stories, which made it easier and more meaningful for them to write; and, on the other hand, by picking and using strategies that allowed for a step-by-step writing process such as brainstorming and drafting, to better cope with their writing tasks.

*Key words:* writing, cohesion, journal writing, life stories, awareness

### **Resumen**

Este estudio de investigación acción fue llevado a cabo con dieciséis estudiantes de una universidad privada en Bogotá. El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar el desarrollo de la conciencia y el mejoramiento de la cohesión escrita con respecto al uso de conectores a través de la escritura de historias autobiográficas escritas en diarios. La información obtenida vino de la implementación de diarios, un cuestionario en la mitad del proceso, y una entrevista semi-estructurada. Los hallazgos obtenidos permitieron al investigador concluir que: al final del estudio los diarios de los estudiantes exhibieron un aumento en el uso de conectores, específicamente de adición y de tiempo, comparado con su frecuencia de uso al inicio del estudio. Además, los estudiantes fueron capaces de afrontar estratégicamente sus tareas escritas centrándose en la forma para ocuparse de la construcción del texto mismo, y también en el contenido, escogiendo un tema dentro del campo de las historias de vida, lo que lo hizo más fácil y más significativo para ellos; y, por otra parte, escogiendo y usando estrategias como la lluvia de ideas y los borradores para afrontar mejor las tareas escritas.

*Palabras claves:* escritura, cohesión, escritura de diarios, historias de vida, conciencia

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction to the study**

Since its beginnings, writing has developed into an important method of close and distant communication, allowing people to express and share their ideas. Writing is so important that it has become a fundamental aspect of literacy. It is used to communicate with people and for academic purposes such as writing research reports and/or articles. Writing can be done in the traditional form of paper and pencil or using the technological advances available nowadays. Given its importance, our role as language teachers is to promote and encourage the realization and improvement of this skill during the language learners' course of study. Furthermore, it is, undoubtedly, essential to learn this skill to successfully communicate in a second or foreign language; but writing has to be taught, or as Harmer (2004) states "the ability to write has to be consciously learned" (p. 3).

### **1.2 Rationale of the study**

Every study's emphasis is on the collection of rich data with extensive details that support its findings and claims. Results might enhance future instruction for educational research. The objective of this study was to examine and document whether written cohesion could be enhanced through the using of autobiographical life writing journals. The descriptor for cohesion and coherence of a person in level A1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), is that they "can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like 'and' or 'then'" (p. 125). Oxford (1990) claims that to communicate with other people it is necessary to learn a language through speaking, writing, reading and listening. In this case the target skill to research into was writing.

### **1.2.1 Needs analysis and problem statement**

From the point of view of the researcher, writing has been one of the most difficult skills to develop, since it is a rigorous thought process that requires the use of sophisticated language structures to perform it well. Then, it is very common to hear teachers say that their students are not good at writing. This means that students require more than the book's exercises in the classroom to enhance this skill. In the case of this study, in informal conversations in class, students stated that they did not have enough time to become good at writing, so extra time and attention devoted to this purpose was needed from the teacher-researcher. Moreover, students reported not to have sufficient knowledge of writing to even complete a single paragraph. Therefore, the researcher knew they needed input and practice on how to write sentences and then how to link them to make paragraphs.

To respond to students' needs to develop writing, journals were chosen as the instrument through which students could enhance their writing by composing life stories. Through journal-writing people can express their ideas, feelings, or experiences: the subjects that we know best. As stated by Smith (1996), journal writing is "thinking on paper – tangible and visible" (p. 155). This study, then, intended to get students involved in this task to discover whether they could improve their informal writing skills in such way. Hence, the researcher examined the students' journal writing process in hopes that it would allow students to reflect more as they wrote. Given that they had only written under the pressure of a deadline, they were used to writing anything that came to their minds so that they could hand in their homework without delay.

This study was conducted with students enrolled in an English course at Universidad El Bosque, in Bogotá. The course was composed of sixteen undergraduate and graduate students of different academic programs who have different graduation requirements, but they all need to

show that they have reached a proficiency level in English, either by taking the English courses offered by the University or the institutionally-accredited exam.

The students who participated in the study were adults who, by the end of the semester, reached an A1 level as per CEFR (2001) standards. Basic users at this level can “understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type[...] Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help” (p. 24). Even though students were taking an English course because, as mentioned above, it was a requirement for their graduation, they were aware of the importance of learning the language because it could be useful when travelling to another country and also because it would provide them with job opportunities in the near future. These students had basic or no knowledge of English because, as reported by them, either their education in English at secondary school was poor or the school did not offer them the opportunity to learn it. Despite their lack of good experience with the language, they were optimistic and learned fast, probably to meet their reported goal of going abroad to have a real-life English experience.

To collect information, the needs analysis stage began with the application of a questionnaire (Appendix C – Needs Analysis Questionnaire) to know how students’ writing experience in English was in general and whether or not they were able to write a paragraph in English. The analysis revealed the majority of students’ reported difficulty writing in English due to a lack of knowledge and practice of grammar structures and vocabulary, and ultimately to a lack of knowledge of how to link ideas together. Despite this, all of them reported a need to improve their writing skills because of their inexperience in this matter. When students were asked if they used any strategy to write their paragraphs correctly, most of them admitted relying on online translators and dictionaries.

In the second phase of the needs analysis, an interview (Appendix D – Needs Analysis Interview) was applied as a way to inquire more deeply into their writing experience in English. At the beginning of the interview students were asked to describe a recent homework assignment they had done. Subsequently, students were asked a set of questions so to deepen more into their writing difficulties. The most important emergent pattern was that they reported not knowing how to connect sentences, followed by their lack of vocabulary and paragraph structure. Students were also asked to mention the aspects that had made their writing experience difficult, and the salient patterns were lack of practice and vocabulary. Lastly, the analysis showed that the students' strategy to write their paragraph correctly was to use dictionaries and web translators to write their paragraphs. This result agrees with their reported lack of management of cohesive devices (linkers) and that of grammar and vocabulary, since translators today facilitate the elaboration of paragraphs without worrying about grammar, vocabulary, or the linkage of sentences. Since the familiarization of structures and the acquisition of vocabulary were expected to be gradual along their current English course and in subsequent ones, this study focused on the analysis and treatment of cohesion.

### **1.2.2 Justification of problem's significance**

In Bogotá there is a project to promote English as a foreign language called *Bogotá Bilingüe*. Its objective is to help all the students involved in it to realize that this language is important not only because they need it at school, but also because it is required to be used at university, at work, and also for social life abroad. In the context of Colombia, in which English is taught as a foreign language, teachers often must try to motivate students by giving them tips and tools to overcome difficulties during the learning process to improve their writing skills so they can use them later on in a real-life environment and do not feel disappointed because what

they learned in the classroom was not useful. Therefore, students could find it useful to learn which cohesive devices they can use so their writings can communicate what they mean.

Consequently, it was important for the researcher to conduct this study to help teachers become more reflective and to help them lead students to improve their writing. Also, the researcher considered it useful that students, through the use of journals, were more aware of their writing process.

### **1.3 Research question and objectives**

This study investigated the possible outcomes of writing autobiographical life stories through the use of journals to enhance written cohesion. The project was guided by the following research question and objectives:

*To what extent might the use of classroom journals help A1 CEFR level university students raise awareness and enhance their written cohesion in autobiographical life stories?*

The previous question had one general and two specific objectives which guided the research data collection and corresponding analysis:

#### **General Objective**

To identify the extent to which, if any, autobiographical story writing (through journals) could play a role in the enhancement of cohesion and in the raising of students' awareness of their learning process.

#### **Specific Objectives**

- To determine how the writing of autobiographical journals in class shapes students' written cohesion, with specific regards to the use of lexical connectives.
- To examine the extent to which the writing of autobiographical journals in class helps students become more aware of their learning process

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter it was stated that the students' need was to develop their writing skills, especially cohesion, and that one possible way of helping them was through writing life stories in journals in the classroom. This chapter presents a discussion on the constructs underlying and supporting this study: writing, journal writing, cohesion, awareness, and autobiographical writing.

### **2.2 Definitions and state of the art**

#### **2.2.1 Writing**

Writing in English is a challenging task for students; this is a perception that the researcher has experienced in person, and that can also be seen in the literature. According to Bram (1995), one of the most common problems for writers whose mother tongue is not English may be “a lack of ability to construct grammatical sentences” (p. 25). Johnson (2012), in turn, affirms that writing can be a problematic task “because of a lack of practice” (p. 168), as it was the case of the participants in the present study, whose learning setting did not allow for intensive practice of writing. Johnson (2012) identified and listed a set of problems which can cause bad writing, such as “poor control of punctuation, weak grammar and syntax, sentences too long, unrelated clauses, [and] jumbled vocabulary” (p. 179). At the students' level, A1, it is common that they face these problems, particularly because their command of grammar, punctuation rules in English and written discourse are at a very incipient phase. Another “very common” problem that writers face, according to Johnson (2012), is the mental block when they see a blank paper. The author states that these people may write some words after that mental block but they erase them later, getting back to where they were at the beginning. Johnson (2012)



also adds that knowing the causes of those mental blocks may help to get out of that state, and he mentions the following as probable causes: the person is not sure of what to say, his/her mind goes blank, he/she is just waiting for a small piece of information, or he/she has too much information.

Various authors have made attempts at defining writing. Hyland (2009), for instance, holds that writing is the “free expression of ideas [that] can encourage self-discovery and cognitive maturation” (p. 18). The freedom of expression is one of the aspects of writing that this study was looking for when the students wrote their life stories in their journals. Hyland (2009) also expresses that writing is a developmental process that cannot be learned based on notions of a grammar taught in the classroom. Nevertheless, he recognizes, this view of writing does not offer clear theoretical principles to assess good writing.

Giving greater emphasis on the performance-related aspects of writing, Hyland (2009) defines it, regarded as a situated act, as:

a social act that can occur within particular situations. It is therefore influenced both by the personal attitudes and prior experiences that the writer brings to writing and the impact of the specific political and institutional contexts in which it takes place. (p. 26)

This perspective, thus, gives an account of writing as a product, not only of grammar and of knowledge of writing rules, but also as the result of the writer’s desire to express himself or herself within a given context. It is conceived as an exercise of dialogue and of communication. Another rather performance-based perspective is that of Hedge (2000), who affirms that writing is “the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process, which is one of gradually developing a text...it is a complex process which is neither easy nor spontaneous for many second language writers” (p. 302). Despite its difficulty, writing is, undoubtedly, a very important language skill. In this regard, Hyland (2002) affirms that writing has been central topic

in applied linguistics for over a half century and remains an area of lively intellectual research and debate. This might be so because writing is one of the most important ways to communicate with other people apart from speaking and sign language. It could be affirmed, then, that having good writing skills is an important asset for anyone who wants to succeed in everyday, academic professional life abroad, as reported by the participants in this study. They perceive writing as an essential skill which they need to develop to communicate in real life if, according to them, they studied or lived in another country. Writing skills are significant to our lives because people often make judgments by our own management of them. In this sense, Hyland (2009) affirms that “writing is central to our personal experience and social identities, and we are often evaluated by our control of it” (p. 2). Writing is an experience that not all of the students involved in this study like to practice, probably because they fear to do it wrong, and if they have had the opportunity to do it, it has been under the pressure of a deadline. In any case, apprehension and mental blockages may exist that could result counterproductive for students’ learning objectives.

Writing is rightly considered as part of a language, as are the other skills, and as such, it is the teachers’ duty to promote it even if students consider it a difficult or disturbing experience at the beginning of the process (Harmer, 2004). Teachers need to give students input in a way that they are convinced that one day they can do it by themselves. The teacher-researcher’s job in this study had to go beyond teaching grammar and vocabulary. Given that all the participants in this study belong to an academic or professional setting, the teacher-researcher was to help students become more aware of the role that writing in English could have in their lives, not only to live in another country, but also to get a job or to pursue further studies. Therefore, it became necessary to pay special attention to students’ development of literacy in the foreign language.

At this point, it is important to note that learners undergo different processes in reading and writing to listening and speaking, both in L1 and L2 because, as pointed out by Kern and Schultz (2005):

[R]eading and writing are not natural but cultural activities, [thus] certain aspects of what SLA currently presents as the *nature* of the language learning [...] might be more aptly explored as the *culture* of language learning. (p. 387)

The difference between oral-aural and written skills or so between the *natural* and *cultural* aspects of language learning reveals the necessity to devote overtly-conscious attention to writing. Being so difficult to master, the performance and practice of writing should not only be at home but it must also be incorporated into the classroom. All too often, teachers tackle the writing tasks in instructional materials as homework assignments, devoting little attention to it during class time, ignoring that there exist a wide array of activities in books and even on the Internet that they can bring to the classroom so students can practice more and perform better each time they write. By devoting more time to writing in class, students come to understand that getting used to practicing the skill is a way of overcoming the obstacles that they encounter at the time of writing, like those mentioned by Johnson (2012). Schellekens (2007) talks about getting used to writing and she argues that:

many students struggle with writing. They often find it hard to write at all, even about topics that they know well, such as their home life, their children, or their job. Just the thought of having a blank sheet in front of them fills them with dread. Yet, like any skill, writing can be learnt, but it does need frequent practice. Since the fear of writing is so often a major obstacle, overcoming it is a crucial step to developing writing skills. (p. 103)

The researcher agrees with the author when she states that writing requires practice, and this is why students find it difficult. The participants in this study were undergraduate and graduate

students, most of whom worked, so they did not have enough time to practice their writing in English on their own.

As to the process of writing, Seow (2002) talks about all the stages most of the students have followed to do a piece of writing: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. He describes process writing as an approach that

has been bandied about for quite a while in ESL classrooms...Process writing as a classroom activity incorporates the four basic writing stages – planning, drafting (writing), revising (redrafting) and editing – and three other stages externally imposed on students by the teacher, namely, responding (sharing), evaluating, and post-writing. (p. 315)

Seow (2002) observes that those stages do not have to be applied in that precise sequence, although in the context of this study that is the order the students experienced in writing tasks.

### **2.2.2 Cohesion**

To begin with the discussion of cohesion, I will resort to the definition in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Pearson Education Limited, 2002): “the grammatical and/or lexical relationships between different elements of a text. This may be the relationship between different sentences or between different parts of a sentence” (p. 86). Schellekens (2007) affirms that writing is “a skill which demands a particularly wide range of sub-skills, from the ability to handle a pen, or knowledge of spelling, to being able to apply conventions of writing” (p. 101). Cohesion is one of such skills, and it is that which was analyzed for the purposes of this study. Reid (1993) points out that “cohesion has been defined as [...] specific words and phrases (transitions, pronouns, repetition of key words and phrases) that tie prose together and direct the reader” (pp. 36, 37). Campbell (1995) points out that cohesion “describes connections among the elements between discourse” (p. 6). Moreover, Nunan (2007) provides a similar definition of cohesion as the “linguistic link existing between

clauses and sentences that mark various types of relationships” (p. 205) Halliday and Hasan (1976), categorize linkers in five groups, which are: additive, adversative, causal, temporal, and continuative. Likewise, Harmer (2004) classifies linkers by relationships: “of addition (and, also, moreover, furthermore), of contrast (however, on the other hand, but, yet), of result (therefore, consequently, thus), [and] of time (first, then, later, after a while)” (p. 24). Nunan (2007) is less specific and names different categories of cohesion devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical and conjunction. The latter type, also called lexical connectives or linkers, (e.g. however) is the one under analysis in this study. In this study, the researcher adhered to the classification provided by Harmer (2004).

Research has shown that cohesion can be a very powerful indicator of the perceived quality of a written text. Chiang (2003), for instance, collected writing samples from 60 college-level Taiwanese learners of English as a foreign language who had received 6 years of formal instruction in English prior to college enrolment, and who were majoring in different fields, but not in English; then, assessment of the quality of the texts was made by 15 native English speakers (NS) and 15 native speakers of Chinese (NNS), taking into account 20 analytical features that the researcher classified into four areas: coherence, cohesion, syntax and morphology (p. 474). Although authors like Halliday and Hasan (1976) present cohesion as a sub-concept within the concept of coherence, Chiang’s (2003, p. 474) bases his classification on Canale’s (1983) construct of discourse competence. Interestingly, Chiang’s (2003) results point towards discourse features like cohesion and coherence, rather than grammar or morphology, as the best predictors of overall writing quality (2003, p. 476). Although the study does not list out a specific set of cohesive devices that the researcher paid attention to in the study, Chiang’s (2003) results can shed important insights into the use of cohesive devices (such as linkers) in the

development of better-quality writing. These results are consistent with those rendered by an earlier study (Chiang, 1999) conducted with American learners of French as a foreign language, where cohesion was also identified as a powerful predictor of the quality of a written text, while grammar was not. As Chiang (2003) puts it comparing both studies, “the fact that the rating pattern involving certain discourse features remained relatively stable across the three rater-writer combinations, namely French NS-American NNS, American NS-Chinese NNS, and Chinese NNS-Chinese NNS while the grammatical traits did not suggests that the construct of “discourse competence” might be much less language-specific than the linguistic trait” (p. 481).

Liu and Braine (2005) investigated the cohesive features in argumentative writing by Chinese undergraduate non-English majors as well as the relationship between “the number of cohesive devices used and the quality of writing” (p. 625). With a population of 96 students enrolled in a class called *Basic Writing* at Tsinghua University, the researchers offered training in, among others, the use of cohesive devices in argumentative writing, following the framework for cohesive devices presented by Halliday and Hasan (1976). The researchers measured the appearance of cohesive devices in such compositions and correlated this measurement with overall quality scores. Results show that “the composition scores significantly co-varied with the total number of cohesive devices [...]. Moreover, the composition scores were highly correlated to lexical devices among the three main categories of cohesive devices [reference, conjunction and lexical]” (p. 631). That is, the more cohesive devices were found in a composition, the higher its perceived quality was; in the authors’ words “there was a significant relationship between the number of cohesive devices used and the quality of the argumentative writing” (p. 634).

In Liu and Braine's study (2005), "lexical devices (55.6%) constituted the highest percentage of the total number of cohesive devices, followed by reference devices (19.8%) and conjunction devices (14.6%)" (p. 633). The authors, however, do point out that, "with regard to the use of conjunctions, [...] the students were capable of using a variety of devices to bridge the previous sentence(s) and the following one(s) to make their writing clearer and more logical [...but that] those commonly used items as 'and', 'but', 'or' and 'so' were the students' favorites, whereas [...] 'furthermore', 'on the contrary', 'moreover', 'in addition', 'on the whole', and 'nevertheless' seldom occurred in their writing" (p. 634). This finding, far from worrisome, was promising for the case pertaining to the present study since the population of student-participants was just starting to learn English and their use of more sophisticated conjunctions was not expected. Finally, Liu and Braine (2005) issue a word of caution as to the fact that "compositions with high scores tended to be longer and involved more lexical items" (p. 631); this evidently indicates that longer texts are perceived to be of higher quality, probably because they offer ampler room for the use of cohesive devices. In an attempt to stabilize this measurement, this study required the participants to write a predetermined number of words in every journal, and this number increased from earlier to later compositions.

Chiang's (1999; 2003) and Liu and Braine's (2005), studies focused on the use of cohesive devices at a specific level of proficiency. In a similar fashion, Yang and Sun (2012) studied the use of cohesive devices, but broadened the range to a population of different proficiency levels. Comparing the use of cohesive devices in argumentative writing by 60 undergraduate Chinese students of English language and literature (30 second-year and 30 fourth-year), the researchers analyzed the occurrence and use of devices of reference, conjunction, ellipsis and substitution, and lexical cohesion. The study yielded results that support

those in Chiang (1999; 2003) and Liu and Braine (2005) in that “the overall frequency of (correct) cohesive devices constitutes a very effective predictor in evaluating the quality of essays composed by ESL/EFL learners, regardless of their proficiency” (Yang & Sun, 2012, p. 46). That is to say, the use of conjunctions by students of different proficiency levels did not vary significantly, which reveals that language proficiency level is not positively correlated with the (correct) use of conjunctions in writing and that “the application of conjunctions to use in writing may constitute persistent challenges to EFL learners across different proficiencies” (p. 45).

In Colombia, the study of cohesion is not widespread, and the studies that have made reference to this textual feature do so incidentally. From two of them, however, it is possible to derive similar conclusions to the ones mentioned in Chiang (1999; 2003), Liu and Braine (2005), and Yang and Sun (2012).

Camelo (2010) studied the use of metacognition in the recognition and production of texts of narrative, expository and argumentative genres. Her population, a group of school students, produced texts in these genres and published them in a school news bulletin, as part of a classroom project. Initially, the teacher-researcher presented the students with models of each type of text for recognition and analysis of its macrostructure, objective and purpose; afterwards, she went with her students through all the steps of process writing, producing two drafts that received feedback from the teacher and from peer students. Comparing the quality of the drafts, Camelo (2010) mentions how, in the first draft “the superstructure of the expository text cannot be precisely determined, the information is not presented with clarity and organization, *there is lack of coherence and absence of connectors*” (p. 65). After the process of revising/editing, in the third draft that students wrote, the author reports “a text that progresses, that advances, *where the connectors used have contributed to its coherence*” (p. 65) (own translations; emphasis added).



This perception of (at least partial) text quality from the use of cohesive devices has also been identified at the level of higher education in Colombia. Carvajal Medina and Roberto Flórez (2014) studied the development of academic writing at university with a group of engineering students. Following the writing stages proposed by Hyland (2003), and incorporating collaborative work, the authors created a *Convergence Writing Model* which they applied to have their students produce academic research articles. Carvajal Medina and Roberto Flórez (2014) hosted a set of ten workshops to guide their students through the process of creation of the academic articles. One of these workshops was specifically devoted to refining and editing, so that “students began to familiarize themselves with the meanings of some of the connectors, and they wrote sentences with logical connectors” (p. 126). Once the *Convergence Writing Model* was implemented, the authors reported, among others, that “the participants improved the use of appropriate technical vocabulary and connectors and the way they organized the information into paragraphs” (p. 132).

Neither Camelo (2010) nor Carvajal Medina & Roberto Flórez (2014) focused explicitly on the use of connectors and other cohesive devices in the construction of a text, though their findings do report the importance that they attribute to cohesion as a predictor of text quality. That is, the findings in both studies recognize text quality as linked to the extent to which ideas are logically and correctly linked by connectors, although none make mention of which specific type of cohesive devices they paid attention to.

The studies above offered solid ground for cohesion to be considered a crucial aspect of written proficiency and yielded important insights into the design and the implementation of this study. Two conclusions can be reached: first, the more cohesive a written text is, the higher its

overall quality is perceived, and second, this improvement in cohesion can be reached even at elementary levels of language learning.

### **2.2.3 Awareness**

This study set the raising of awareness in students as one of its objectives, which is why the concept is discussed below.

Nunan (2007) states awareness as “a conscious understanding of the nature of the language, its components and its role in human life” (p. 212). Similarly, Tomlinson (2003) refers to language awareness as “a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work” (p. 251); in his work, he also argues that within a language awareness approach it is key that students discover language for themselves. Van Lier, as cited by Tomlinson (2003), confirms this important point by saying that this approach is very different from traditional teaching because it “is not taught by the teacher, or the coursebook; it is developed by the learner” (p. 252). He adds that language awareness is a gradual realization of the language use driven by the student’s curiosity.

Awareness plays a very important role in the development of learner autonomy. That is, the “ability to take control of” (Holec, 1981, p. 3), or the “capacity to control” (Benson, 2001, p. 47) one’s own learning is heavily dictated by the extent to which the learner has conscious knowledge of the learning itself. In this regard, Chan (2001) argues that “conscious awareness of the learning process is particularly important because without such meta-cognitive awareness, the learner will find it difficult to exploit the learning resources at his-her disposal” (pp. 506-507). Likewise, Cotterall (2000) points out that “a basic understanding of the language learning process is essential for anyone who wishes to manage their own learning. Learners can only be

autonomous if they are aware of a range of learning options, and understand the consequences of the choices they make” (p. 111).

Not being able to teach or transmit awareness, the teacher is to offer opportunities to raise it in the classroom, in order to help students learn better and to facilitate lifelong learning. In this sense, it cannot be overstated that it is important for students to take an active role in their own learning and for the teacher to offer activities to help them do so, starting at initial levels and adopting a systematic and gradual approach. Scharle and Szabó (2000) state that these activities are designed to develop a comprehensive range of skills and attitudes, and can also be integrated into regular lessons, since each activity serves a clear linguistic purpose and promotes more general learner development. In the case of this research study, for example, from the very beginning, students had a say in the topics they liked to write about, in an attempt to have them involved in a more horizontal process that gave room for choice. Moreover, as the study advanced, the training sessions in coherence and in the process of writing also offered room for reflection, so that each student could begin to understand his/her own learning situation.

#### **2.2.4 Journal writing**

Journal writing is often confounded with just writing in diaries, which is why, in the context where this study took place, it tended to be under-used, if it ever was incorporated into the classroom. In fact, journal writing and diary-keeping are different. Wallace (1998) states that they differ from each other in which journals, at some point, are going to be read. He also mentions some advantages among which can be found that journals are very good tools for reflection, and that they enhance awareness about what the students learn. It derives from this that journal writing can aid learners to communicate personal ideas about their learning that they want others (teachers, fellow students) to read, and by doing so, offer them the possibility to

enter metacognitive realms. In fact, according to Reid (1993) “journals can be used as [...] places to record notes, gather materials, and plan writing; and for write-to-learn activities that stress metacognition (that is, writing to discover what the student has learned, and reflecting on the process of learning to learn)” (p. 161). Another reason for the popularity of journals is that “they involve students in non-threatening exploration and development of ideas” (Worthington, 1997, p. 2). As stated by Kirby, Liner and Vinz (1988), journals are “the most consistently effective tool for establishing fluency” (p. 57). Students, therefore, could be benefited from journal writing in that they could explore and understand themselves better as learners, which may have brought about benefits on their language development as well. This research study thus found support on Wallace’s (1998) and Kirby et al.’s (1988) views on journal writing, not only to be applied to students, but also to give the teacher-researcher the possibility to reflect on and raise awareness of one’s own work, and to reflect on and challenge one’s own beliefs, attitudes and practices as a teacher.

In practical terms, Smith (1999, 2006, 2013) provides many key points in writing and keeping journals. Not only does he define what a journal is, but he also discusses the benefits of writing and keeping a journal, the process of starting to write and keep a journal, and that of evaluating writing and keeping journals. He claims that journal writing encourages engagement and reflection, which (to him), are the most important characteristics teachers want their students to develop in the process of writing a journal. As to the benefits of journal writing, Smith (1999, 2006, 2013) considers it, first, as a tool for helping to remember something later. Second, he argues, the act of putting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) engages our brains; that is, in order to write stories, people have to think, and these thoughts often provoke wonderings such as “‘Why do I do this?’ or ‘Why did this happen?’” (Hollie, 1989, p. xi as cited in Smith 1999,

2006, 2013). Third, it allows learners and teachers to look at themselves, and at their actions in a different way; “by writing things down in a journal the words are now 'outside’”. Learners and teachers can almost come to look at their ideas “as strangers”, in a sort of asking. “Did I really think that?’, 'How does this fit with that?’” Put differently, Smith (1999, 2006, 2013) argues “words may become more concrete” so learners and teachers “can play with them, and look at them in another light.” Fourth, it also allows learners and teachers to “clear their minds.” And fifth, “having made a note of something”, a person “can put them [sic] on one side for consideration or action at a later point.” This is important, he adds, because humans can only handle a limited amount of information at any moment and trying to remember different things, and dealing with current situations can sometimes mean that attention is not centered on what is really needed. Finally, he closes quoting Rainer (2004), making journal writing a habit for learners and teachers means that they “actually take time out to reflect on what might be happening” in their practice and in their own lives. It follows from these words that journal keeping is an exercise of metacognition, given that the ideas put on words lead the journal-keeper to reflect and evaluate his/her own actions in a way that would otherwise be unlikely to take place.

As to the actual procedure of starting to write and keeping a journal, Smith (1999, 2006, 2013) argues it might be the most difficult part of this process. The author mentions three main forms of taking a journal: notebooks, loose leaf paper within ring binders, or digitally via a word processor or note taker. In this research project the journals were kept digitally. Smith (1999, 2006, 2013) goes on to state that a good starting point is to use four central elements:

- **Description** of the situation/ encounter/ experience that includes some attention to feelings at the time.

- **Additional material** - information that come [sic] to our notice or into our minds after the event.
- **Reflection** - going back to the experiences, attending to feelings and evaluating experience.
- **Things to do** - the process of reflection may well lead to the need to look again at a situation or to explore some further area. It may highlight the need to take some concrete actions. In this 'section' of the entry users can make notes to pick-up later.

In addition, Hiemstra (2001) argues that “during the journaling process it is likely that a student will face an obstacle in not knowing what to do next. In essence, they reach an impasse that can even inhibit their continuing with the writing process” (p. 25). So, the teacher-researcher in this study kept alert for such circumstances through questions he/she asked in class to determine potential problems. However, Hiemstra (2001) adds, those difficulties are part of the writing process. Taking into account that the students involved in this research study were beginners, the researcher was careful when giving instructions and input. If students displayed further difficulties, the teacher-researcher took immediate action to ensure the smooth and continuous development of the study.

Journals are not only a tool for reflection but also offer other affordances such as freedom of expression, student-teacher dialogue, and the development of writing skills. Regarding the latter, Harmer (2004) states that journals “expand the [student’s] range of written expression and [let students] write with greater ease and speed [...] They contribute to a student’s general writing improvement” (p. 127). Such ‘improvement’ is the one expected to be seen through a focus on writing life stories, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In his study, Tuan (2003) reports on the benefits of journal writing. Having gathered 85 second-year students enrolled in writing classes at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, the researcher pre-tested and post-tested their writing fluency and accuracy; he then split them in two groups: a control group that remained with traditional classroom practices, and an experimental group that engaged in out-of-class journaling, as additional to their everyday writing activities and home assignments (p. 83). After thirteen weeks, the results showed that written fluency in the experimental group improved twice as fast as that in the control group (p. 84). As to accuracy in writing, the study reports that the experimental group showed a 64.64% decrease in the number of mistakes in the post-test compared to the pre-test, whereas the control group only showed a decrease of 29.70%, “which implies that the students in the experimental group demonstrated the better progress in the level of writing accuracy than those in the control group” (p. 84). Finally, whereas both groups showed “an insignificant disparity (-0.24) in terms of average pretest score” (p. 84), “the average posttest score gained by the students in the experimental group increased by [...] (24.67%) compared to the average pretest score, while that in the control group increased merely by [...] (7.32%)” (p. 84). Despite the purely quantitative nature of the data yielded by Tuan’s (2003) study, it is possible to derive an important conclusion from it: that the global and aspect-specific (fluency and accuracy) quality of a written text is positively correlated with the incorporation of journaling in the classroom, which was certainly promising for the case pertaining to this study.

### **2.2.5 Autobiographical writing/Lifewriting**

Autobiographies are stories of good or bad experiences which might have happened to anybody in any time of his/her life. Birren and Cochran (2001) state that an autobiography is “a

life history told by the person who lived it, a form of nonfiction writing that dates from the earliest recorded time” (p. 18). Also, the authors add, an autobiography “can be told in any number of ways. A person may write his or her history as an adventure, profile, humor piece, children’s book, or coming-of-age story, or in some other form” (p. 19). Whatever the student’s written style is, they will always tell details about who they are. This was positive for this study as students were expected to remember some experiences (life stories) in writing in a foreign language and write them on a journal. This not only required that they thought of the language to use, but also that they were involved personally in the process. Besides, they reflected on the cohesion of the stories at the end of the process, as formerly mentioned. At the time of reflection, there are some possible questions the teacher may ask as those proposed by Gale (1994): “why did you choose to write about this experience? How did this experience change your perception of yourself...? What did you learn from this experience? How has the experience changed your life?” (p. 7). According to the author, these questions have the potential to raise awareness in students whenever teachers ask them about any activity they have to do.

McCarthy (1994) reports the case studies of two children who were part of a “fifth/sixth-grade classroom of 28 ethnically diverse students [...] in an elementary school situated in a middle-class neighborhood in New York City” (p. 182). The first case is that of a 9-year-old child of Puerto Rican descent, who liked writing though acknowledged to often suffer from writer’s block. ‘Anthony,’ as called by the author, expressed that he liked writing from experience “because he could write with his “heart,” whereas [in past classes] he used his “head” to write reports” (p. 184) and so decided to write about his grandmother. The author reports that Anthony “had written seven pieces about his grandmother in his notebook. He selected many lines from these stories about his experiences with her and made several revisions before his



final draft” (p. 184). The story that Anthony wrote was filled with adjectives and experiences that he had had with his grandmother, to ultimately end with the moment when he had to witness his death. McCarthy (1994) points out the importance of such piece of writing by highlighting:

the therapeutic value for Anthony in having the opportunity to experience this significant event with his teacher and peers. Like therapists’ clients who keep a journal of their feelings in order to work through them, Anthony may have been able to work through his sadness and loss by writing about his grandmother. (p. 185)

The second case study is that of ‘Anita’, an African-American child who lived with her mother and her brother. Anita constantly wrote about her negative personal experiences with her bully brother and an abusive father, but also with a grandfather that was good to her (p. 186). Although Anita was “excited enough about her experiences with her notebook to tell a woman she met on the [subway] train about what a notebook was [...and] encouraged the woman on the train to keep one” (p. 186), the study also reports that Anita expressed “conflict about whether to include events of a highly personal nature [...] for a wider audience” (p. 186). As Anita later chose to write about topics of less personal relevance and depth (in the writing teacher’s view), the teacher pushed for more “important” issues, to later find a revelation that caused discomfort in the student, the teacher and the researcher (pp. 187-188). The identified risks of writing from personal experience, McCarthy (1994) reports, include: “unintended consequences from what is revealed” if a teacher is not prepared for the consequences of what is shared, and “possibilities of limiting students’ voice,” whenever a different genre (e.g. fiction) could still offer opportunities to make sense without requiring students to reveal personal issues (pp. 188-189). It is important, then, to consider these potential risks in order to minimize hazards and to offer room to take advantage of the potential opportunities to engage students in writing that is meaningful and affectively positive to them.

Nicholas, Rossiter and Abbott (2011) also report on the positive effects of incorporating stories (spoken and written) in the ESL classroom by gathering the perspectives of instructors and their students “on the use of story and its perceived benefits and challenges in adult ESL classrooms at a settlement agency in western Canada” (p. 254). Five female ESL instructors and nine adult ESL learners participated in the study, the latter coming from several geographical locations and from different linguistic backgrounds; four of the learners were enrolled in classes for newcomers in Canada and the other five were enrolled in an ungraded, community ESL class (p. 255). Through surveys, the researchers could establish that “story was seen as a medium through which to increase the richness of the language learning experience” (pp. 255-256) by facilitating the introduction of new vocabulary and the development of “other language skills and structures” (p. 257). Enjoyment was also identified, as “students reported that they enjoyed telling stories about themselves and listening to stories about other people [...although] few had had an opportunity to write stories in their L1” (p. 258). The findings show that stories engaged students in the classroom as stories “are one medium which attracts we people; ... it is making classroom interesting” (p. 261). The authors close by offering some guidelines for the use of story, among which they recommend respecting learners and their right to non-participation, and valuing the wealth of learners’ personal stories and experiences (p. 262). These guidelines agree with the findings in McCarthy (1994) and, what is more, illustrate the importance of giving students a say in their own writing process; this leads to valuing their autobiographical writings as personal outcomes, rather than just products of de-personalized learning.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented and discussed, based on theoretical grounds, the relevant constructs of this study, as well as some of the relevant state of the art in the field of

autobiographical writing, journaling, and the development of written cohesion. The next chapter presents the research design framing this study.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the type of the study carried out and its implications in the classroom. There is description of the setting in which the study was conducted. As such, this chapter presents an account of the participants, the researcher's role, and the data collection instruments and procedures that were applied during the process. Finally, materials, procedures to ensure validity and the ethical considerations of the study are presented.

### 3.2 Type of study

This was a qualitative action research study. Qualitative research, according to Wallace (1998), is “a type of investigation in which there is a substantial subjective element” (p. 258). It follows from this that this type of research describes and uses data which cannot be counted or “measured in an objective way” (p. 38). As to action research, Nunan (1992) argues, is the process undertaken by classroom teachers who are “interested in exploring processes of teaching and learning in their own context” (p. 18). Similarly, Sagor (1993) depicts action research as a process “conducted by people who want to do something to improve *their own situation*” (p. 7) and describes action researchers as people who “look at what *they themselves* are or should be doing” (p. 7). Likewise, Harmer (2007) poses that “action research is the name given to a series of procedures teachers can engage in, perhaps because they wish to improve aspects of their teaching, or alternatively, because they wish to evaluate success and/or appropriacy of certain activities and procedures” (p. 414). Finally, Burns (2010) states that the main idea of action research is “to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice” (p. 2). Therefore, it is clear that classroom action research is a reflective tool used by teachers to transform issues seen in classrooms, or

skills teachers think students could enhance using a specific method or strategy within a definite period of time. In this study, the theoretical perspectives above offered a sound basis to using action research to investigate a situation in the researcher's own setting, moved by the interest in enhancing the students' learning process, as also identified by learners themselves.

Thus, in this case, this type of study aimed at seeing the effectiveness of journals as a strategy to improve writing.

This qualitative action research involved an emic perspective to data collection and analysis. Freeman (1998, p. 70) describes this perspective as that from which meanings of a situation are assigned by the insiders of a particular sociocultural group. Given that this study intended to investigate the results of the application of a classroom writing strategy, the insider-looking perspectives from the students and from the teacher yielded insightful and relevant data, much more than an outsider perspective would do.

### **3.3 Context**

This study took place at Universidad El Bosque, a private university in Bogotá, Colombia, where English classes are taught mainly by non-native English teachers. In order to meet a graduation requirement, students have the choice of demonstrating sufficiency in a foreign language (mainly English) using an internationally-recognized examination, or taking the institutionally-accredited exam. Students also have the option to take two 90-hour levels of English, and provided they pass with a grade of 4.0 or higher (passing grade is 3.0 in a scale of 0.0 to 5.0), they will meet their graduation requirement. Despite having this array of options, it is uncommon to find students that do like the English language; instead, they enroll in the courses and do not make an effort to learn but only to pass the subject. Most of the students in this study

were beginners, given that they had not taken any English courses before and their command of the language was almost inexistent.

### **3.3.1 Participants**

The participants involved in this study were sixteen university students from different undergraduate and graduate programs. They were enrolled in the first course of the English proficiency program and most of them were between 17 and 19 years of age. Upon satisfactory completion of the course requirements, their level was expected to be CEFR A1. This means that, at the beginning of the course, students were only able to understand the most basic structures and vocabulary, which certainly impeded their communication. As the course advanced, however, students were ready to communicate with a wider, though still limited range of words and structures related to their immediate context, of course not without difficulty and great degree of hesitation.

### **3.3.2 Researcher's role**

The researcher's role in this action research project was the one of a teacher-researcher. The researcher asked for consent of students and the coordinator to carry out this study in class. With a double role, the teacher-researcher acted as an inside teacher that dealt with the pedagogical processes of the class and also took part as an inside-researcher conducting the study and collecting and analyzing data.

### **3.3.3 Ethical Considerations**

This research project addressed ethical considerations by assuring the following aspects throughout the process: confidentiality and responsibility.

In this study ethical considerations were taken into account during all the research by assuring confidentiality and responsibility to the study. Confidentiality was one of the aspects

taken into account. Confidentiality as affirmed by Burns' (1999) "ensures that the identities of those involved in the research are not made public, thus reducing the likelihood that they may be judged negatively by colleagues or supervisors" (p. 71) So, the participants were given a consent letter (Appendix A – Student's Consent Letter) to ensure that they understood what their participation in the present project entailed and take part in this project if they decided to do so. It is worth mentioning that the participants' names were not revealed in any of the stages or results of the research. Student-participants were explained orally what the research project was about and what their participation entailed. Also, another consent letter was handed in to the coordinator of the institution (Appendix B – Supervisor's Consent Letter) asking her to give the researcher permission to do the research. The other aspect taken into account was responsibility as the coordinator of the program was also asked to sign a consent letter, similar to the one given to students, where it said the goals and benefits that this study could have for the institution, and also for students such as them to begin being more aware of their learning process.

### **3.4 Data Collection Instruments**

#### **3.4.1 Description**

This research used the following instruments for data collection: journals (artifacts), a mid-study questionnaire, and a final semi-structured interview.

##### ***3.4.1.1 Students' artifacts (Journals)***

Although some of the literature has approached the use of journals in the classroom, there is much to find out about their usefulness. In this case, journals were used to record students' life stories written on every writing class with the purpose of seeing if students improved or not cohesion in their informal writing. It is worth mentioning that the journal entries were saved in electronic manner for the purpose of facilitating the further data analysis. The participants in this

study were asked to write a predetermined number of words in every journal, and this number increased from earlier to later compositions.

#### ***3.4.1.2 Questionnaires***

A questionnaire was applied at the middle of the process for students to do some reflection on the three texts they had already written. The researcher selected this instrument because, as Freeman (1998) states, it looks for “responses to closed or ranked questions/options and/or open-ended personal opinions, judgements [sic] or beliefs” (p. 94).

#### ***3.4.1.3 Semi-structured Interviews***

An interview was applied at the end of the process of implementation to raise students’ awareness on how much they thought they had progressed, if they think they had. The choice of this type of interview is because it provides, as Burns (1999) claims, some advantages as “the emergence of themes and topics which had not been anticipated” (p. 120).

### **3.4.2 Materials**

The materials used for this project were chosen by the researcher. These were handouts on the training of life stories, each of the steps in the writing process, cohesion and linkers, and also about the ways to write a journal. Besides, the topics for every journal were provided before each written entry.

### **3.4.3 Validation and piloting**

In the first stage, a piloting of the instruments was applied to a similar population to see unexpected results and further enhance the application of the instruments before the data was collected. To obtain validity in the results of the data analysis, data were collected from different perspectives. Triangulation of the data from the three different instruments (students’ journals, questionnaires, and interviews) was made to see if there was a relation with the research



question. Then, in the following stages, the researcher applied the instruments, and finally analyzed the data. These data collected allowed the researcher to get final results in this research study.

This validity process was dialogic since, as Burns (1999) states, the information and procedures carried out in this research were shared with expert professors that guided the process, and also colleagues currently immersed in the field of education and action research, too.

## **Chapter 4: Pedagogical Intervention and Implementation**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a description of the pedagogical intervention that was implemented in this study. The intervention was intended to take place in eight weeks, thirty hours in total. The implementation was divided in five stages, all of which had leading questions that guided the researcher in the implementation, and helped the participants to become better acquainted with the stages of the study. At the beginning of the process the researcher provided input to the participants about what an autobiographical story is, about what journals are, how to write on them, and also about the writing process. All throughout the course of the study there was communication between the researcher and the participants in different ways, to guarantee effective accompaniment: face to face, via email, or by synchronous communication tools such as chat and video calls (e.g. Skype™).

For the intervention, lessons were planned taking into account the task-based approach in order to better students' writing skills by writing autobiographical life stories. The choice of this approach was supported by its affordance to provide students with a close-to-real context for using the target language. A task, according to Skehan (1998), is “an activity in which meaning is primary, [...] with an objective that can be assessed in terms of an outcome” (p. 95). Moreover, Richards and Rodgers (2001) mention that an important characteristic of a task is that it is ‘reality based’, which means that it “mirrors a real-world activity” (p. 235). Finally, Nunan (2004) states that real-world tasks “refer to the uses of language in the world beyond the classroom” (p. 1). So, what the researcher considered most important is that the tasks provided students with a context for using the target language in a meaningful way.

Life stories are meaningful in the sense that they are learners' memories, and they come with feelings of all kinds. Thus, this study decided to have students produce autobiographical life stories, and analyze their levels of cohesion as to their use of connectors between their sentences and paragraphs. Training and tasks were context-based, following Robinson's (2011) assertion, that tasks "provide a context for negotiating and comprehending the meaning of language provided in task input" (p. 2). Input content, then, was introduced in class, and it offered students sufficient context to facilitate their comprehension of the concepts of writing, life stories, and cohesion before they actually began writing their journal entries.

## **4.2 Visions of language, learning and curriculum**

### **4.2.1 Vision of language**

The language proficiency program at the Language Center of this private university conceives language as a means to communicate meaning. In this sense, communication is founded on the effective use of the language competences, among which the discourse competence earns great relevance. In this study, language was considered as a means to communicate through written real-life stories and that fact may help students to better structure their discourse (in sentences and paragraphs). So, being aware that the aim of this study is the possible enhancement of cohesion in text via the use of linkers and connectives, the researcher studied language from the perspective of discourse competence, which Brown (2007) defines as "the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances" (p. 380).

### **4.2.2 Vision of learning**

This study sees learning as a dynamic process. In order for learning to be effective, it needs to be meaningful. Since students are learning English in an EFL context, the teacher-

researcher needed to come up with topics that easily activated students' background knowledge and experiences. Brown (2007) defines meaningful learning as "a process of relating and anchoring new material to relevant established entities in cognitive structure" (p. 91). So, in order to ensure that the writing process was effective, the researcher gave the participants key context-based input so they knew and understood the key concepts of life story and cohesion, and how to use them when writing their journal entries.

#### **4.2.3 Vision of curriculum**

According to Harrison, Blakemore and Buck (2001), curriculum is defined as the planned sequence of formal instructional experiences presented by the teachers, who will decide how to implement the instruction strategies in the class. However, it is important that the learners' needs are not left aside, so they were taken into account for the process, too. The authors' idea is that a curriculum should be designed taking into account the students' context. For this reason, the curriculum must have objectives, content and methodologies related to those contexts. The teacher's role in the design of the curriculum is to use the chosen methodologies appropriately to apply them in the class in order to reach the objectives already established in each of the lessons (Harrison, Blakemore, & Buck, 2001).

The vision of curriculum of the Language Center at Universidad El Bosque can be found at its website. Its view of curriculum (Centro de Lenguas Universidad El Bosque) reads (own translation):

Every program of the Language Center is aligned with the parameters of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. [...The Language Center] aims for students to acquire speaking, listening, writing and reading skills, contributing to the development of bilingualism in a community oriented towards research, development, and the application of new technologies in languages different to their native one.

### 4.3 Instructional Design

At the beginning of the process the researcher provided input to the participants who wanted to take part of this project about what an autobiographical story was, about what journals were, how to write on them, and also about the writing process.

#### 4.3.1 Implementation

The following are the stages implemented throughout this process of research.

##### 4.3.1.1 Stage 1 – Exploration

This stage sought to get students acquainted with the concept, the form and the use of journals. For this stage there were two guiding questions: **What are autobiographical life stories?** and **What are journals?** Subsequently, participants were presented with a journal sample. With this, the researcher intended to give participants a clear idea of what journals are and what people normally write in a journal. The researcher also provided students with a sample life story with the purpose of getting them acquainted with life stories. This stage was intended to be completed along with Stage 2 in a two-week period.

##### 4.3.1.2 Stage 2 – Development of concepts

#### Guiding Questions:

#### **What is cohesion? How does cohesion make texts look better?**

Cohesion was a key concept on which this study focused. Because the participants' level of proficiency did not equip them with sufficient linguistic ground to tell a high quality text from a low quality one, they were presented with the concept of cohesion in an inductive manner, using a sample of a life story, highlighting cohesive devices (linkers and connectives) in an attempt to guide them towards a clear understanding of the concept. Sample texts were used to help students become aware of what was necessary to have good cohesion in a text. This stage

was completed face to face along with the first stage, four hours a week, for two weeks, eight hours in total.

#### ***4.3.1.3 Stage 3 – Journal creation and updating***

##### **Guiding Questions:**

##### **How do I create my own journal? What will I write about in my journal?**

At this stage, participants took initial steps on writing their own journals, which included selecting the topics to write about. The researcher offered a pool of topics, but participants were given a say and could suggest and choose other topics that they would like to write about. This stage was completed in four weeks, three hours a week.

##### **Step 1 – One week**

At this stage, some of the participants signed up for a free Google Account and some of them used their institutional address (@unbosque.edu.co), which is offered by Google. Then, they signed up for the cloud-based service Google Drive, in which they could create their journals and also share them with the researcher. In this way, the researcher could get online access to all the students' journals anytime needed. This facilitated the process of data management and the subsequent process of computer-aided data analysis. Having signed up, the students were given the chance to quickly explore the tools that Google Drive offered, to help them familiarize with the tool. This step took three hours in one week.

##### **Step 2 – Three weeks**

Upon completion of stage 1, in which the students dealt with the technology aspect of this study, they were ready to choose what to write about and to engage in writing. In this step, the students chose four topics (out of a pool of six) to write their entries. This done, the students

proceeded to write their first, second and third autobiographical stories. The researcher suggested that the participants wrote about the following topics:

- Your first day of school
- Your most memorable Christmas present
- An excellent or awful vacation you remember
- Your favorite past-time when you were a child
- Your best friend from childhood
- Your favorite teacher at school.

The writing entries were collected electronically and analyzed later by the researcher in the data analysis stage of this study. This step took three hours a week, for three weeks.

#### ***4.3.1.4 Stage 4 – Mid-process awareness-raising and end of writing – Two weeks***

At this stage, the researcher applied a questionnaire (Appendix E - Mid-Process Questionnaire) in an attempt to collect second-order data and to raise students' awareness of their process in cohesion development. To do so, the questionnaire addressed aspects such as the students' difficulties while writing, their writing process, and the tools and strategies they used while writing. Students also wrote their last autobiographical entry. This stage was implemented three hours a week, in two weeks, for an amount of six hours.

#### ***4.3.1.5 Stage 5 – Reflection and awareness-raising - One week***

**Question: Do I think that my writing improved or not? Why or why not?**

This stage sought to raise students' awareness by having them reflect on their writing process and on their perceived achievements with regards to cohesion. The researcher conducted an interview (Appendix F - Final Interview) with each student where they compared their first

journal entry with their last one and reported on their perceived improvement, supporting their answers with reasons. As well as that, the interview also involved questions that aimed to obtain data on the awareness raised after the process. This final stage took place in two weeks, two hours a week.

#### **4.3.2 Timeline**

The timeline for this study was designed by modifying the course schedule. This shows the stages carried out during the implementation. However, this was adjusted because of time constraints and unforeseen events. The timing and the activities in each of the stages can be seen in Appendix G - Pedagogical Intervention Timeline.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the pedagogical intervention implemented in this study. A description of the stages comprising the intervention and of the specific activities in which the participants and researcher engaged was made. A brief rationale was also offered to provide support on the choice of the stages and steps taken.



## **Chapter 5: Results and Data Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the researcher will describe the data analysis and procedures to follow in this qualitative research study, including findings and theory derived from data to answer the research question. The researcher will also present the codes and categories that emerged during the data analysis drawn from the concepts presented in earlier chapters.

For this qualitative research the grounded theory approach was considered, which, according to Strauss and Corbin (2008) is “a specific methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for the purpose of building theory from data” (p. 1). So, this research study did not begin taking into account theory to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but with a question which arose from a problem identified in the needs analysis.

### **5.2 Data management procedures**

The analysis from this research study is based on the data collected from students' journals (artifacts), a questionnaire, and a final interview. As it was mentioned earlier in this paper, the journal entries were collected and saved digitally for the purpose of facilitating their following analysis. First, every piece of data was coded with a letter identifying the instrument and the participant's initials (e.g. J0-ACG; Journal 0, Students' name) so to keep track of the submission of the data. Every set of instruments was kept in a separate computer folder. Journals were written in Google Drive, and downloaded in DOCX (Word 2010) format to a hard drive and backed up in computer folders, in an external drive, as well as in the cloud. The mid-term questionnaire was created in Google Drive and sent to students via Gmail for them to answer it in class. Interviews, in turn, were recorded using a professional Sony IC recorder; the device was

battery-powered, which is why back-up batteries were always at hand. The audio files were downloaded from the recorder to the computer and backed up in folders and in an external drive.

### **5.2.1 Data reduction**

Miles and Huberman (1994) define data reduction (also known as data condensation) as “a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that final conclusions can be drawn and verified” (p. 11). In this regard, what the researcher did was reorganizing and summarizing the data collected from the three different instruments taking into account similarities and/or differences. The following section is an explanation of how the researcher coded the collected data.

### **5.2.2 Data analysis methodology**

With the purpose of analyzing data, three coding procedures were applied: open, axial, and selective.

#### ***5.2.2.1 Open coding***

Strauss and Corbin (2008) define open coding as “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data” (p. 195). During this stage the researcher explored the data in the journals, questionnaires and interviews to identify relevant concepts which allowed data to be grouped into the future categories, according to the frequency observed in each case. Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used for this purpose; the program chosen was MAXQDA, version 11, which allows the researcher to code data in more than one way: e.g. by assigning a concept name to an identified phenomenon, or coding in-vivo, using the actual words that participants use as concepts themselves. Colors can also be used to facilitate the visual interpretation of the analysis. MAXQDA not only permits the analysis of data that lies in text, but it also lets the researcher analyze and code still images, audio and video;

the program also facilitates the transcription of audiovisual material. The fact that MAXQDA allows for coding of audio and video segments was particularly useful to analyze the data from interviews in this study, for it rendered the complete transcription of all interviews unnecessary.

To begin with, the researcher classified the data collected into first order and second order to differentiate its nature and to retrieve it more easily in further stages. The first step in the process of analysis was to do the open coding of the data collected in students' journals, questionnaires and interviews in order to find and identify the most frequent concepts. First order data came from the students' journals. And, second order data was extracted from interviews and questionnaires, too. Figure 1 shows a sample of some second order data in the open coding phase.

In the first order data, the frequency at which each kind of linker was used was identified. Each student's journal was examined to observe the type of linkers used and in-vivo codes were used. The researcher paid attention to the usage of the linkers in text, and only coded, and later grouped in categories, those linkers that were used correctly; the categories of linkers created all fit within those proposed by Harmer (2004): addition, time, result, and contrast (See Figure 2).

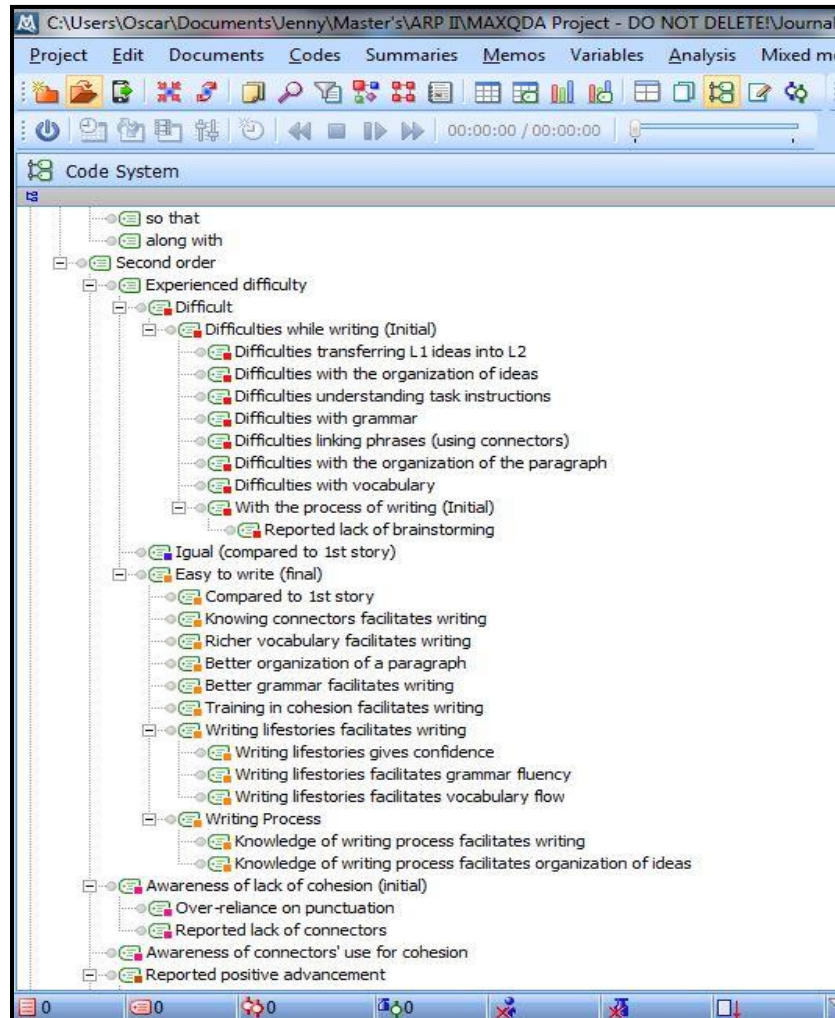


Figure 1: Open coding phase sample

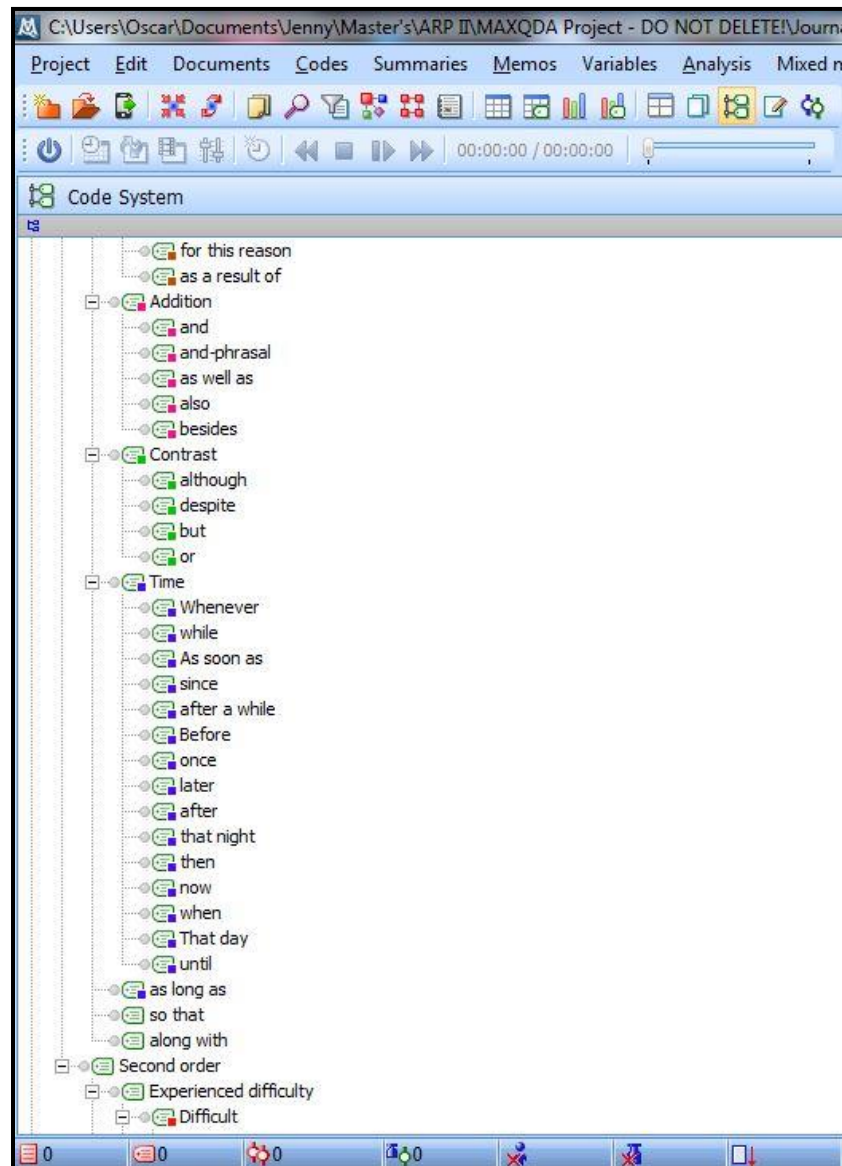


Figure 2: Coding of linkers

Second order data instruments permitted to go deeper into the analysis and observe phenomena that were not visible in the journals (e.g. perceptions, awareness, and strategies to write). In the same way as journal data, the answers to the interviews and to the questionnaire were analyzed to identify phenomena pertaining to this study, and were coded accordingly. Some second order data in the open coding phase can be observed in Figure 3.

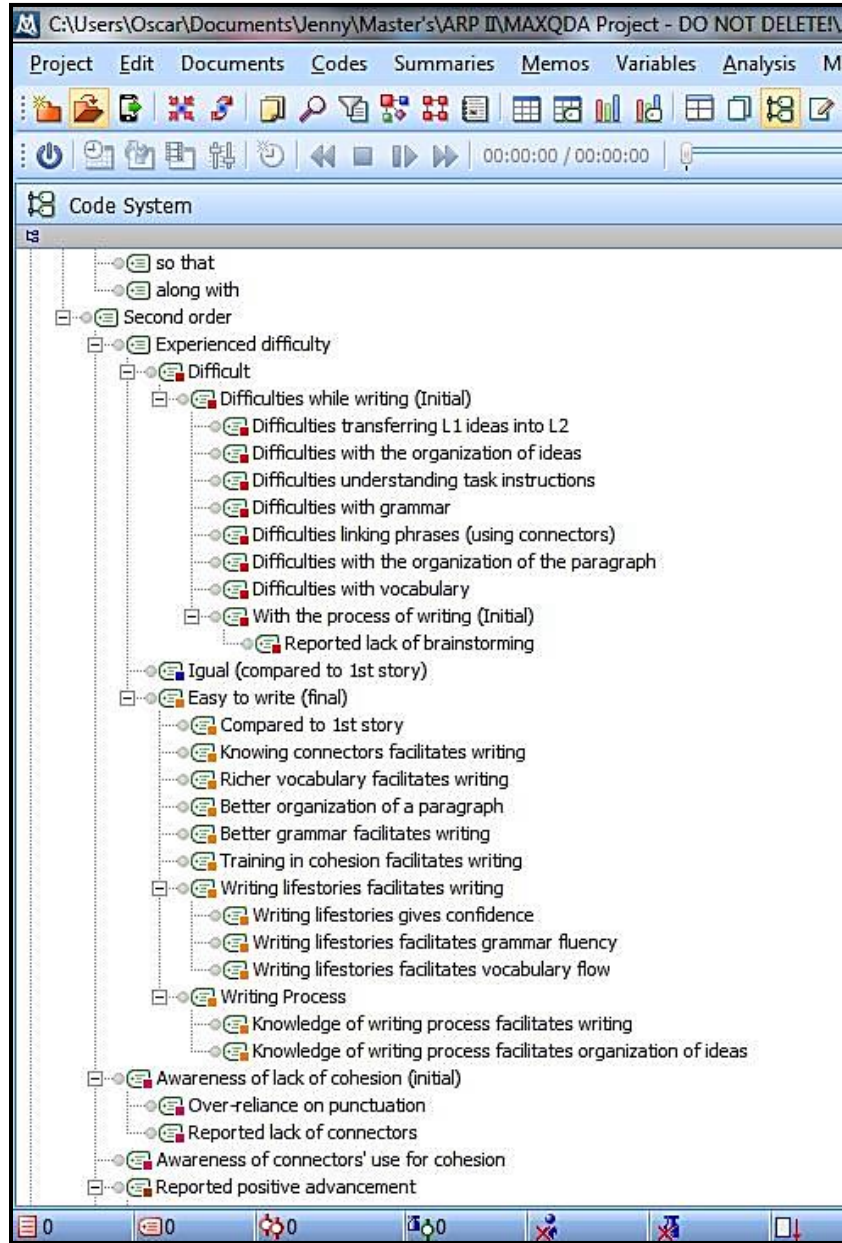


Figure 3: Second order data in the open coding phase

**5.2.2.2 Axial coding**

After open coding, axial coding was done. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008) it consists of “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (p. 195). That is, making relations between the codes already discovered in the open coding and the categories. This is, as Babbie

(2013) states, a “regrouping of the data, in which the researcher uses the open-code categories and looks for more analytic concepts” (p. 398).

After grouping codes which referred to similar, or the same phenomena, it was possible to work out the categories that sustain the findings of this study .See Figure 4 for an example of the axial coding phase.

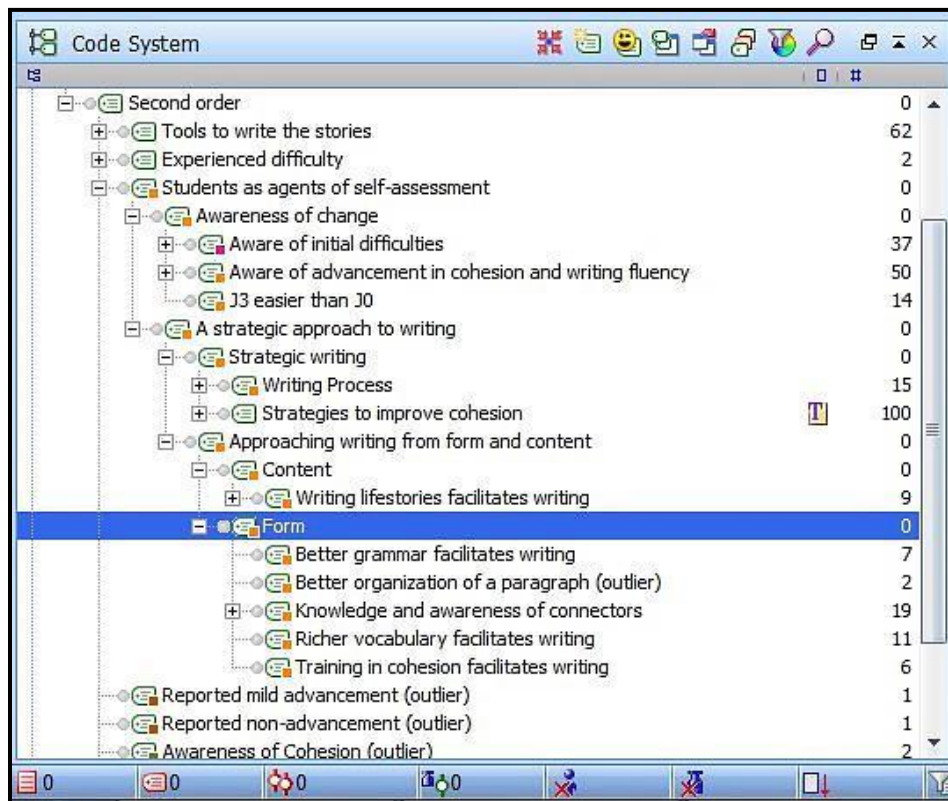


Figure 4: Axial coding phase sample

It is important to note that more codes appear in Figure 4 than in the categories described in the findings; this is so because these unreported codes were treated as outliers and did not make integral part of the findings due to their qualitatively small size.

### 5.2.2.3 Selective coding

As a final step, the analysis focused on selective coding. Johnson and Christensen (2010) define selective coding as “the stage of data analysis in which the researcher puts the finishing

touches on the grounded theory for the current research study” (p. 404). They also state that this is the time when the researcher reflects upon “data and the results that were produced during open coding and axial coding” (p. 404). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), to turn the data into comprehensible theory there are five steps to accomplish:

The first step involves explicating the *story line*. The second consists of *relating subsidiary categories* around the *core category* by means of the *paradigm*. The third involves *relating categories at the dimensional level*. The fourth entails *validating those relationships* against data. The fifth and final step consists of *filling in categories* that may need further refinement and / or development. (pp. 117, 118)

In sum, this is the stage in which the researcher related all the categories to identify a core category that finally allowed for the generation of theory from the analyzed data.

#### ***5.2.2.4 Data display and data verification***

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s (2014) definition of a display is “an organized, compressed assembly of information that allows conclusion drawing and action” (pp. 12, 13) effectively. In this study, the researcher used the charts, diagrams, or matrices that MAXQDA exports, to display data in such a way that patterns and interrelationships could be distinguished. These data displays were revisited often, to reach and verify conclusions. The following figure shows a map from the coding of a participant’s interview.



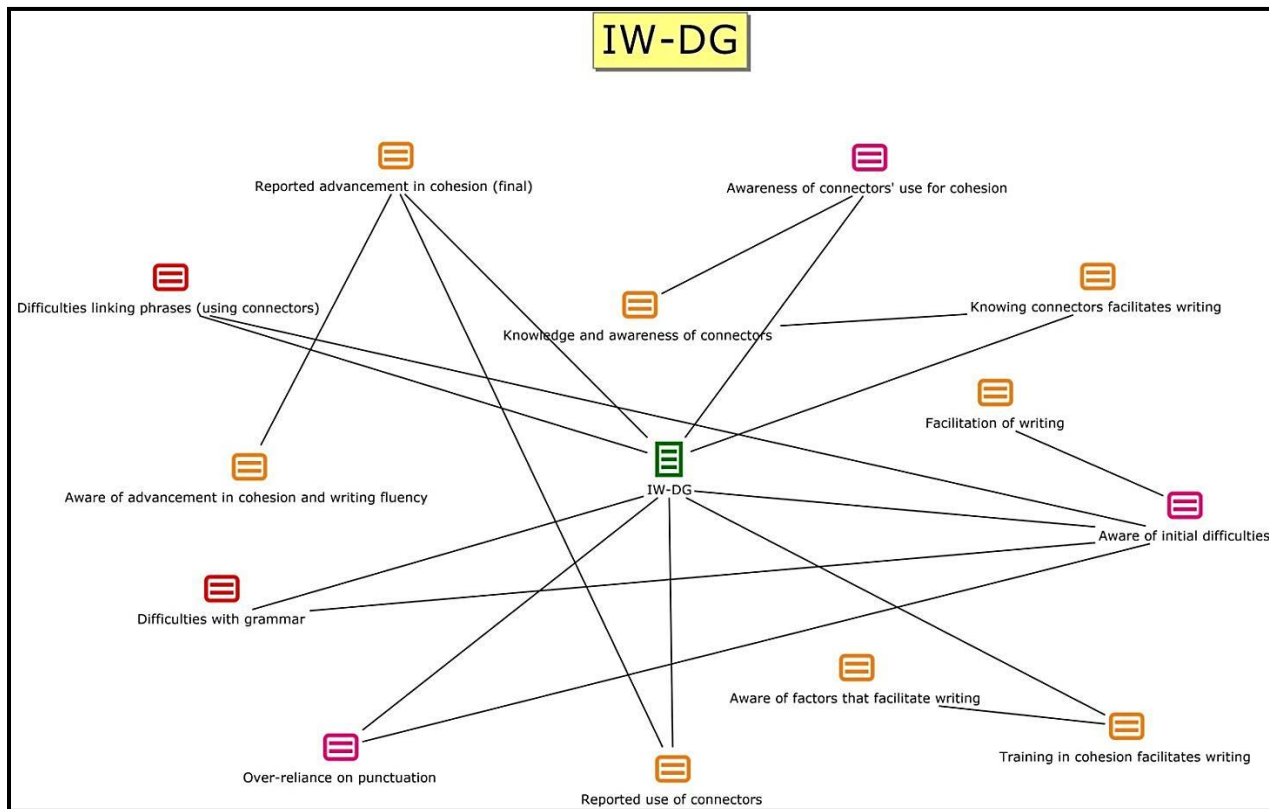


Figure 5: Map of the coding of a student’s interview (IW-DG)

### 5.2.3 Validation

Triangulation was done to validate data. Freeman (1998) states that triangulation is a validation strategy which “means including multiple sources of information or points of view on the phenomenon or question you are investigating” (p. 96). Another approach is Jonker and Pennink’s (2010) which defines triangulation as the “utilisation, inclusion and combination of different (data) sources in order to clarify *a number of* aspects of reality at the same time” (p. 104). Methodological triangulation, as used in this study, is the approach of using “multiple ways to collect data, and thus to study the problem” (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Freeman (1998, p. 97)). In the case of this study, the three main instruments or ways (journals, questionnaires and

interviews) were used to work out categories and conclusions during the data analysis phase. See Figure 6 for an example of data found in Interviews and in the questionnaire.

	Document: Interviews	Document: Questionnaire
Awareness of connectors' use for cohesion	Sí, porque con la ayuda de los conectores es más fácil unir los textos y todo tiene más, como, coherencia. Interviews\WV-ACG, 4-5	porque conocí algunas otras conjunciones que no conocía. Questionnaires\Research Questionnaire (Respuestas), 9
	Sí, sí hay diferencia y está básicamente en las conjunciones que se trabajaron. ... Al adquirir mayor vocabulario cuando se trabajaba con los diversos materiales que que nos brindabas para poder como desarrollar cada, cada, cada texto, cada redacción, eso nos iba generando como un mayor conocimiento entonces podíamos hacer una cohesión más fuerte con conjunciones que íbamos adquiriendo, que íbamos aprendiendo. Interviews\WV-BAG, 3	por el conocimiento de conectores para unir las oraciones de la lluvia de ideas Questionnaires\Research Questionnaire (Respuestas), 11  Por que comprendo mejor la forma de relacionar oraciones e interrelacionar palabras Questionnaires\Research Questionnaire (Respuestas), 5
	Y en la última las ideas y frases se pudieron unir a través de, de conectores. Sí, pues me sirvió de mucho y me mejoró pues debido a que la gramática ya la tengo más clara, me ayudó a mejorar mi vocabulario y me facilita más la escritura. Interviews\WV-CDG, 5-4	porque he conocido mas conectores y hace que enlace mejor mis ideas y las oraciones Questionnaires\Research Questionnaire (Respuestas), 16  porque tengo mejores bases a la hora de escribir conociendo conectores y palabras para mejorar la escritura. Questionnaires\Research Questionnaire (Respuestas), 3

Figure 6: Data triangulation (coding from interviews and questionnaire)

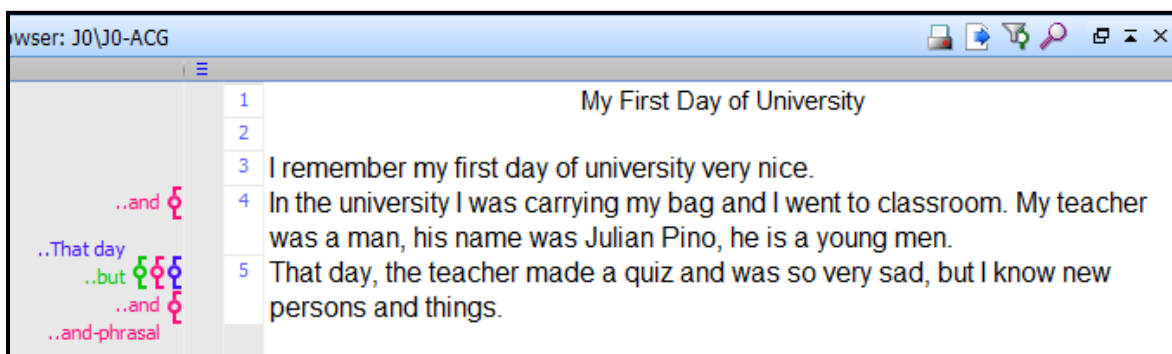
### 5.3 Findings

After the processes of open and axial coding, the following categories were created that fall within the realms of cohesion and awareness, as enquired in the research question of this study. These, as mentioned above, derive from the two types of data collected (i.e. first and second order). The categories are as follows:

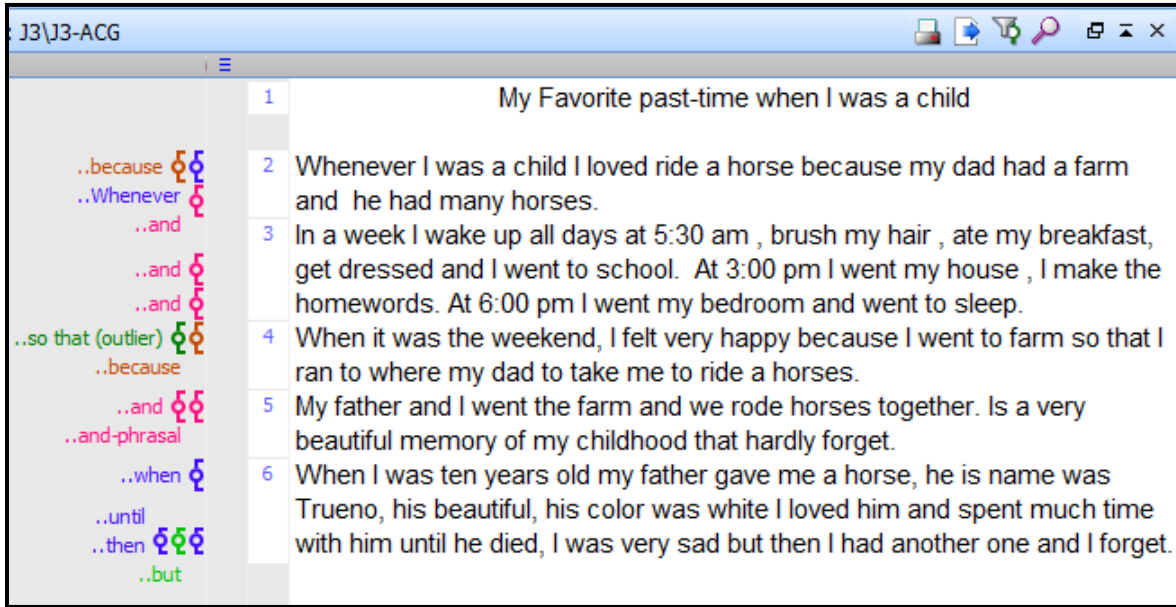
#### 5.3.1 Increased use of specific kinds of connectors

For the purposes of seeing which the most-often used linkers were, the word frequencies in each journal were normalized to 100 as all the written stories had a different number of words. This was done by multiplying the number of identified linkers by 100 and then dividing the

product by the average number of words across the participant population (averages: **61.9** in Journal 0, **77.3** in Journal 1, **133.0** in Journal 2, and **176.3** in Journal 3). The evolution of frequencies of the linkers in each of the journals is shown in Figure 7. This was done in order to obtain a real, proportional number of linkers used in each of the journals. After doing this operation and observing the frequencies, it was found that there was an increase in the use of additive linkers and time linkers from across Journals 0 (additive: 53.3 times; time: 12.9 times) to across Journals 3 (additive: 65.2 times; time: 22.7 times). Note that, as mentioned above, only correct usage of linkers was recorded in order to ensure that the numbers corresponded to real phenomena, and not to mere appearances of the word within the text. Then, it is reasonable to believe that students, indeed, exhibited an increase and improvement in the way in which they connected in-text ideas (See Figure 7). Also, the researcher took two participants' journals as samples for the purposes of seeing the evolution from Journal 0 to Journal 3, which can be seen below. (See Appendix H – Extra Sample of Evolution from Journal 0 to Journal 3 for an extra example).



Sample of a student's first journal writing (J0-ACG)



Sample of a student’s last journal writing (J3-ACG)

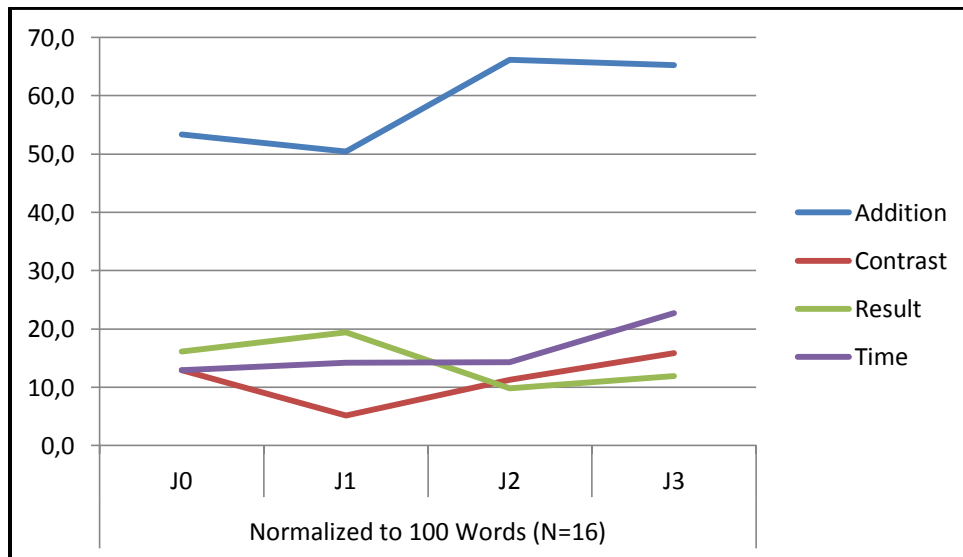


Figure 7: Evolution of frequencies from Journal 0 to Journal 3

The same cannot be confidently stated about contrast linkers and result linkers given their fluctuation, or even decrease in frequency. However, the nature of this finding was unsurprising

as the common exposure that participants have to linkers in the class textbook is mostly to the additive and time ones. Besides, the fact that participants used journals as vehicles to tell a life story in past where the events are often written in chronological order, could have been determining in the choice and use of these cohesive devices.

### **5.3.2 Learner Autonomy: Students as agents of self-assessment**

More important than the increase in the use of additive and time linkers, this study found, is the fact that students exhibited levels of sensitivity and awareness that led them to start taking control of their own learning. Thus, this category presents the findings related to students' development of autonomy based on their exhibited ability to self-asses their work and their progress and to tackle their writing from a strategic approach.

#### ***5.3.2.1 Awareness of change***

This study found that students developed a sense of awareness of the change that their writing underwent along the intervention, and of their perceived difficulty while writing. That is, they made explicit contrast between the most challenging aspects of writing their first and last journals, and supported their claims. This contrast mainly showed facilitation of writing in the last journal due to an increase of students' range of lexis. The following are excerpts from the interviews of two different participants who express their difficulty when writing the first story and the facilitation of writing in the last story they wrote.

Eh, mi mayor dificultad fue la redacción y no contar con el vocabulario necesario para poderlo redactar.

En la última historia pues todo me fluyó y pues tenía muchísimo más vocabulario para poderla redactar mejor.

Excerpts from an interview (IW-EC)

Bueno pues, eh, la, la mayor dificultad que tuve fue, eh, el no tener como las palabras en la cabeza y no poder organizarlas

Eh, sí. La verdad sí porque el escribir esto, eh, eh, mejoré con lo que anteriormente había dicho que era, eh, la falta de, de palabras en mi cabeza, eh, de organizar ideas y de que haya una cohesión entre ellas. Eso fue lo que generó, osea la escritura. Haber generado eso me sirvió mucho en eso.

Excerpts from an interview (IW-JEC)

Interestingly, students' awareness was not limited to their increase in vocabulary knowledge and use. Participants also reported having achieved better levels of cohesion thanks to using more linkers in their last journal story, compared to those that they had written in their first one. This reveals not only their ability to self-assess their progress and to do it right, but also their awareness of the role that linkers play as textual cohesive devices. Below are three excerpts of different participants' responses to an interview question that asked whether they could see any difference between the cohesion in their first and last journals.

Eh, sí veo una diferencia muy grande y es que en la primera historia yo solamente pues hacía oraciones y un punto, osea nunca, nunca tenía como conexión una oración con otra, y en el último párrafo yo ya pude, ya aprendí conjunciones, ya aprendí conectores, y ya aprendí a relacionar una frase con otra.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-DG)

Sí, pues sí se notó la diferencia ya que las ideas de la primera historia no iban muy relacionadas entre sí, y en la última las ideas y frases se pudieron unir a través de, de conectores.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-CDG)

Sí, sí se puede ver diferencia. Por ejemplo en la primera, en la primera historia, eh digamos, eran oraciones simples. Ya para la tercera, la tercera historia las oraciones son más fluidas y se utilizaban las, las conjunciones como, como enlace de textos de entre oraciones y oraciones.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-JAA)

### 5.3.2.2 *A strategic approach to writing*

As students' awareness of progress increased in terms of their perceived difficulty to write, of their range of lexis, and of the role of linkers in the production of a cohesive text, so did change the way in which they engaged in their writing tasks. As data revealed, students adopted a strategic approach to writing that, combined paying attention to text form and content, as well as to the use of strategies to facilitate the task.

5.3.2.2.1 *Approaching writing from form and content.* Data reveals that students perceive and approach writing as a combination of two aspects: **form** and **content**; an effective combination of these two proved useful for students to engage in writing. Form is related, first, to vocabulary, which, according to the participants, was essential to write their stories considering that, without it, their stories would not have been fluent. As it was mentioned above, students' increase in lexis made it easier for them to write, which here is shown as exhibit of the attention that they paid to this aspect of their texts. See the excerpts below from the mid-intervention questionnaire and from a final interview.

la idea de escribir sobre mi vida  
hace que se llene de vocabulario  
mi cabeza y mejorar en hacer  
oraciones que sean correctas

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (JEC)

Digamos, arranca desde la primera, la segunda es mucho más fácil, la tercera se hace más fluida, sobretodo porque ya uno tiene un vocabulario y porque las ideas son un poco más claras.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-JAA)

Form also relates to grammar, which was also an important aspect for the participants because, reportedly, the more grammar they know, the better they write their sentences and

stories, too. This is a natural and expected claim, given that it is common for students, at all levels, to equate good writing with high grammar control. The following excerpts are from three participants' responses to the mid-intervention questionnaire and final interview where they report this attributed importance.

por que antes no conocía tanta gramática y no sabía como escribir en ingles si primero era una cosa y después otra ahora me parece mas facil ya que conozco las reglas y mucha mas gramática

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (DG)

La diferencia que pude ver fue en la parte de gramática, en la parte de redacción, y pues ha aumentado el vocabulario.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-MCN)

En la última historia ya, pues, ya es más fluido, porque ya uno conoce el pasado de una palabra, el presente de una palabra, cómo se complementa, cómo es, digamos el orden de la oración.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-AMP)

Furthermore, form was visibly related to the knowledge and correct use of linkers for cohesion improvement, too. The participants expressed that, thanks to the training received in cohesion, they could connect their ideas and sentences better in writing. As it was reported earlier, students' showed increased levels of awareness of the role of linkers to bring cohesion to text, which correlates well with and explains this conscious attention to their use in writing. To evidence this, there are three extracts below corresponding to a questionnaire and two interviews from different participants.



porque he conocido mas conectores y hace que enlace mejor mis ideas y las oraciones

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (EC)

En las últimas historias ya mirábamos los conectores que podíamos utilizar para conectar la frase y no como perder la idea en cada frase como nos pasó en la primera historia.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-MGV)

¡Sí, sí hay diferencia y está básicamente en las conjunciones que se trabajaron. ... Al adquirir mayor vocabulario cuando se trabajaba con los diversos materiales que que nos brindabas para poder como desarrollar cada, cada, cada texto, cada redacción, eso nos iba generando como un mayor conocimiento entonces podíamos hacer una cohesión más fuerte con conjunciones que íbamos adquiriendo, que íbamos aprendiendo.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-BAG)

Finally, it was found that content is related to the usefulness and relevance of writing autobiographical life stories. Data revealed that writing life stories helped participants to write more fluently because the topics were familiar and they could think of several ideas and vocabulary related to that type of text. This finding supports the choice of autobiographical writing due to the close connection that it establishes between the writer and the text. The following excerpts from the interviews and questionnaires support this finding.

El estar escribiendo sobre, sobre todo esto, temas que son muy familiares para uno, temas sobre los que uno conoce mucho, eh la fluidez al momento de escribir se mejora bastante.

Excerpt from an interview (IW-DOS)

la idea de escribir sobre mi vida hace que se llene de vocabulario mi cabeza y mejorar en hacer oraciones que sean correctas

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (JEC)

pues me parece que escribiendo acerca de uno, de las experiencias es mas fluida la lluvia de ideas y es mas facil las escritura

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (ACG)

5.3.2.2.2 *Taking small steps to write.* Within the strategic approach to writing, data revealed that students selected and continuously used two specific strategies to write: brainstorming and drafting. As it can be observed in Figure 8, all of the sixteen participant students reported using brainstorming, and twelve of them reported using drafting as a strategy to improve cohesion in their writing.

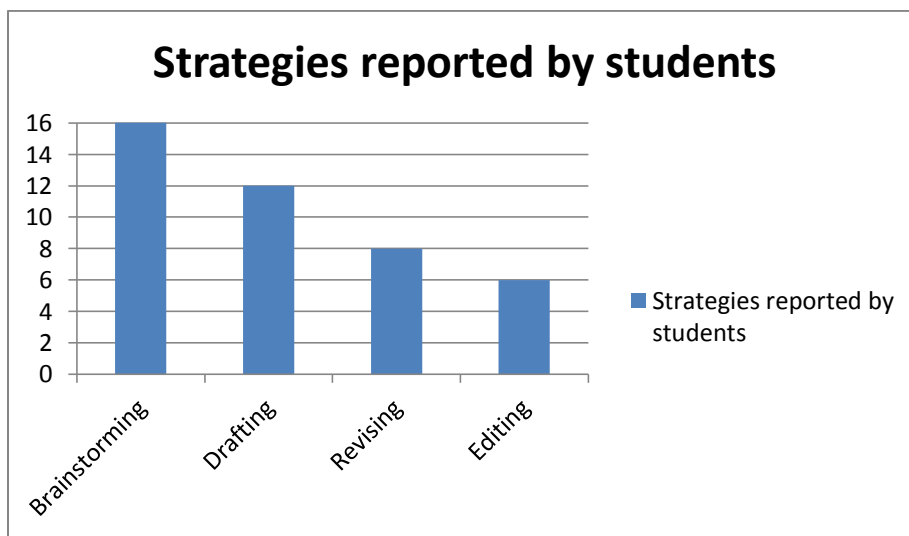


Figure 8: Strategies reported by students

The two reported strategies were useful to students in order to tackle a task of the difficulty of writing. Both strategies, student-participants reported in the mid-intervention questionnaire, were an aid to write better by helping to keep ideas in mind and to organize them in paragraphs later.

Lluvia de ideas y borradores sirven mucho para ordenar y ideas y luego plasmarlas en el escrito real.

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (PAS)

por que las ideas que genero las ordeno y escribo las palabras correctas

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (JEC)

brainstorming porque ayuda a que no se queden cosas importantes por fuera de la historia a contar

Excerpt from mid-intervention questionnaire (APG)

Data revealed that revising and editing were also used, though to a lesser extent compared to brainstorming and drafting. However, references to them in the questionnaire and in the interview made it visible that the concepts of these two strategies were confusing to them. This does not mean that either strategy was not used by students, but it does make it difficult to determine their individual usefulness for writing. Therefore, the researcher cannot make confident and valid claims or reach conclusions about their usefulness to the participants in this study.

Interestingly, although the study did not require student participants to continue using any strategies beyond the training stage, nor were exhibits of strategy use collected, students' reported strategy use reveals their relevance and usefulness for their writing objectives, and is

also evidence of the students' freedom of choice and decision-making power. This is, evidently, an important advancement in the development of learner autonomy.

### 5.3.3 Identification of core category

The categories mentioned and elaborated on above lead to an important conclusion and core category in this study, based on the premises that (a) cohesion development does lie on the correct use of linkers since they facilitate the linkage of ideas, and (b) students take an active, autonomy-building role in their own learning process, showing ability to self-assess and make decisions before and while writing. Thus, this study found that, for this population of students, **cohesion development lies beyond the use of linkers**, and it encompasses not only forms and content in text, but also an active posture on behalf of the learner. Writing is often a challenging task, due to the multiple factors (grammar, mechanics, cohesion, content and frequency of practice) that coexist in its construction (Bram, 1995; Chiang, 1999; Chiang, 2003; Liu & Braine, 2005; Schellekens, 2007; Johnson R. , 2012). Therefore, it would not be realistic, nor is within the scope of this study, to determine or state which single factor plays a more important role in its development or in students' learning advancements. Instead, as shown in the findings presented above, this study can claim that students' progress in written cohesion does relate to the formal characteristics of a text, but also that this progress is co-accompanied by factors pertaining to the development of learner autonomy.

### 5.4 Other findings

Related to the identified students' attention on vocabulary when building a text is the selection of tools to write and their usefulness. This study found that the most frequent tools that participants used were the dictionary and the teacher's help. The dictionary, participants reported, not only helped them understand the appropriate vocabulary that they needed to write

their stories, but also was a fundamental tool to improve writing. On a similar token, the teacher was also considered helpful to understand vocabulary; and asking questions to the teacher was considered useful at generating more knowledge. Some excerpts from the questionnaire exhibit students' words when asked about the choice and usefulness of these tools to write.

“[Los diccionarios, la profesora y el libro] *han sido de gran ayuda pues son herramientas fundamentales para mejorar el proceso de escritura.*”

Excerpt from the mid-intervention questionnaire (CDG)

“[La ayuda de la profesora y el diccionario online han facilitado] *el reconocimiento de vocabulario para hacer mas fácil la escritura de los textos*”

Excerpt from the mid-intervention questionnaire (MGV)

“[La ayuda de la profesora, ayuda del libro de ingles y diccionarios on line jugaron un papel] *muy importante a medida que indagaba para saber como expresar algo generaba mas conocimiento a lo que ya tenia*”

Excerpt from the mid-intervention questionnaire (EC)

This study's final finding has to do with text extension as participants advanced in their writing process; it was observed that the number of words written at the end of the intervention was more uniform across the entire group of participants than it was at the beginning. In Journal 0 students were asked to write 60 words and they wrote, in average 61.9. However, the deviation from this average was + / - 9.76 words. In Journal 3, the last journal, the required number of words was 180 words and students wrote an average of 176.3; here, the deviation was only + / - 4.12 words, revealing less variability in word extension (See Figure 9). Although not further

analysis was made of these quantitative data, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that lower-achieving students could catch up with their more capable peers, at least in the extension of texts.

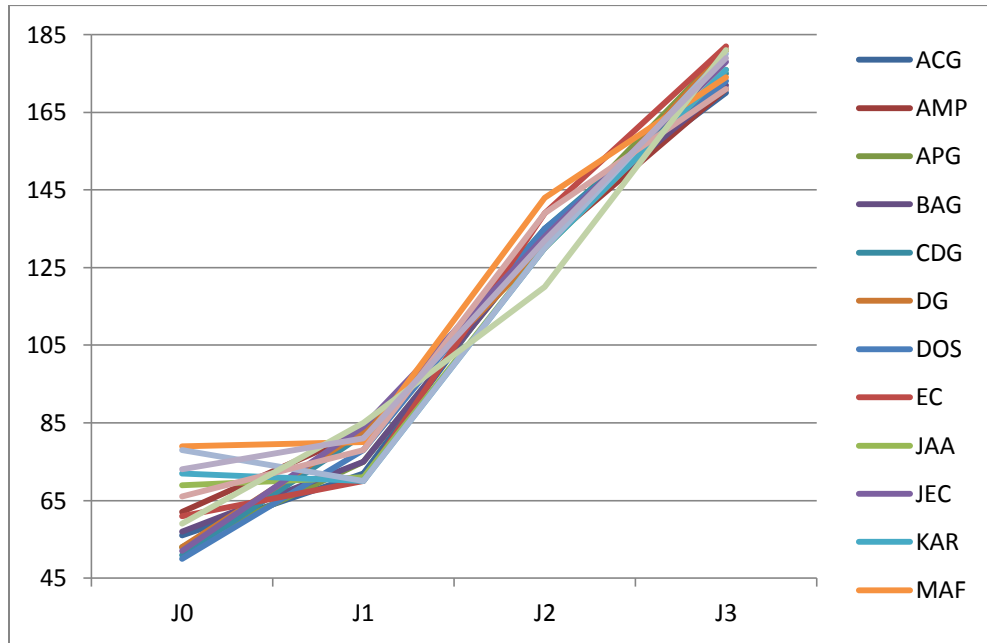


Figure 9: Standard deviation: (SD J3 < SD J0)

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The present study proposed to inquire into the raising of awareness and the enhancement of written cohesion, with specific regards to the use of connectors, through writing autobiographical, journal-based life stories. After data were analyzed and interpreted, a core category and subsequent sub-categories were generated to answer the research question “*to what extent might the use of classroom journals help A1 CEFR level university students raise awareness and enhance their written cohesion in autobiographical life stories?*” as can be seen in Chapter Five of this document. Thus, this chapter presents the resulting conclusions of this study, its pedagogical implications and its limitations. Further research suggestions will also be made.

### **6.2 Significance of the results and comparison with previous studies**

As shown in the findings presented in Chapter 5, this study found that students’ progress in written cohesion goes beyond the use of connectors. That is to say, that although the enhancement of writing does relate to the formal characteristics of a text like the correct use of cohesive devices, it is also accompanied by factors pertaining to the development of learner autonomy. This first formal aspect was revealed as students’ journals exhibited an increase in the use of connectors, specifically of addition and time, which is not surprising due to the type of text the students wrote in their journals and to their level of English. Thus, and although this study did not focus on overall text quality, it can be argued that as students wrote more and their level of English increased, they incorporated connectors more often and better to link their ideas in writing. This finding agrees with Chiang (1999; 2003) and Liu and Braine (2005) in that higher-quality texts show increased and better use of cohesive devices.

Perhaps the most remarkable finding in this study is the one related to learner autonomy. Given that learners could exercise self-assessment practices, they started to become managers of their own learning and they were able to make choices based on a higher level of awareness and on a strategic approach to writing. This is important as students could understand and report the changes in their writing quality along the whole process as well as their perception of difficulty in the task. They were able to tackle their writing strategically: on the one hand, approaching the task with a focus on form (vocabulary, grammar, cohesive devices) to deal with the construction of the text itself, and with a focus on content, choosing a topic within the range life stories that would make it easier and more meaningful to write due to familiarity and closeness to it, facilitating the flow of ideas and the fluency to write; and on the other hand, the students did so by picking and using strategies that allowed for a step-by-step writing process such as brainstorming and drafting to better cope with their writing tasks.

### **6.2.1 Pedagogical implications**

The findings in this study reveal the importance and usefulness of letting students take control of their writing process before, while and after they write. Writing is an essential skill for undergraduate and graduate students, and its enhancement is seen to be effective in student-centered, autonomy-fostering classes. Moreover, additionally to increasing students' levels of cohesion (performance) in an actual writing task, the approach followed in this study could confidently expect long-lasting effects, due to the possibility it offered to students to take some control of their own process.

Though not generalizable, the results of this may be transferred to teaching and learning situations in which students' linguistic needs are similar, even in settings at different educational levels (e.g. high school) or at different levels of proficiency. The results of this study, in



accordance with Chiang (1999; 2003) and Liu and Braine (2005), strongly indicate that advancement in control of cohesion is not inextricably tied to a certain level of proficiency or to a language in particular. Thus, SSL and L1 learners can also benefit from learning to use cohesive devices in written texts. In addition, provided that attention is paid to writing as a means of expression and not just as a set of formal rules, similar results with regards to the strategic approach to writing presented here should be achievable with students at a comparable level of proficiency.

The findings presented are important to the institution where the study was conducted because they show the usefulness of writing for a communicative reason. This goes along well with the vision of language at the institution, which sees language as a vehicle for the conveyance of meaning. An approach like the one in this study could help enhance students' learning at the institution, especially with those students who, for one reason or another, feel reluctant to tackle writing through homework, as it has traditionally been done in the classroom. However, the approach could be modified to create communities of practice by letting students work in groups and let them write and edit their stories through the use of Web 2.0 tools so to make the process more interesting.

The results from this study indicate that it is possible to approach writing from a different perspective, so helping change the common grammar-oriented approach that prevails in the ELT community worldwide. Writing, as mentioned earlier in this paper, is often neglected because it is time consuming or because other skills (e.g. speaking) are considered more important. We as English teachers should take into account that even if students do not talk about it, we could help them become more aware of the changes that their learning in each skill undergoes, and the importance of each, in order to help them gradually become more autonomous. Thus, research in

writing should be continuously done to find more and more efficient ways to make it easier and more likely to advance in skills other than listening, speaking or grammar.

### **6.3 Limitations**

The major limitation in this study was time. Due to unforeseen events such as student absenteeism, the researcher had to make a flexible chronogram to conduct the study having as many participants as possible. This meant that some extra sessions were held off the original plan to offer every participant the same opportunities. In addition to this, the researcher had to adapt the weekly workload of only two-hour classes three times a week so that the activities of this study would fit within the normal classes. This initially caused reluctance in students because they were concerned that they would not get to study all the units in the textbook. Thus, in an attempt to reassure them, the researcher showed the potential benefits of the study and the chronogram that showed how the study and the classes would complement each other. Finally, as the journals were required to be done digitally and some students were not skilled in using Google Drive, there was some training in how to use the tool.

### **6.4 Further research**

Further studies could examine how students tackle the problems that might arise in their finished products (not before or while writing- as this study showed), and how this may have an impact in their development of learner autonomy. Another research trend may be followed by investigating the role that affective factors (e.g. motivation, self-efficacy) play in the writing process. Maybe, through the usage and access to students' diaries, it would be possible to see if students' negative feelings towards writing could disappear or at least change to more positive ones, and also how such change could have a repercussion on their cohesion in writing.

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**Appendix A – Student’s Consent Letter**

Bogotá, D.C. Marzo de 2013

Asunto: Carta de Consentimiento Informado

Apreciado estudiante

En la actualidad estoy realizando un proyecto de investigación para la Maestría en Didáctica del Inglés de la Universidad de La Sabana. Este proyecto tiene la intención de involucrarlo en la tarea de escribir un diario para descubrir si de esa manera usted mejora o no sus habilidades de escritura en inglés.

Enfocaré mi proyecto en un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de primer nivel. Me encontraré con ustedes entre semana, en el tiempo de clase, para darles práctica adicional en estrategias de escritura. Yo recogeré los trabajos que hagan en clase, encuestas, y otra información a través de la realización del proyecto. El no querer participar en este proyecto no afectará su nota del curso.

Usted permanecerá en el anonimato en mi reporte escrito y cualquier muestra usada no incluirá sus nombres. Cada uno de ustedes será identificado con letras o números en el reporte.

En caso de tener preguntas relacionadas con mi proyecto pueden contactarme en el correo electrónico [jcosmap@hotmail.com](mailto:jcosmap@hotmail.com). Si no quieren participar de este proyecto de investigación, yo lo asistiré en el proceso de escritura de la misma manera.

Atentamente,

Jenny Carolina Osma Pinzón

PD: Favor completar la parte de abajo de esta carta y devolvérmela lo antes posible. Gracias

-----  
Voy a participar en el proyecto de investigación:

SÍ \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_

Nombre del estudiante: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B – Supervisor’s Consent Letter**

Bogotá, D.C. Marzo de 2013

Asunto: Carta de Consentimiento Informado

Coordinadora académica

Apreciada señora,

Este año estoy realizando un proyecto de investigación para la Maestría en Didáctica del Inglés de la Universidad de La Sabana. Este proyecto tiene la intención de involucrar a los estudiantes en la tarea de escribir un diario para descubrir si de esa manera ellos mejoran o no sus habilidades de escritura en inglés.

Enfocaré mi proyecto en un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de primer nivel. Me encontraré con ellos entre semana, en el tiempo de clase, para darles práctica adicional en estrategias de escritura. Yo recogeré los trabajos que hagan en clase, encuestas, y otra información a través de la realización del proyecto, los cuales no tendrán ninguna nota.

Los estudiantes permanecerán en el anonimato en mi reporte escrito y cualquier muestra usada no incluirá sus nombres. Cada uno de ellos será identificado con letras o números en el reporte.

En caso de tener preguntas relacionadas con mi proyecto puede contactarme en el correo electrónico [jcosmap@hotmail.com](mailto:jcosmap@hotmail.com). En caso de que el estudiante no quiera participar de este proyecto de investigación, yo lo asistiré en el proceso de escritura de la misma manera.

Atentamente,

Jenny Carolina Osma Pinzón

PD: Favor completar la parte de abajo de esta carta y devolvérmela lo antes posible. Gracias.

-----  
Voy a dejar que se realice el proyecto de investigación en el centro de lenguas de la universidad:

SÍ \_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_ Firma de la coordinadora: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C – Needs Analysis Questionnaire**

**Questionnaire > Needs analysis**

**Research title:** Developing first level university students’ skills of autobiographical life stories through journals in the classroom.

**Student’s name:** \_\_\_\_\_

1) ¿Te gusta escribir en inglés? Sí \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

2) ¿Cómo ha sido tu experiencia cuando escribes en inglés? Explica.

.....  
 .....

3) ¿Piensas que necesitas mejorar tu escritura en inglés? Sí \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ ¿Por qué?

.....  
 .....

4) ¿Puedes escribir: historias cortas, resúmenes, ensayos? Sí \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

5) ¿Puedes escribir un párrafo bien estructurado con una idea principal, ideas secundarias y una conclusión? Sí \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

6) ¿Qué haces antes de escribir un párrafo? Explica.

.....  
 .....

7) ¿Haces algo después de que tu párrafo está escrito? Sí \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

8) ¿Usas un diccionario cuando escribes? Sí \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

**Appendix D – Needs Analysis Interview****Semi-structured interview > Needs analysis**

**Research title:** Developing first level university students' skills of autobiographical life stories through the use of journals in the classroom.

**Student's name:** \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) Describe a fondo una tarea que tuviste que escribir en inglés.
- 2) ¿Qué fue lo que más se te dificultó al escribir la tarea?
- 3) ¿Qué aspectos crees que han hecho difícil tu experiencia a la hora de escribir en inglés?
- 4) ¿Usas alguna estrategia para escribir correctamente tus párrafos? ¿Cuál?
- 5) ¿Cuál estrategia tienes en mente para mejorar tu habilidad de escritura en inglés?
- 6) ¿Sigues algunos pasos para asegurarte de que tu párrafo esté correctamente escrito?  
¿Cuáles?

## Appendix E - Mid-Process Questionnaire

Hola

Gracias por tomar un poco de tu tiempo para responder este cuestionario. No tomará más de 15 minutos y la información será valiosa para conocer tus ideas actuales sobre el proceso de escritura que estás llevando a cabo.

Recuerda que la información recolectada sólo se utilizará para los propósitos de esta investigación, y tu nombre permanecerá siempre bajo estricta confidencialidad.

Muchas gracias,

Jenny Carolina Osma Pinzón

1. Tu nombre
2. ¿Cómo percibes tu dificultad para escribir una historia en este momento, comparada a cuando escribiste tu primera historia?  
  
¿Por qué te parece así?
3. ¿Crees que la cohesión en tus historias ha mejorado?  
  
¿Por qué lo crees así?
4. ¿Hasta qué punto sientes que esta mejoría o la ausencia de ésta se ha relacionado con la escritura de tus historias autobiográficas?
5. ¿Has usado alguna herramienta para escribir tus historias?  
  
¿Sí? ¿Cuáles?; ¿No? ¿Por qué?
6. ¿Qué papel ha(n) jugado la(s) herramienta(s) en tu proceso de escritura?
7. ¿Has usado alguna estrategia para mejorar la cohesión en tus historias?  
  
¿Sí? ¿Cuáles?; ¿No? ¿Por qué?
8. ¿Te ha ayudado esta estrategia?  
  
¿Sí? ¿Cómo?; ¿No? ¿Por qué?

**Appendix F - Final Interview**

Responde las siguientes preguntas después de comparar la primera y la última historia que redactaste.

- 1) ¿Puedes ver alguna diferencia entre la primera y la última historia? ¿Cuál(es)?
- 2) ¿Cuál fue tu mayor dificultad cuando escribiste la primera historia? ¿Por qué?
- 3) ¿Crees que el conocimiento adquirido sobre el proceso de escritura y la cohesión facilitó o no la redacción de las siguientes tres historias? Sí o no y ¿Por qué?
- 4) ¿Puedes ver alguna diferencia entre la cohesión de la primera historia y la última? Si sí, ¿cuál(es)? / Si no, ¿por qué?
- 5) ¿Podrías decir que la escritura de las historias en los diarios influyó o no en el mejoramiento de tu escritura? Si sí, ¿cómo? Si no, ¿por qué?

## Appendix G - Pedagogical Intervention Timeline

### Stages 1 and 2

	<b>Exploration and Development of Concepts</b>
<b>Timing</b>	Weeks 1 to 4
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Input on the concepts of life stories, the writing process and cohesion was given so to raise awareness. This input was given in handouts:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Definition of life stories, with a short sample of them, and an exercise.</li> <li>- Students read about writing problems and did an exercise on how to cope with them.</li> <li>- Students received input on the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing). Each of these steps had its own explanation.</li> <li>- A handout on punctuation was given to be used during the process of editing.</li> <li>- Students received a handout on cohesion and linkers so to use it in the writing of each life story.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Stage 3

	<b>Journal Creation and Updating</b>
<b>Timing</b>	Weeks 5 to 8
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students signed up for a Google account if they did not have one already.</li> <li>• Students explored the tools Google Drive offers.</li> <li>• Students chose four topics out of six given by the teacher-researcher.</li> <li>• Students created a folder named 'Journals' in which they kept every story they wrote.</li> <li>• Students wrote three journal entries.</li> </ul>

### Stage 4

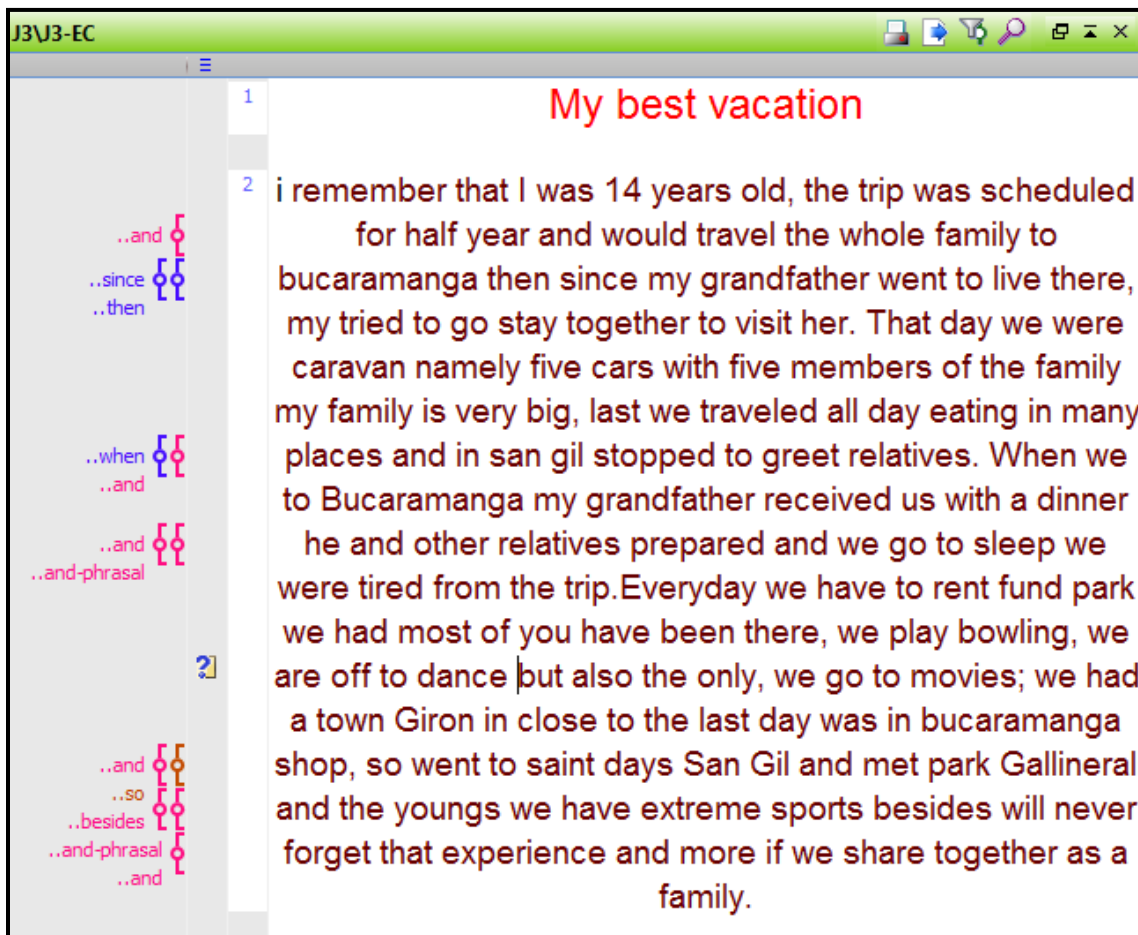
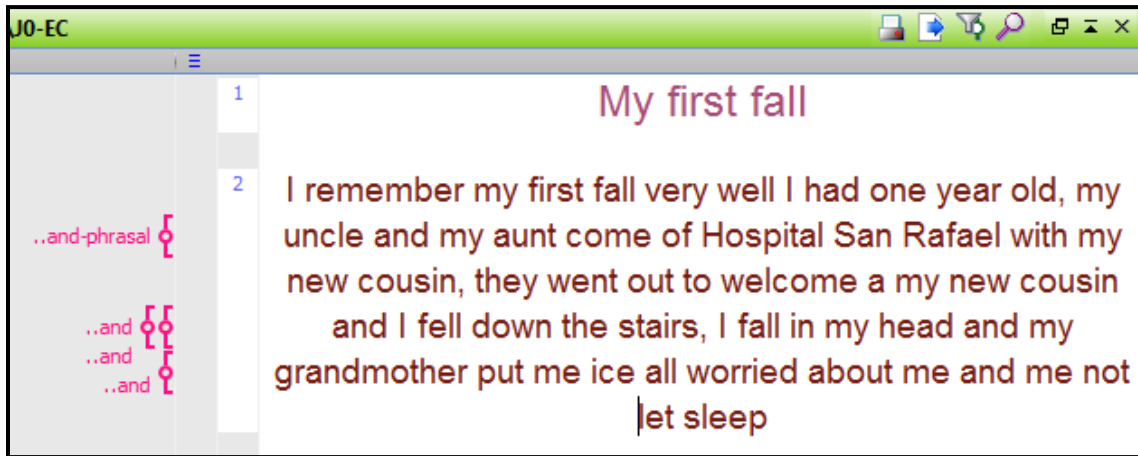
	<b>Mid-process awareness-raising and end of writing</b>
<b>Timing</b>	Weeks 9 and 10
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The awareness-raising questionnaire was applied.</li> <li>• Students wrote their final journal entry.</li> </ul>

### Stage 5

	<b>Reflection and awareness-raising</b>
<b>Timing</b>	Weeks 11 and 12
<b>Activities</b>	Semi- structured interviews were conducted.



**Appendix H – Extra Sample of Evolution from Journal 0 to Journal 3**



Excerpts from a student’s journal writing (J0 and J3-EC)