

## Original Article

# English Cohesive Devices Used by Indonesian EFL Learners in Their Writing

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Cohesive devices are regarded as an important linking marker in organizing the sequence of the idea. The purpose of this study was to find out the cohesive English devices used by Indonesian EFL students in their writing. It also dealt with the factors affecting students' writing ability with regard to English cohesive mastery.

**Methodology:** Participants in the current study were 100 sixth-semester EFL students studying at universities in Kupang, Indonesia. The instruments used were fill-in-the-blank tests and a sequence of pictures. The analysis of collected data revealed that the respondents were able to use references and conjunction in the fill-the-blank writing tasks.

**Results:** It was found that substitution and ellipsis were considered difficult cohesive devices for students. The findings also confirmed that the respondents had problems using an ellipsis based on a sequence of pictures in their writing. The obtained results indicated that the Indonesian students favored using reference and conjunction cohesive devices. Various factors, such as a lack of teachers' knowledge in introducing cohesive devices to students, can affect Indonesian learners' use of cohesive devices.

**Conclusion:** The results of this research provided a general understanding of cohesive devices in Indonesian EFL learners' writing. This will help to identify students' problems in using cohesive devices, such as overuse, underuse, or never use of certain cohesive devices. Teachers are suggested to introduce the devices, such as substitution and ellipsis, in writing class.

## 1. Introduction

Grammar deals with two main components, morphology and syntax. Morphology deals with morphemes and words while syntax with phrases, clauses, and sentences. That is why talking about grammar always deals with how words are combined to form phrases form clauses, and clauses to form sentences. Richards and Schmit (2010) define grammar as a description of the structure of a language and the way through which linguistic units, such as words and phrases, are combined to produce sentences in the language. It usually takes into account the meanings and functions these sentences have in the overall system of the language. Similarly, Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) and Salkie (1995) believe that grammar is the study of how words are combined to form sentences. In addition, Patel and Jain (2008) state that grammar is a scientific statement of the principles of good usage concerning the

relation of words in sentences. It means that studying grammar enables students to know how to construct meaningful sentences. Grammatical rules are applied both in spoken and written language.

Different languages apply different grammar. Grammar provides ideas and understanding to make language comprehensible (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002). The lack of students' knowledge in grammatically constructing sentences is one of the biggest problems in EFL writing (Alisha et al., 2019; Benu, 2018; Lestari, 2020; Nenotek & Benu, 2022). Grammar is the main reason students struggle to produce good writing (Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Febriani, 2022). According to Bulqiyah et al. (2021) not only the grammatical aspect but the linguistics knowledge in general (e.g., syntax, semantics) are areas within which EFL students have difficulty. A previous study by Nenotek et al. (2022) on

30 students in the fifth semester of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana, Indonesia, showed that students faced difficulties in essay writing. Those difficulties were related to aspects of academic writing, namely content, organization, discourse, and mechanics.

Several studies revealed that one component that students should develop to have good writing is cohesive devices (Albana et al., 2020) since there is a strong relationship between knowledge of cohesive devices and writing skills (Islami et al., 2022). The use of grammatical cohesion devices can develop the quality of students' writing. It can also create a relationship and connectedness between one element and another in the text (Rudiana, 2021). So, the lack of knowledge or understanding of cohesive devices, for example misusing the devices, will lead to poor writing (Aqmarina, 2020; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Ludji et al., 2022; Nilopa et al., 2017; Nindya & Widiati, 2020; Prasetyaningrum et al., 2022). This might be a challenging task for English teachers, especially for non-native English teachers, to increase learners' proficiency in using cohesive devices. It also has to be admitted here that the big problem may be not only the students but also the teachers themselves, as found by Hung et al. (2021) when comparing native and non-native English teachers in using cohesive devices in their writing.

Cohesive devices are the use of certain words and expressions that function to link the sentence together. Cohesive devices make a text coherent. According to Connor (1996), cohesive devices are words or phrase, which are used as indicators to the readers to connect with what had already been stated or soon will be stated. Besides that, cohesive devices are easy to identify (Salkie, 1995). The cohesive devices consist of grammatical and lexical elements in the text. Grammatical cohesions are subordinate conjunctions, coordinating conjunctions, adverbial connectives, and implicit connectives (Klimova & Hubackova, 2014). Subordinate conjunctions show temporal (when, as soon as), causal (because), concessive (although), purpose (so that, in order), and conditional (if). Common coordinating conjunctions are *and*, *but*, and *or*. Adverbial conjunctions are sentence-modifying adverbs that express a discourse relation, for example, *however*, *therefore*, *then* including prepositional phrases like *as a*

*result*, *in addition* or *in fact*. Implicit connectives are intended to capture the connection between two sentences appearing in adjacent positions. Halliday and Hasan (1989) introduce five major divisions of cohesive devices in English. These are reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction are classified under grammatical cohesion; while reiteration and collocation are classified under lexical cohesion. So, they were of the opinion that analysis of cohesive devices could be used as a means to assess writing.

Given the above-mentioned, it is important to know how EFL learners apply cohesive devices to build cohesion in their writing. This paper focused on students' writing ability, particularly grammatical cohesion, including substitution, conjunction, ellipsis, and conjunction. Moreover, it aimed to spot the areas of difficulty and the related factors in Indonesian EFL learners while applying cohesive devices.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research design

This research employed qualitative data analysis of data. The qualitative approach could provide the chance for researchers to analyze the data in-depth, particularly since this study involved written texts as the main source of data (Murtiana, 2019).

### 2.2. Participants

There were 100 students in the English Education Study Program at universities in Kupang, Indonesia. The participants were EFL learners and planning to be English teachers.

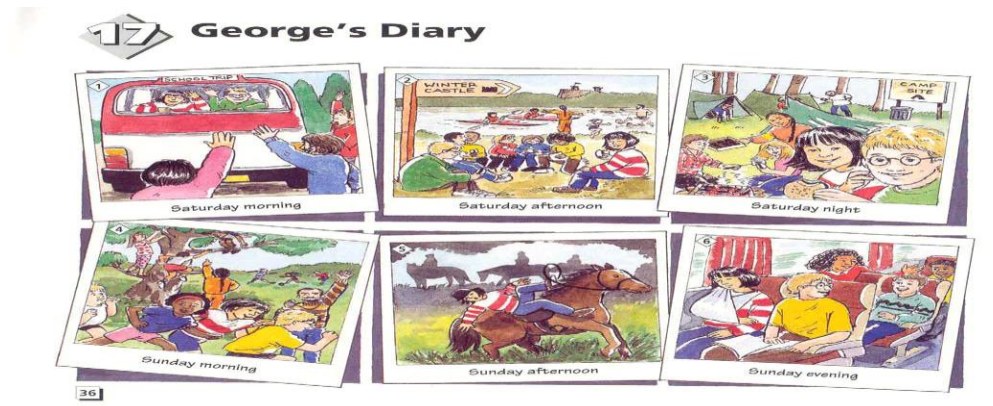
### 2.3. Instruments

Students were examined using a sequence of pictures and a fill-in-the-blank test. The sequence of pictures consisted of six pictures displayed in series to students. Fill-in-the-blank tasks contained seven topics of wiring with several missing words (Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Fill-in-the-blank Task Used as an Instrument*

no	Title of fill-in-the-blank tasks	Resources
1	The life of Mary Reibey Recount	<i>English plus 4</i>
2	Fishing up a great island Narrative	<i>English plus 4</i>
3	Breaking the ice in Britain Argumentative	<i>Look ahead: English course 3 for senior high school</i>
4	Litter is a problem in our City	<i>Changing times, changing tenses</i>
5	Making fried rice Procedure	Author-made
6	Our House Descriptive	<i>English plus 4</i>
7	Handicap people do useful work	<i>Changing times, changing tenses</i>



**Figure 1.**  
A Sequence of Pictures. Source: Pictures for Writing (Stephens, 1998)

### 2.4. Procedure

To begin the study, the fill-in-the-blank tasks were given to the students. In the next step, they were asked to write down the sequencing pictures into a story using the proper cohesive devices, such as reference, substitution, conjunction, or ellipsis (Figure 1).

A short introductory paragraph was provided as follow: *My name is George although I am busy but it is good to write my own diary. The last Saturday morning was my school trip. We set off at .....* This short introduction aimed to lead respondents' opinion towards the text.

After students took part in the tasks, cohesive devices were identified and tabulated by the researchers. This study concentrated on the frequency of cohesive devices, including reference, conjunction, substitution, and ellipsis, acting as grammatical cohesion. The second step was interpreting learners' ability to use English cohesive devices to find out the cause of cohesion mastery.

### 3. Results and discussion

A paragraph's coherence is crucial for the ideas to flow naturally and for the reader to comprehend the steps of the story without any difficulty. Coherence is indicated by the use of appropriate transition signals, such as *first, although, then, and finally*, as well as pronouns. Moreover, the relationship between the ideas is shown using transition phrases, such as *first of all, for example, in conclusion, as a matter of fact, the next, in other words, and on the contrary*.

Transition signals are words or phrases that connect paragraphs or sections in writing. They function to show the relationship between one part and another. Transition signals can be used in both written and spoken contexts,

such as narratives and speeches. The use of transition signals are very useful for building a better understanding of readers or listeners. Transition words help readers or listeners understand the flow to be conveyed. Transition signals become a bridge that also makes a series of sentences not bland and boring.

The findings of the current study indicated that all students were not aware of or able to make use of their composition flow smoothly. The distribution of frequency on the use of each category is figured in Table 2.

As can be seen, conjunction is the most to appear in students' writing followed by reference and substitution. The similar phenomena of the students' writing of the sequences of pictures showed the dominant grammatical cohesive devices used were reference and conjunction. References, such as *he, she, it, her, and him* and conjunctions like *after that, and, and but* were used the most followed by substitution. In the current study *there* was the highly frequent substitution used for *place*.

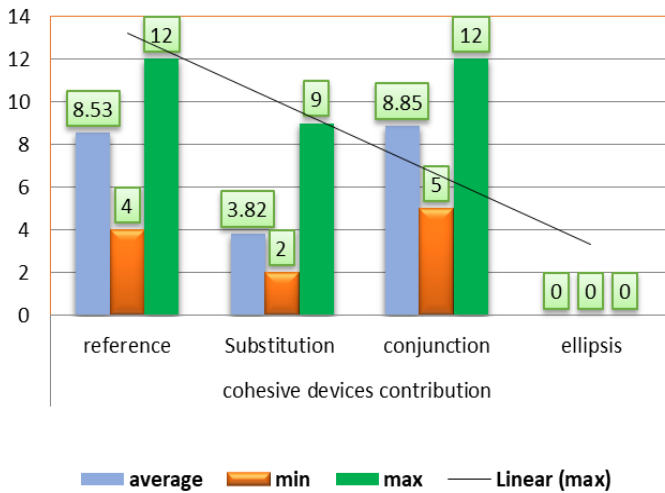
Nindya et al. (2020) and Seken and Suarnajaya (2013) also reported reference and conjunction as the most frequent cohesive devices used by Indonesian EFL learners in their argumentative essays. Regarding Halliday and Has an's (1989) cohesion taxonomy, references cover personal, demonstrative, and comparative references.

Figure 2 provides a better illustration of Indonesian EFL learners' use of cohesive devices.

Based on the result of the respondents' contribution towards cohesive devices, the sixth-semester students' knowledge of cohesive grammatical devices in writing subjects related to reference and conjunction stood out, compared to ellipsis, which was few in number. In fact, none of the students were into using ellipsis. Considering the composition learners wrote based on the pictures, it

**Table 2.**  
The Use of Cohesive Devices in Students' Writing

Respondents are 100 students	Cohesive devices				Total
	Reference	Substitution	Conjunction	Ellipsis	
Total	853	382	885	0	2120
Average	8.53	3.82	8.85	0	21.2
Minimum	4	2	5	0	11
Maximum	12	9	12	0	29



**Figure 2.**  
The Use of Cohesive Devices in Students' Writing

was found that they avoid using ellipsis. These are the students' examples of cohesive devices' contributions.

".... **it** was so nice that we can take free air.... we ride a horse but **he** falled from horse . **It** was hurt.... return to camp to give **him** medecine.... **it** was unforgettable experience..."

Another device was the conjunction (but, and, because, but, although, so, after that). For example,

".... Saturday night..... we make fire.... **before** sleeping, we built camp **because** it was cool in the night.... **and** make some food to eat.... **but** one of my friends got accident....".

On the other hand, students seemed to be familiar with the use of conjunction even though they were not able to classify the types, such as additive, adversative, clausal, and temporal. The cohesive devices of substitution used were *there* and *that place* to replace the word *castle*. *At the time* to substitute *Sunday afternoon*. For example, "**Sunday afternoon**, we arrived at the beach. We all so happy **at the time**.....".

The analysis of students' ability to use cohesive devices in this study indicated that students were familiar with reference, conjunction, and substitution. Meanwhile, ellipsis did not appear in their writing task. In fact, learners avoided using ellipses. Avoidance is a common strategy used by L2 language learners when they have insufficient knowledge about the about grammatical rules and lexical items. As Modhish (2012) reported, some learners are afraid of making mistakes, so they are reluctant to apply unfamiliar cohesive devices which they have never been used before.

There were some similar features among all respondents' use of cohesive devices in terms of cohesive devices while they created the story according to six sequencing pictures. First, ellipses were missed in their writing. Second, the least frequent cohesive device was substitution. Based on the interview with the lecturers and students, it was found that that ellipsis was not taught in writing course although learned in discourse analysis. Also, substitution was almost similar to ellipsis which could justify why the students failed to use this cohesive device.

This argument depends on the readers' point of view. It

is said that the scope of discourse is wider than other subjects or disciplines. Even so, it must be understood that discourse is formed from clauses or sentences that meet the grammatical requirements and other discursive requirements. Grammatical requirements in discourse can be fulfilled if that discourse already built what is called cohesion, that is, there is a harmonious relationship between elements in the discourse. The cohesiveness will result in coherence which is the flow of the idea. A discourse can be said to be good if the relationship between the sentences is cohesive and coherent. For example, the use of ellipsis as a marker of grammatical cohesion, namely the omission of the word or group of words due to the efficiency of language and ease of understanding language. So, it must be a topic in teaching writing that students or writers must master.

Students' ability in producing a paragraph that fulfills the principle of cohesion and coherence is seemed to be a hard task for students. There are various obstacles that students may face in learning to write in class. Students' vocabulary is one of the factors in their writing ability. In other words, the number of words that students master affects their ability to use cohesive devices in their writing. In addition, poor English structure seems to be influenced by students' first language because grammatical cohesion is related to grammar. Grammatical cohesion tends to be bound by rules or grammar, therefore students are required not only to have mastery of vocabulary but also knowledge of rules in the grammar of a language. Low mastery of this causes the use of grammatical cohesion means lower. It is mean that students' English competence is low. This situation seemed to be common to foreign language learners as also found by Nindya and Widiati, (2020). Their study revealed that the lack is caused by the intra-lingual transfer factor. The intra-lingual transfer is the lack of a language learner in applying the grammar rules of the target language.

Apart from students, the teacher is one of the factors that cause students' writing skills to be low. Learning to write should make students practice. The seriousness of the teacher or lecturer in handling this subject can affect students' writing abilities. Students are often not provided with a proper assessment in terms of writing ability. Student writing results are sometimes only assessed by the number of paragraphs produced, the neatness of the writing, and other non-essential factors. Such an assessment is clearly not an assessment that functions to build students' writing skills, on the contrary, it can destroy students' real writing abilities. In addition, the lack of ability in terms of providing various appropriate writing strategies to students is another factor that contributes to the student's writing skills. The teacher or lecturer seems to think that writing is a difficult job, so if students have written, even though the results are not good, they are considered to have fulfilled the expected competencies without giving direct assistance to students to develop their writing skills. On the other hand, there are also those who think writing is an easy job so that even without guidance students can already write. This condition is of



course not appropriate because students must be guided to write step by step according to the writing process itself. Through such learning, students will know exactly their weaknesses while writing and, on this basis, will improve them to produce better writing. It is mean that feedback from the lecturer is a necessity to improve the students' writing.

Therefore, in learning to write, it is very important to strive for improvements in the teaching and learning process by considering reducing student dependence on lecturers so that students become independent and active. Moreover, it is necessary to monitor the writing improvement process systematically where monitoring can guarantee product quality. Finally, there needs to be evidence of the process and learning outcomes that are neatly stored and easy to find again. For this reason, an integrated learning model is needed between teaching and learning activities and the assessment used where in the assessment there must be effective feedback, both in terms of results and student responsibility. This can be done through the application of an integrated electronic portfolio assessment with the process approach used.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings and discussions of the use of cohesive devices show that students are excellent and familiar with reference and conjunction. It is indicated by the highest score of reference used. It appears most in two types of tests, namely fill-in-the-blank and sequences of pictures. The most frequently used grammatical device after the reference is the conjunction, while substitution and ellipsis show a very low result. It might be assumed that the respondents do not recognize and are familiar with it as well as, ellipses which are considered as inaccuracy. Although, they understand the use of substitution and ellipsis as cohesive devices but lack of practicing in writing subject that is why they are not used to writing a composition with those devices. Therefore, the students need to know more about the use of substitution and ellipsis in writing a composition and written discourse analysis research which can be a further research topic. The lecturer introduces more substitution since these devices are similar with reference. The lecturer must develop a strategy so that the students are able to recognize and understand all elements of writing including types of cohesive devices. This paper contributes as information or reference for teachers and lecturers in writing classes that the mastery of cohesive devices is important to be considered.

#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

##### Authors' contribution

Naniana N. Benu designed the study and wrote the

manuscript. Piter Baun performed the statistical analysis. Norci Beeh collected the data and wrote the manuscript. Seprianus A. Nenotek collected the data and wrote the manuscript. All authors checked and confirmed the final draft of the manuscript before submission to JCLR journal.

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