



The use of grammatical devices to achieve cohesion in Grade 12 EFAL learners' essays in Malamulele South Circuit

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ABSTRACT

English writing proficiency is essential for learners of English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) in South Africa. Achieving this requires writers to use precise vocabulary, appropriate expressions and well-structured sentences, which is challenging for most students. The aim of this study is to identify patterns in the use of grammatical cohesion and to highlight the challenges that learners face in achieving coherent writing. The study explored the use of grammatical cohesion among Grade 12 English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners with particular emphasis on students in the Malamulele South Circuit of South Africa. A qualitative approach was adopted to examine the types of grammatical cohesive devices that learners use in their written texts. Data was collected from learners' essays and analysed using thematic content analysis. The study found that the Grade 12 First Additional Language learners in the Malamulele South Circuit use all types of grammatical references, such as personal, demonstrative, comparative, and definite articles, as cohesive devices in their English essays. However, the study also found errors in addition and mismatches in the learners' essays. The results indicate that the Grade 12 First Additional Language learners in the Malamulele South circuit relatively use reference as their cohesive device in English essays. Also, most writing challenges are in the application of personal pronouns, which require special attention from teachers and learners. The study recommends that essay-writing lessons be taught alongside cohesive devices. This study contributes to the scholarship on second language writing by providing context-specific insights into the use of grammatical cohesion among students.

Keywords: Cohesion, Coherence, Demonstrative, Grammatical reference, Personal and Definite article

INTRODUCTION

Developing advanced English writing proficiency is essential for learners of English as a First Additional Language (EFAL) to achieve academic success. The effectiveness of written communication is largely determined by the coherence and clarity of the text. Writing fulfills multiple

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communicative purposes such as informing, narrating, describing, persuading, and warning.¹ Achieving these purposes requires writers to use precise vocabulary, appropriate expressions and well-structured sentences. Livingston and Peña emphasise that producing connected discourse is a fundamental component of language learning, as it involves the construction of clear sentences that integrate into cohesive paragraphs.²

In the South African educational context, EFAL learners in Grades 10 to 12 are required to produce various essay types as part of their formal assessment. Given the complexity of essay writing, which entails a range of sentence structures, learners must develop strong writing skills to generate effective compositions. In evaluating such work, teachers frequently assess the degree of cohesion within essays. Halliday and Hasan conceptualise cohesion as the semantic relationships that link sentences within a text, achieved through cohesive devices.³ These devices, as argued by Fuchs and Bock, are crucial to establish formal connections that render a text unified, logical, and accessible to readers.⁴

A text is considered cohesive when its sentences are meaningfully interconnected.⁵ This interconnectedness depends on the appropriate selection of lexical items and syntactic structures, ensuring both semantic clarity and structural accuracy. Cohesion thus reflects how ideas and linguistic elements are linked through cohesive devices to produce meaningful discourse. For instance, in the sentences “Attest went to school. She sat next to Allot,” the pronoun “she” derives its meaning from the noun “Attest,” illustrating how referential cohesion operates through the relationship between a pronoun and its antecedent.

Cohesion is critical to maintain clarity and relevance in writing. According to Nadia et al., cohesive sentences in an essay are interdependent, and altering their sequence may disrupt the intended meaning.⁶ Paltridge further argues that logical connections between sentences improve the comprehension, interpretation, and critical engagement of the reader with a text.⁷ Therefore, the sustained linkage of ideas throughout an essay is fundamental to effective writing. Kabel et al. distinguish between lexical and grammatical cohesion, noting that each serves distinct but complementary functions.⁸ Grammatical cohesion, in particular, is concerned with the structural relationships that organise a text. Khosa identifies key grammatical cohesive devices, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction; however, the present study focuses specifically on reference.⁹

A reference pertains to linguistic elements that derive meaning from their contextual relationships with other elements in the text. Rather than being independently interpretable, referential forms direct the reader to previously mentioned or contextually understood entities. In essay writing, reference is instrumental in introducing, maintaining, and tracking participants or ideas throughout the discourse. The primary types of reference include personal, demonstrative, and comparative reference, as well as the definite article. These forms are essential to ensure textual clarity, readability, and logical progression.

¹ Helaluddin Helaluddin et al., “Development and Validation of Academic Writing Textbook Based on Process Genre Approach for University Students,” *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 13, no. 2 (August 20, 2021): 1068–79, <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v13i2.766>.

² Miranda A. Livingston and Elizabeth V. Peña, “Latino Male Students’ Perceptions of Writing in First Year College Writing Courses,” *American Association for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2021.

³ M. A. K Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, “Cohesion in English London: Longman Group Ltd,” 1976.

⁴ Eckhardt Fuchs and Annekatrin Bock, *The Palgrave Handbook of Textbook Studies* (Springer, 2018).

⁵ Ambika Prasad Poudel, “Academic Writing: Coherence and Cohesion in Paragraph,” Research Gate, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322537095_Academic_Writing_Coherence_and_Cohesion_in_Paragraph.

⁶ Resa Nadia, Titien Fatmawaty Mohammad, and Yusna Bantulu, “An Analysis of Students’ Cohesion and Coherence in Writing Argumentative Essay,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Konseling (JPDK)* 5, no. 1 (2023): 5249–60.

⁷ Brian Paltridge and Sue Starfield, eds., *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes* (Wiley, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118339855>.

⁸ Kristine Kabel, Jesper Bremholm, and Jeppe Bundsgaard, “A Framework for Identifying Early Writing Development,” *Writing & Pedagogy* 13, no. 1–3 (2022): 51–87.

⁹ Mzamani Steven Khosa, “Evaluation of Sentence Construction in English Essays: A Case Study of Grade 10 Learners of Malamulele Northeast Circuit,” (MA Thesis, University of Venda, 2021).

Against this background, the present study investigates how Grade 12 EFAL learners in the Malamulele South circuit employ grammatical reference to enhance cohesion in their essays. The study is guided by specific research questions aimed at examining the learners' use of referential cohesive devices in written discourse. The following questions underlie the study. What are the types of grammatical references the Grade 12 EFAL learners use in their essays to achieve cohesion? How do the Grade 12 EFAL learners use grammatical references to achieve cohesion in their essays?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jafari views writing as a fundamental skill that scholars must acquire to achieve academic success.¹⁰ Similarly, Obeid asserts that an effective piece of writing is characterised by logical organisation, clear progression, and coherence, all of which are achieved through the appropriate use of cohesive devices.¹¹ The primary objective of writing is to communicate meaning clearly to the reader; therefore, writers must employ cohesive devices accurately and consistently throughout their work.

Setiawan and Taiman conceptualise cohesion as the degree to which meaning is interconnected within spoken or written discourse.¹² Effective essay writing requires the use of cohesive devices to link words and ideas into unified and meaningful sentences. Cohesion is thus a critical element of writing, as it facilitates clarity, comprehension, and ease of interpretation. It is generally classified into two main categories: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion comprises reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction, while lexical cohesion includes reiteration and collocation. However, the present study focuses exclusively on grammatical cohesion, with particular emphasis on reference as a key component. Reference itself encompasses personal pronouns, demonstratives, comparatives, and the definite article "the," as illustrated in the table below.

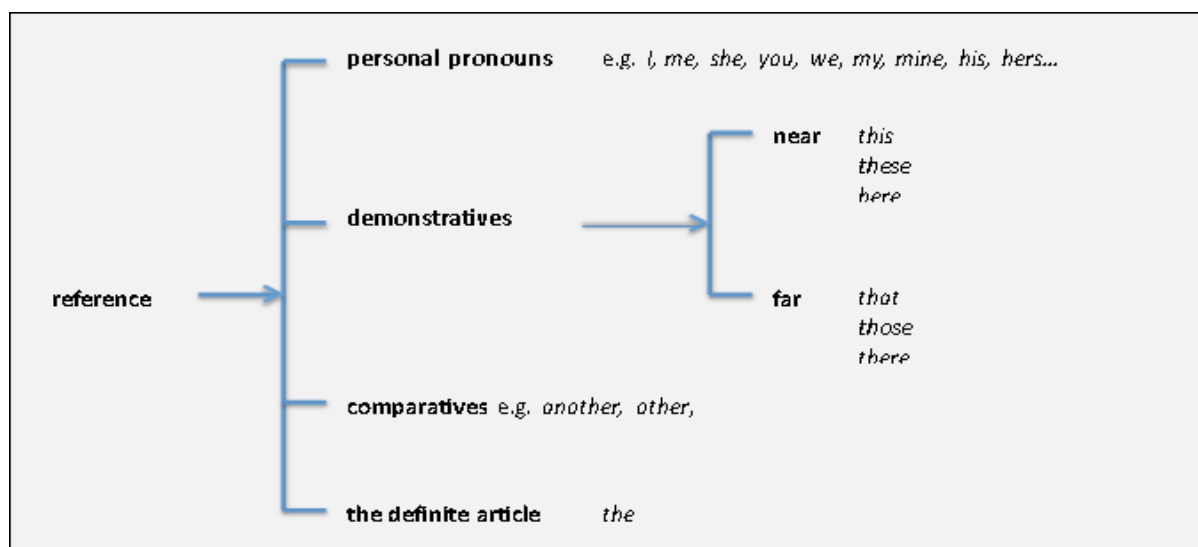


Figure 1: The Reference System in English¹³

The first category of reference, as indicated in the figure above, is personal reference. Personal pronouns are a type of pronoun used to point to a particular person or thing. According to Stoian, a pronoun is a word that replaces a noun or noun phrase. Personal reference includes several forms such as personal pronouns (I, me, you, him, she, he, her, we, us, they, them, it), possessive determiners (my, your, their, its, our, his, her), possessive pronouns (mine, yours, hers, theirs, ours), and reflexive

¹⁰ Seyed Mohammad Jafari, "On the Relationship between L2 Writing and L2 Writing Anxiety," *International Journal of English and Education* 8, no. 2 (2019): 38–51.

¹¹ Rana Obeid, "Second Language Writing and Assessment: Voices from within the Saudi EFL Context.," *English Language Teaching* 10, no. 6 (2017): 174–81.

¹² Fiki Setiawan and Taiman Taiman, "Cohesion and Coherence in Written Texts of Health Medical Laboratory Students," *Indonesian EFL Journal* 7, no. 1 (2021): 59–68.

¹³ Halliday and Hasan, "Cohesion in English London: Longman Group Ltd."

pronouns (self). For example, in the sentences “Mzamani built a house” and “He is a builder,” the pronoun “he” refers back to Mzamani. In this way, “he” creates cohesive reference within the text.¹⁴

Demonstratives

Guirardello describes demonstrative reference as the use of words to point to specific things within a sentence.¹⁵ These demonstratives are divided into two types: nominal demonstratives (this, that, these, those) and circumstantial demonstratives (here, there, now, then). Baskervill and Sewell explain that circumstantial, or adverbial, demonstratives such as “here,” “there,” “now,” and “then” indicate the location of an action in terms of space or time. They are considered direct because they do not refer to the location of participants in the communication.¹⁶

In contrast, nominal demonstratives like “this,” “that,” “these,” “those,” and “the” specify the position or location of a person, object, or entity involved in the situation. Each type plays an important role in making meaning clearer and more precise in communication. Furthermore, demonstrative references can be classified as proximal or distal. Proximal demonstratives refer to objects close to the speaker. For example, in the sentence “This is my car,” the word “this” indicates that the car is near the speaker. Distal demonstratives, on the other hand, point to objects that are farther away. In the sentence “Those books are mine,” the word “those” shows that the books are not close to the speaker. In both cases, demonstrative references help create cohesion and clarity within the sentences.

Comparatives

Comparative references can also be divided into “general” and “particular”. General comparison focuses on similarities and differences without considering specific features; items can simply be described as the same, similar, or different (where “different” includes both “not the same” and “not similar”).

Rustipa explains that comparative reference highlights the similarities and contrasts between two items.¹⁷ Similarly, Setiawan and Taiman define it as an indirect form of reference that emphasizes identity or resemblance between the things being compared. Comparative references are further classified into general and specific types.¹⁸ General comparison emphasizes overall similarity or difference, often using adjectives and adverbs such as “same,” “similar,” or “different.” In contrast, specific comparison focuses on particular qualities or quantities of the items being compared.

The definite article

The fourth type of grammatical reference involves the definite article “the.” This article can be used with any noun, whether singular or plural, countable or uncountable—provided the noun is already known to the reader. In other words, it is used when the noun has been mentioned previously. For example, in the sentence, “Ndzima ate a slice of meat last week. The meat was oily,” the use of “the” is appropriate because the meat has already been introduced. The definite article also contributes to cohesion when it appears with adjectives, phrases, or clauses that describe a noun. For instance, in the sentence “The lecturer was standing near him,” “the” is correctly used because it specifies and describes the noun lecturer.

Difficulties in writing cohesive paragraphs appear to be a widespread issue among learners, as many studies highlight their struggles with cohesion in essay writing. For example, Li and Akram examined pronoun–antecedent agreement errors among ESL students through content analysis.¹⁹ Their

¹⁴ Andreea Mihaela Stoian, “Pronouns in English Language,” *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue Des Sciences Politiques*, no. 80 (2023): 92–98.

¹⁵ Raquel Guirardello-Damian, “11 Trumai: Non-Contrastive Exophoric Uses of Demonstratives,” *Demonstratives in Cross-Linguistic Perspective* 14 (2018): 242.

¹⁶ William Malone Baskervill and James Witt Sewell, *An English Grammar* (DigiCat, 2022).

¹⁷ Katharina Rustipa, “The Use of Demonstrative Pronoun and Demonstrative Determiner” This” in Upper-Level Student Writing: A Case Study,” *English Language Teaching* 8, no. 5 (2015): 158–67.

¹⁸ Setiawan and Taiman, “Cohesion and Coherence in Written Texts of Health Medical Laboratory Students.”

¹⁹ Shengji Li and Huma Akram, “Navigating Pronoun-Antecedent Challenges: A Study of ESL Academic Writing Errors,” *Sage Open* 14, no. 4 (2024): 21582440241296610.

findings showed that most errors involved personal pronouns, followed by possessive, relative, and demonstrative pronouns. This indicates that although students attempt to use grammatical references, they often apply them incorrectly. Similarly, Miryadi found that students at Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry encounter challenges when using personal pronouns in writing. These challenges include incorrect use of pronouns as subjects, objects, and possessive adjectives.²⁰

In addition, Paturusi investigated the use of demonstrative pronouns among students at SMP Aisyiyah Sungguminasa.²¹ The study showed that while students do use demonstrative pronouns in their essays, they often struggle to apply them accurately. Furthermore, Fitriati and Yonata explored Indonesian students' writing abilities, particularly focusing on cohesion in essays. Their findings revealed that students have difficulty producing coherent texts, and the misuse of reference pronouns is one of the main contributing factors.²²

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was mainly guided by Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion Theory, which highlights the important role of cohesive devices in linking words to form clear sentences and paragraphs for effective communication.²³ These cohesive devices are grouped into two categories: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. The theory directly addresses the key issues of cohesion that this study explores.

According to Khosa, lexical cohesion refers to “the cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary.”²⁴ This concept is based on the idea that careful word choice helps create meaningful connections within a text, making it easier for readers to understand the intended message. Puspita et al. further explain that lexical cohesion relies mainly on the use of appropriate vocabulary rather than grammatical structures.²⁵

This study specifically examined reference, which includes elements such as demonstratives, personal pronouns, comparatives, and the definite article “the.” Sidabutar notes that the use of references enriches a text and improves readers' understanding in both spoken and written communication.²⁶

METHODOLOGY

To examine the use of grammatical reference in English essays written by Grade 12 learners in the Malamulele South Circuit, Vhembe East District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, this study adopted a qualitative research approach. In the present study, the phenomenon under investigation pertains to learners' writing practices, specifically their use of grammatical reference, as it naturally occurs within the classroom environment.

Research Design

In this study, a descriptive case study design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of complex issues in a real-life context, specifically focusing on the essay-writing practices of Grade 12 First Additional Language learners in the Malamulele South Circuit.

²⁰ Z. Miryadi, “Analysing Pronoun Errors Made by Students in Essay Writing” (Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, 2023).

²¹ Muhammad Arief Paturusi, “The Students' Difficulties in Using Demonstrative Pronoun,” *Exposure* 5, no. 2 (2016): 90–109.

²² Sri Wuli Fitriati and Fadhila Yonata, “Examining Text Coherence in Graduate Students of English Argumentative Writing: Case Study,” *Arab World English Journal* 8, no. 3 (September 15, 2017): 251–64, <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no3.17>.

²³ Halliday and Hasan, “Cohesion in English London: Longman Group Ltd.”

²⁴ Khosa, “Evaluation of Sentence Construction in English Essays: A Case Study of Grade 10 Learners of Malamulele Northeast Circuit.”

²⁵ Galih Setia Puspita, F Rizkiyah, and Dasep Suprijadi, “Lexical Cohesion in News Article on the Jakarta Post Entitled Why Full Day School Will Not Work in Indonesia,” *Professional Journal of English Education*, II, 2019, 507–13.

²⁶ Usman Sidabutar, “An Analysis of Lexical Cohesion on the Students' Writing,” *JETAL: Journal of English Teaching & Applied Linguistic* 2, no. 2 (2021): 62–67.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at two schools in the Malamulele South Circuit, Vhembe, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The participants of the study were 14 Grade 12 First Additional Language learners. Participants were purposively sampled based on their essay performance. Students with average marks, below average and above average were sampled.

Data Collection Instruments

Given the nature of the available data, this study used document analysis as its primary data collection instrument. The data were obtained from learners' English Paper 3 essay scripts.

Data Analysis

In this study, the researchers used inductive thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the data. TA is particularly effective at identifying patterns and themes that emerge directly from the data rather than imposing preconceived categories. According to Taherdoost, this method enables a nuanced interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives, allowing for a deeper understanding of the underlying phenomena.²⁷ Creswell and Creswell note that the researcher first organises and prepares the data for analysis, then reads the entire dataset before conducting a detailed analysis using a coding procedure.²⁸

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to established ethical guidelines for conducting research involving human participants. The researcher ensured that the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants were respected throughout the research process. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Learners were provided with clear, detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and objectives. Since some Grade 12 learners were under 18, parental or guardian consent was also obtained. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Learners were not coerced, pressured, or influenced in any way to participate. consequences. The researcher ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly protected. No participant's real name or identifying information was used in the study. Instead, pseudonyms or codes were assigned to all participants. The study ensured that participants were not exposed to any form of harm, whether physical, psychological, or emotional. The researcher will be particularly sensitive to the fact that the study involves language competence, which may make some learners feel vulnerable or self-conscious. Care was taken to avoid embarrassment, judgment, or negative labelling of learners based on their grammatical abilities. Before conducting the study, the researcher obtained formal approval from relevant authorities. This included the Department of Education (Limpopo Province) and the school principals of the selected schools.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings are organised around the use of grammatical cohesive devices, namely personal pronouns, demonstratives, definite articles, and comparatives, as evidenced in the learners' extracts.

Extract 1

“I was very happy as I woke up myself.”

This extract shows that the learner can use the personal pronoun “I” effectively to maintain a clear and consistent point of reference throughout the sentence. The repetition of “I” contributes to cohesion by linking the clauses and making the sentence easy to follow. This demonstrates that the learner understands the role of personal pronouns in creating continuity and clarity in writing. However, the

²⁷ Hamed Taherdoost, “What Are Different Research Approaches? Comprehensive Review of Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Research, Their Applications, Types, and Limitations,” *Journal of Management Science & Engineering Research* 5, no. 1 (April 22, 2022): 53–63, <https://doi.org/10.30564/jmser.v5i1.4538>.

²⁸ John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

sentence also contains an error of addition by making unnecessary use of the reflexive pronoun “myself.” The reflexive pronoun does not add any meaning because the subject is already clear. Its inclusion results in redundancy and slightly distorts the grammatical correctness of the sentence. This suggests that the learner may be overgeneralising the use of reflexive pronouns without fully understanding their appropriate contexts.

Extract 2

“When you are facing a problem or a challenge in your life, your true friend will be there to rescue you and bring a solution to your problems.”

In this extract, the learner uses several personal pronouns (“you,” “your,” and “our”) to connect ideas and address the reader directly. This demonstrates an attempt to create cohesion and engage the reader, which is a positive feature of writing. However, there is a clear mismatch error in pronoun agreement. The sentence begins with the second-person pronoun “you,” but later shifts incorrectly to “our.” This inconsistency disrupts cohesion and creates confusion with respect to the intended reference. The pronoun should remain consistent (“your problems”) to maintain clarity. This extract highlights the difficulty of the learner in maintaining referential consistency within a sentence.

Extract 3

“Money can make youré self killed by criminals.”

This extract reflects an attempt to use personal reference but shows significant challenges in form and structure. The incorrect form “youré self” indicates confusion in pronoun construction, and the overall sentence structure is grammatically incorrect.

The intended meaning becomes clearer when using the correct pronoun “you,” as in “Money can get you killed by criminals.” This suggests that the learner is aware of the need for personal reference but lacks sufficient mastery to apply it accurately. The extract demonstrates misuse of pronouns, in which incorrect formation and placement reduce clarity and cohesion.

Extract 4

“Many people they were killed because of money.”

In this sentence, the learner attempts to reinforce the subject by using the pronoun “they.” While this shows an awareness of pronouns as cohesive devices, the usage results in an error of redundancy (addition). The noun phrase “many people” already functions as a subject, making the pronoun “they” unnecessary. Instead of enhancing cohesion, this repetition disrupts the natural flow of the sentence. The correct form (“Many people were killed because of money”) demonstrates that pronouns should replace nouns, not duplicate them. This extract highlights the difficulty of the learner in understanding the functional role of pronouns as substitutes rather than repetitions.

Extract 5

‘The teacher arrived on the scene, and he told us to leave.’

The participant correctly used the pronoun “he” to refer back to “the teacher.” This creates cohesion in the sentence by avoiding unnecessary repetition of the noun the teacher. Instead of repeating the full noun phrase, the pronoun links the second clause to the first, making the sentence flow more smoothly. The pronoun “he” acts as a cohesive device because it refers to a previously mentioned noun (the teacher). It helps maintain clarity and continuity of meaning and makes the sentence less repetitive and more natural.

Extract 6

“After that, he broke up with me in front of the whole school.”

This extract demonstrates appropriate use of the demonstrative “that.” The word effectively refers to a previous event and establishes a temporal relationship between actions, thereby strengthening cohesion in the narrative. It helps the reader to follow the sequence of events logically. Despite this correct use of the demonstrative, the sentence contains a structural error (“the all school”), which is unrelated to

the demonstrative itself. Overall, the extract shows that the learner can successfully use demonstratives to link ideas and maintain continuity in writing.

Extract 7

“This is caused by the shortage of coal.”

In this extract, the learner correctly uses the demonstrative “this” to refer to a previously mentioned idea or situation. This usage is effective in maintaining cohesion because it connects the current sentence to earlier information.

The sentence is clear and logically structured, indicating that the learner understands how demonstratives function to refer back and maintain textual continuity. This suggests a relatively strong grasp of demonstrative reference compared to other cohesive devices.

Extract 8

"Look at that shoes."

The participant incorrectly used the demonstrative ‘that’, which is singular, to refer to a plural object ‘shoes’. The sentence lacks proper agreement, which affects clarity and grammatical correctness. The correct sentence should be ‘look at those shoes’ or ‘look at that she.’

Extract 9

“He broke up with me in front of the all school.”

This extract shows the learner’s attempt to use the definite article “the” to refer to a specific and identifiable noun (“school”). This reflects an understanding of how definite articles contribute to cohesion by specifying known entities. However, the construction “the all school” is grammatically incorrect due to the incorrect placement of the adjective “all.” This results in a structural error that affects the clarity of the sentence. The correct form (“the school”) demonstrates that while the learner understands the function of the definite article, they struggle with correct grammatical application.

Extract 10

“Your lover who means the world to you.”

In this sentence, the learner uses the definite article “the” correctly in the expression “the world.” This phrase is a fixed and commonly understood expression, and the use of “the” clearly identifies a specific concept. The correct application of the definite article here indicates that learners are more accurate when dealing with familiar or formulaic expressions. This extract shows that the learner can use definite articles effectively in certain contexts, contributing positively to cohesion and meaning.

Extract 11

"I am traveling to the France next week."

The participant incorrectly used the definite article in the sentence "I am traveling to the France next week." The definite article “the” is used to refer to something specific or already known, helping to create cohesion by linking to shared knowledge. However, in this sentence, “France” is a proper noun (the name of a country) and does not normally take the article “the.” As a result, the use of “the” here is unnecessary and incorrect, and it does not contribute to cohesion. The correct form is “I am traveling to France next week.”

Extract 12

“She gave me a tight slap stronger than the ocean wave.”

This extract demonstrates an effective use of the comparative “than.” The learner successfully compares the intensity of the slap to that of an ocean wave, creating a vivid and meaningful image. The comparative structure links two ideas, enhancing both cohesion and expression. It shows that the learner is capable of using comparative reference not only correctly but also creatively, adding depth to the narrative. This extract reflects a strong and appropriate use of comparative cohesion.

Extract 13

“He behaved like his father in the meeting.”

In this extract, the learner correctly uses the comparative “like” to establish similarity between two individuals. This comparison helps to clarify the behaviour being described and strengthens the connection between ideas. The sentence is clear, grammatically correct, and cohesive. The use of “like” shows that the learner can effectively employ comparative structures to express relationships and improve understanding.

Extract 14

“The pains were as like I was stabbed by a knife.”

The sentence “The pains were as like I was stabbed with a knife.” shows an attempt to use a comparative cohesive device, but its cohesion is weakened by incorrect structure and inappropriate word choice. Firstly, the learner redundantly combines two comparative markers: “as” and “like.” In English, these are not used together in this way. This results in the misuse and overuse of cohesive devices, which disrupt the flow and clarity of the sentence rather than enhancing them. Secondly, the sentence lacks grammatical coherence because the comparison is not properly constructed. The phrase “I was stabbed with a knife” is not correctly linked to “the pains were,” making the relationship between the two ideas unclear. To improve cohesion and clarity, the sentence should use a single, appropriate comparative structure, such as: “The pain was like being stabbed with a knife.” or “The pain felt as if I had been stabbed with a knife.”

DISCUSSION

Personal pronouns

The results show that learners use personal pronouns such as I, you, he, and they to maintain reference and link ideas in their writing. In some cases, learners use pronouns effectively to ensure clarity and continuity, as seen where the pronoun “I” is consistently used to maintain a clear point of view, and “he” is correctly used to refer back to a previously mentioned noun. This demonstrates an understanding of pronouns as cohesive devices that avoid repetition and improve the flow of sentences.

However, the results also reveal several challenges in the use of personal pronouns. Learners make addition errors, such as the unnecessary use of reflexive pronouns (“myself”) and redundant pronouns (“many people they”). There are also mismatch errors, where learners shift pronouns incorrectly (e.g., from “you” to “our”), disrupting cohesion and causing confusion. In addition, misuse and incorrect formation of pronouns are evident (e.g., “youré self”), indicating limited control over pronoun structure and placement. These findings suggest that while learners understand the basic function of pronouns, they struggle with accuracy and consistency in their application. These results are consistent with Jannah, who found that eighth-grade students at SMP IT Roudlotussalam College struggled with personal pronouns.²⁹ Similarly, Li reported that Thai non-English major students experienced difficulties with cohesion, including misuse, misplacement, and overuse of cohesive devices.³⁰ The findings also align with Miryadi, who observed that although students used a range of pronouns, many still made errors such as omission, mismatch, addition and displacement.³¹ Furthermore, Rahman found that students at Ibnu Khaldun University used various personal references to achieve cohesion in their writing.³²

Demonstrative references

²⁹ Liwalana Nuafi Futhu Hiyata Rihil Jannah, “An Analysis Of Using Personal Pronouns In Writing Recount Text Paragraph Written By The Eighth Grade Students Of Smp It Roudlotussalam In Academic Year 2021/2022” (Islamic Institute Of Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi, 2021).

³⁰ Z Li, “Error Analysis—Types and Causes of Errors in English Writing among Chinese Students,” *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research* 5, no. 8 (2021): 238–41.

³¹ Miryadi, “Analysing Pronoun Errors Made by Students in Essay Writing.”

³² Taufiq Rahman, “Investigation of Grammatical Cohesion on Students’ Academic Essay Writing (A Discourse Analysis)” (Fakultas Ilmu Tarbiyah dan Keguruan, 2017).

The findings indicate that learners use demonstratives such as “this” and “that” to create cohesion by referring back to previously mentioned ideas or events. In several instances, these demonstratives are used correctly to establish logical connections and maintain continuity in the text. For example, “that” is effectively used to show sequence, while “this” clearly refers to an earlier idea, demonstrating learners’ ability to link sentences cohesively.

Despite this, some learners experience difficulties with agreement and correct usage. An example is the use of the singular demonstrative “that” with a plural noun (“that shoes”), which results in a grammatical error and weakens clarity. Overall, the results suggest that learners have a relatively strong understanding of demonstratives but occasionally struggle with form and agreement.

Comparative reference

The results indicate that learners use comparative structures such as “than” and “like” to establish relationships between ideas and enhance cohesion. In some cases, comparatives are used effectively and creatively. For example, “stronger than the ocean wave” and “like his father” clearly express comparison and improve both cohesion and descriptive quality. These examples show that learners can use comparative devices to connect ideas in a meaningful way.

However, the challenges are also evident. Learners misuse and overuse comparative markers, as seen in constructions such as “as like,” which combine two forms incorrectly. Additionally, some comparisons are poorly structured, leading to unclear relationships between ideas. These errors weaken cohesion rather than strengthen it. The findings suggest that while some learners can use comparatives effectively, others lack a full understanding of correct comparative structures. These findings are supported by Unubi, who found that foreign students studying English in South Africa frequently used comparatives as part of cohesive devices.³³ His results also show that these students struggle to use comparatives correctly.

Definite article

The results show that learners use the definite article “the” to refer to specific and identifiable nouns, thereby contributing to cohesion. In some cases, the article is used correctly, particularly in familiar expressions such as “the world,” indicating that learners can apply it accurately in fixed or commonly used phrases. This demonstrates an awareness of how the definite article helps specify meaning and link ideas within a text. However, the findings also reveal significant challenges in the correct use of the definite article. Learners produce structural errors, such as “the all school,” showing difficulty with word order and article placement. There is also evidence of unnecessary use of the article with proper nouns (“the France”), where it is not required. These errors indicate that although learners understand the function of the definite article, they struggle with it. Learners produce structural errors, such as “the all school,” showing difficulty with word order and article placement. There is also evidence of unnecessary use of the article with proper nouns (“the France”), where it is not required. These errors indicate that although learners understand the function of the definite article, they struggle with its grammatical rules and appropriate contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that essay-writing lessons be taught alongside cohesive devices. Therefore, teachers should not teach cohesive devices in isolation. Cohesive devices should be embedded in a text or passage. The researcher recommends that English teachers focus on teaching cohesive devices in context. This can be effectively achieved by exposing students to exemplary essay compositions and implementing process-oriented approaches, which encompass group discussions, role-playing, peer editing, and debates to foster adept writing skills. This will help learners not to memorise some cohesive devices and apply them without understanding. It is essential to provide learners with progressively intensive practice to ensure that they have sufficient exposure to connecting and organising ideas

³³ Abraham Sunday Unubi, “Conjunctions in English: Meaning, Types and Uses,” *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 4, no. 3 (2016): 202–13.

coherently to produce meaningful and cohesive texts. The study further recommends that future researchers investigate ways to improve the teaching of cohesive devices, paying attention to personal pronouns, as this study found it challenging for many Grade 12 learners in the Malamulele South circuit.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the usage of cohesive devices in English essays written by the Grade 12 EFAL learners in the Malamulele South circuit. This research provided imperative information on sentence construction, paying special attention to the usage of cohesive devices in English essays. The results indicate that the Grade 12 First Additional Language learners in the Malamulele South circuit relatively use reference as their cohesive device in English essays. The study further revealed that most writing challenges are in the application of personal pronouns, which require special attention from teachers and learners for logical and readable English essays, because the learners' failure to use cohesive devices correctly implies a hindrance to effective communication.

Study Limitations

This study was based on a sample of only 14 Grade 12 First Additional Language learners in the Malamulele South Circuit and two schools. Furthermore, the study is limited to grammatical cohesion alone.

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