
Cohesive Devices in EFL Students' Essays and Problems Encountered during Writing

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Abstract

The research investigated the cohesive devices used in EFL students' recount texts and the problems encountered during their writing. 33 high school students' essays were analyzed, and the students were interviewed. The findings showed that all five types of cohesive devices appeared in the students' writings, with reference the most, followed by a conjunction, lexical cohesion, ellipsis, and substitution the least. Three types of cohesive devices were identified as problematic to the students: conjunction, reference, and lexical cohesion. Four reasons were further found for the students' difficulty in using the cohesive devices: pure error, absence of knowledge, overuse, and lack of writing practice. These findings may give new insights for language teachers in the attempt to understand the causes that lead to cohesion problems in students' writing so that proper measures can be taken to address them and improve the quality of their writing generally.

Keywords

Cohesive devices, EFL learners, recount texts, problems

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Introduction

Researchers in ELT (English Language Teaching) have widely agreed that writing, of all English skills, is the skill that students find the most difficult to become skilled at (Ayub et al., 2013; Ong, 2011; Rassouli & Abbasvandi, 2013). One challenge in writing is when students must organize ideas into a text to be easily understood by readers. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students across the world have been reported to struggle with this problem, and Indonesian student are no exception (Kurniawan et al., 2020; Saputro et al., 2022; Sudirman et al., 2021; Susilo et al., 2021). Preliminary research conducted by the researchers of this research on EFL students in Aceh, Indonesia, confirmed this problem, in which students expressed difficulty in producing cohesive writing in English. Interviews with a few English teachers from various high schools in the research also revealed the lack of clarity in students' writing because they tended to use cohesive devices incorrectly.

Researchers have been trying to explain students' difficulties when using cohesive devices. Among them is that students often find it challenging to create a sense of cohesion in their compositions because of first language interference, which confuses them in creating discursive meaning in their texts (Yusuf et al., 2021). The minute the mother tongue interferes, students, tend to adopt the convention of their first language, which may not always work the same way with the target language; in the case of this research, between English and the Indonesian language. When proper meaning is not formed, the intended ideas do not get across to the readers (Hyland, 2003). Consequently, cohesive devices may be used incorrectly or inappropriately by language learners. It is also possible that they are underused or overused due to students' poor knowledge of the writing component (Bagheri & Riasati, 2016; Ghasemi, 2013). The research conducted by Ong (2011) on Chinese EFL learners found hundreds of errors in ten students' expository compositions. The students had the most difficulty using reference cohesion, followed by a conjunction and lexical cohesion. The students' repetition and misuse of cohesive devices were the most significant challenges. Moreover, Chinese EFL learners used lexical devices the most compared to other cohesive devices, such as reference and conjunctive (Liu & Braine, 2005). Furthermore, Liu and Braine (2005) discovered that besides lexical devices, students of all proficiency levels deal with difficulties using cohesive devices. The most identified problems in their writing were in the use of references.

In Indonesia, English has been prioritized in its curriculum since the 1960s, considering the tremendous advancement of information and communication technology in this language (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019). In the English syllabus at the high school level, cohesive devices are embedded in their writing lessons in to improve students' writing. Hence, among the common problems in composing an English text is the misuse of cohesive devices (Emilia et al., 2018). These devices are especially prominent in the teaching of recount text composition. However, given that students still need help producing a cohesive text, it is imperative to investigate the issue further to get to the bottom of the problem.

This current research aims to investigate the types of cohesive devices used by Indonesian high school students, specifically in Aceh, Indonesia, and further explore the

students' problems with using these devices. Only a few studies have been conducted on students in Aceh on this topic, and thus, the researchers tend to fill in this gap. Cohesive devices in Indonesian and English may be different. The students face difficulties using the linking words. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated for this research:

- What cohesive devices are used by EFL high school students in writing recount texts?
- Which cohesive devices are the most difficult for the students to use in writing recount texts?
- Why is it problematic for the students to use cohesive devices in writing recount texts?

The current research is paramount as the results can provide better insights into this issue. EFL teachers, especially in the Indonesian context, can further understand the problems students face in incorporating cohesive devices in their compositions to help them improve and enhance their motivation in writing. In addition, studies have shown that the better students' writing motivation is, the better students' writing practice will be (Tridinanti et al., 2020). EFL teachers must bear in mind that the level of student motivation impacts how engaged and persistent they will be despite the challenges of learning a foreign language. Hence, a more thorough comprehension and knowledge of cohesive devices can help them express their ideas more coherently in their texts, eventually contributing to their overall readability compositions.

Literature Review

Types of cohesive devices

Cohesive devices play a paramount role in creating a good flow in writing. Their significance has been firmly established in literature. According to Rassouli and Abbasvandi (2013), the appropriate use of these devices allows the readers to connect between what was said, what is being said, and what will be said. Furthermore, these devices will allow consistency and connectedness throughout the passage in a text to be preserved (Adiantika, 2015). Eventually, when cohesion is established, it will enhance the meaning of texts (Rassouli & Abbasvandi, 2013). Therefore, students must be assisted in generating and organizing ideas well to produce a coherent text.

Coherence and cohesion have been cited as one of the most problematic areas in writing for EFL learners, and producing cohesive writing are incredibly effortful for students (Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh, 2007). One proposition to tackle this problem would be to teach students the proper use of cohesive devices (Nilopa et al., 2017) since the reason learners who struggled to produce an easy-to-understand written work often mentioned was the lack of teaching and training in the use of these devices (Adiantika, 2015). Moreover, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976), text elements must be tied together using specific devices for readers to make sense of a text. Therefore, a text that makes sense to readers' features appropriately used cohesive devices. Cohesion is achieved when the interpretation of one item is dependent on the interpretation of the other, i.e., one item assumes the other

(Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Consequently, a clearly defined relationship between elements contributes to greater comprehensibility and meaningfulness of the text.

A coherent text can be produced through two types of cohesion: grammatical and lexical cohesion (Alarcon & Morales, 2011). The former includes reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction, while lexical cohesion has two types: reiteration and collocation. The five major types have been used to assess cohesion in students' writing by several researchers in the past (Liu & Braine, 2005; Meisuo, 2000; Yang & Sun, 2012). First, reference is a situation in which one textual element cannot be interpreted without reference to another (Bahaziq, 2016). Reference items include personal pronouns, demonstratives, and comparatives to establish a cohesive relation between the cohesive item and its antecedent (Ong, 2011). Second, substitution happens when a writer replaces one text component with another (Ayub et al., 2013). It can occur in nouns, verbs, and clauses (Bahaziq, 2016). Third, an ellipsis refers to the omission of a word or phrase that has been mentioned in a text, and this omission is not a problem since the meaning can still be understood from the context (Bahaziq, 2016). Fourth, conjunctions are best known as linking words or connectives that help connect ideas between sentences (Paltridge, 2006). It also allows readers to construct representations and understand the relationship between different text parts (Sanders & Noordman, 2000). Finally, lexical cohesion comprises reiteration and collocation; they are ties that are created in a text through the repetition of a noun phrase or the use of another noun phrase that bears a relation to the antecedent noun phrase (Ayub et al., 2013; Bahaziq, 2016; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Halliday and Hassan (1976) further specified the sub-types of reiteration, including the same item, general item, super-ordinate item, and a synonym or near-synonym. Meanwhile, Cutting's (2008) categorization of reiteration consists of synonyms, repetition, general words, and super-ordinates. The quality of students' writing relies on using these types and sub-types of lexical cohesion (Alotaibi, 2014). Good quality writing is written with syntactic complexity and adequate organization of connected ideas (Kyle & Crossley, 2018).

Studies on the use of cohesive devices in EFL students' writings

Some research has been conducted on using cohesive devices by EFL learners. For instance, research by Adiantika (2005) examined the use of cohesive devices in expository texts that Indonesian EFL students produced. It was found that four devices were used in the students' compositions, namely reference, substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. The research also explained that the reasons for errors in the use of cohesive devices were mainly the lack of training in the proper use of the devices. Hence, previous studies show a tendency for EFL learners to use some types of cohesive devices and ways to face difficulty using them appropriately. When some learners overuse cohesive devices, others misuse the features.

Meanwhile, in the case of Thai undergraduate students, Chanyoo (2018) found that students frequently used four types of cohesive devices: reiteration, reference, conjunction, and ellipsis. The research also showed that the students' writing scores were positively correlated with the total number of words used in the writing task, cohesive devices, and several references. In another research, Dastjerdi and Samian (2011) investigated Iranian

graduate non-English majors' use of cohesive devices in argumentative essays and the relationship between the number of cohesive devices and their writing quality. Their research revealed that lexical devices had the highest percentage of the total number of cohesive devices. Nevertheless, [Dastjerdi and Samian \(2011\)](#) found no significant relationship between the number of cohesive devices used and the quality of the student's writing. This finding differed from other researchers ([Chanyoo, 2018](#); [Ghasemi, 2013](#); [Liu & Braine, 2005](#); [Yang & Sun, 2012](#)), who proved that using cohesive devices could directly impact the students' writing quality. Meanwhile, [Ghasemi \(2013\)](#) found a general pattern of cohesive devices in EFL/ESL learners' academic and non-academic writing.

In the case of cohesive devices in English writing used by native and non-native speakers in frequency, variety, and control, [Rahman \(2013\)](#) investigated Arabic (of Omanis) and native English speakers. The research concluded that there was a difference between the use of cohesive devices by the two groups of speakers. Native English speakers could use a balanced use and frequency on the various cohesive devices. In contrast, non-natives (i.e., Arabic students) tended to overuse some types of cohesive devices in their English writing, such as repetition and reference, while neglecting the other types.

Methodology

Research design, site, and participants

This research adopted the descriptive qualitative method. This method analyzes words or figures and does not involve numerical analysis ([Brink, 1993](#); [Mohajan, 2018](#)). The sample consisted of 33 students in the twelfth grade in a senior high school in Aceh, Indonesia, Jeumala Amal Boarding School. The research instruments used to collect data were documentation and interviews. In this research, the students were coded as S1 for Student 1, S2 for Student 2, and so forth until S33 for Student 33, respectively.

Data collection and analysis

In the curriculum of Indonesian high schools, twelfth-grade students are taught recount text composition. Accordingly, the cohesive devices analyzed were those used in these recount texts written by the students. Data collection started by having students write recount texts on the topic of "spending time during holidays". These students did not receive any training on using cohesive devices before the data collection, nor did they get any guidance on correctly using these devices. Their knowledge was based on their English skills, which had been taught to them formally since the seventh grade. 33 texts were collected from these students without any intervention. Each text consisted of an essay of 200 words. The analysis of the essays on cohesive devices was based on [Halliday and Hasan's \(1976\)](#) on the five major types of cohesive devices, which has been well adopted in previous research on this topic as well ([Adiantika, 2015](#); [Bahaziq, 2016](#); [Ghasemi, 2013](#); [Nasser, 2017](#); [Ong, 2011](#)). Here, the types of cohesive devices that the students used and the errors they made were identified, and their frequency of occurrence was calculated using simple statistics of percentages.

Once data analysis was completed, and problematic cohesive devices identified, ten students were purposively chosen for interviews based on their performance using the cohesive devices. It was to answer the third research question about why students faced difficulties using cohesive devices. Each one-on-one interview lasted about 15 minutes, and the sessions were recorded with a handphone. To analyze the interview data, the recordings were first transcribed. Then the researchers adopted the interactive model that Miles et al. (2014) proposed, involving condensation, data display, and conclusion/verification. In condensation, the raw data went through the processes of selection, focusing, simplification, abstraction, and transformation (Miles et al., 2014). Responses relevant to explaining the students' difficulties when using cohesive devices were singled out and categorized based on themes that emerged within their answers. In the data display, the themes were posed with pertinent excerpts to explain and elaborate on each of them. Finally, a conclusion was made after verifying and rechecking the data findings from documents and interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Types of cohesive devices used in students' writings

Each of the 33 students' essays was studied to determine the cohesive device type used. All five types of cohesive devices were found in their writings. The number of occurrences for each is in Table 1.

Table 1. *The types of cohesive devices found in students' writings*

No.	Type of Cohesive Devices	Number of Occurrences
1.	Reference	2133
2.	Conjunction	86
3.	Lexical Cohesion	200
4.	Ellipsis	2
5.	Substitution	1
Total		3203

The research found that students used 24 reference items in their compositions. The most frequently used ones are 'I', 'the', 'my', and 'we', whereas reference items students used the least were 'your', 'him', and 'its'. Next are conjunctions, where 20 conjunction items were found in the students' recount texts. Conjunctions 'and', 'because', and 'for' take up the most significant portion of conjunctions used, and 'however' and 'by the way' were used the least. As for lexical cohesion, 200 items were found in students' writing. One type of lexical cohesion, reiteration, has approximately 50 occurrences, with repetition being the type found the most (34 occurrences) and antonymy the least (1 occurrence). Others stood between synonymy (5 occurrences) and hyponymy (8 occurrences). Meanwhile, collocation, the other type of lexical cohesion, has 152 occurrences, meaning this type appeared more frequently in students' composition than the reiteration type. The next type, ellipses only appeared twice. Finally, only one substitution item was found in all 33 texts analyzed, making the device students used the least in their recount texts.

The results of this research show some differences from those of previous studies. The research by Liu and Braine (2005) in China found that Chinese EFL learners used more lexical devices in their argumentative essays, followed by references and conjunctive. Meanwhile, in another research, Adiantika (2015) found that students mostly used reference followed by substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion in their expository essays. Nevertheless, these differences could be rooted in the different texts each study focuses on. When this research focused on recount texts, Liu and Braine (2005) focused on argumentative texts, and Adiantika (2015) investigated expository texts. In conclusion, the use of cohesive devices that occurred also varies according to text type.

Most difficult types of cohesive devices to the EFL learners

Out of 3203 cohesive devices found in the students' writing, 213 were used incorrectly, roughly 6.7%. Here, each student's writings were examined to find the errors in cohesive devices. Then, each error was listed according to its type of cohesive device. The errors found in this research are in Table 2.

Table 2. *The inappropriate use of cohesive devices*

No.	Type of Cohesive Devices	Number of Inappropriate Uses
1.	Reference	67
2.	Conjunction	113
3.	Lexical Cohesion	31
Total		213

As shown in Table 2, there were 213 cases of students' errors in using cohesive devices. Other errors also occurred regarding grammar usage; however, this research only focused on the inappropriate use of cohesive devices. Hence, other errors in writing (i.e., grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization) were excluded. From the five types of cohesive devices, there were three types recorded that have been used incorrectly. They are reference with 67 cases, conjunction with 113 cases, and lexical cohesion with 31 cases. These errors explanation is in the following sub-sections.

Conjunction

The conjunction was found to be the most difficult cohesive device for the students to use because it is the type in which most errors occurred; 113 cases. The students were struggling with using conjunction items correctly. It could be seen in E1 (E refers to extracts in the students' writing, and the cohesive devices in focus are underlined):

E1: "When we take picture on an animal, but my mother calls me at handphone and I up." (S19)

The conjunction 'but' was inappropriately used in this sentence. The student should not put 'but' since it did not need it. The correct sentence should be, 'When we took a picture of an animal, suddenly my mother called my handphone and I answered it'. The sentence made by

the student was incorrect from both views of the English and Indonesian languages. Nevertheless, this did not occur due to interference. In this case, the student made the wrong choice of conjunction. The cause of misuse was most likely due to the absence of knowledge in using the correct conjunction to fit the sentence. According to [Adiantika \(2015\)](#), the lack of knowledge was due to insufficient training and guidance in using cohesive devices. Many students also made errors in using conjunctions without adding a comma. For example:

E2: “Then I look at my father, my mother and also my sisters.” (S4)

This sentence could be corrected into, “Then, I looked for my father, mother, and sisters”. Here, the student did not recognize the proper way of using conjunction in the sentence, which is probably due to improper mechanical exercise in writing ([Darweesh & Kadhim, 2016](#)). There were also some instances where the students incorrectly used ‘for’ in their sentences. For instance:

E3: “Five minutes later we went to Matahari plaza for buy the clothes.” (S31)

The student used ‘for’ instead of putting a ‘to infinitive’ verb. The correct sentence should be ‘Five minutes later, we went to Matahari plaza to buy clothes’. Both ‘to’ and ‘for’ could have the same meaning in Indonesian, which is *untuk* ‘to, for’. It means that the student failed to recognize the correct conjunction to use. [Darweesh and Kadhim \(2016\)](#) regarded the student’s first language interference as the main factor that leads to this misuse.

Reference

The results showed that there were 67 cases of incorrect use of reference. Out of 33 recount texts, 27 contain mistakes in how reference items are used. The students seemed confused in choosing a reference item as an object and a subject in a sentence. For example, S17 made an error on the reference item ‘we’ which should be written as ‘us’ as seen in E4:

E4: “But we are is not boring just stay at home because my father always make we felt happy.” (S17)

In E4, the correct sentence should be, ‘But we were not bored to just stay at home because my father always made us feel happy’. This case happened due to the student’s inadequate knowledge of how to use the reference correctly. Besides proper exercises, [Dastjerdi and Samian \(2011\)](#) argued that the limited exposure of authentic materials in the target language is another cause for the improper use of cohesive devices. Another common error made by the students is the use of ‘I and my family’. As seen in E2:

E5: “I and my family went to Banda Aceh.” (S4)

The sentence in E5 should be corrected as ‘My family and I went to Banda Aceh’. From the Indonesian language structure, the student’s order choice was not wrong when Student 4 wrote, ‘I and my family’. Thus, the first language interference caused the error because, in Indonesia, it is correct to say *saya dan keluarga saya* ‘I and my family’. In this case, the

interference of the first language to the target language was revealed to be the cause of the student's problem (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011). Then, there is an incorrect use of putting a reference even though it was not needed, such as shown in E6:

E6: I was alone at home and didn't knew what should I did it. (S8)

The reference 'it' written by the student must be deleted. The correct sentence should be, 'I was alone at home and didn't know what I should do'. The student lacked knowledge that the reference 'it' should not be inserted in such sentence structure; even in the Indonesian language, this structure is incorrect. Besides lacking practice and exercise, inadequate direct exposure to the target language texts also leads to improper use of cohesive devices (Olateju, 2006).

Lexical cohesion

The next erroneous cohesive device was lexical cohesion, with 31 cases of incorrect uses. Some of the errors are in the data below:

E7: "I and my family back to home". (S6)

The phrase 'back to home' is incorrect, while the correct one is 'back home'. The student seemed to think that 'back' is a verb. The sentence could be corrected into 'My family and I went back home'. The student made this error when they tried translating a sentence from Indonesian to English in word-for-word translation (Aziz, 2015). In Indonesia, saying 'going back home' is *kembali ke rumah*, with its word-for-word translation to be 'back to home'. In this case, the translated words turned out incorrect in English. Again, the learners' lack of exposure to the language in use could cause difficulties when dealing with cohesion and coherence in the EFL context (Rassouli & Abbasvandi, 2013). Some students also chose the wrong words in writing a phrase, such as done by S13 in E8:

E8: "And then I remembered that I cannot to drived the motorcycle". (S13)

Her chosen word in E8 should be 'ride' instead of 'drive'. The phrase 'ride a motorcycle' is a collocation, so changing the word with another one makes it incorrect. The correct sentence should be, 'Then, I remembered that I could not ride a motorcycle'. Collocational errors are a prominent feature of the errors made by non-native speakers due to the lack of exposure to the natural expression and word association in the target language. When such exposure is lacking or limited, foreign language learners will resort to their first language lexical resource and translate it into the target language, which seems to be the case here. The student chose the wrong pair of words for the collocation. In this matter, Ong (2011) explained that the errors in the misuse of collocation were due to the students' deficiency in a wide range of vocabulary. Other errors in this type of cohesive device are in using adjectives. It is depicted in E9, as made by S19.

E9: "We went to grandma's house 5 people, my parent, I and my young sister".

In E9, the correct sentence should be ‘We went to grandma’s house, there were five people; my parents, my younger sister and me’. Again, the error was rooted in insufficient exposure to the correct writing of cohesive devices in the target language texts. As previously mentioned, [Rassouli and Abbasvandi \(2013\)](#), [Olateju \(2006\)](#), and [Dastjerdi and Samian \(2011\)](#) believed that inadequate resources or exposure to how cohesive devices were appropriately used could result in students’ errors.

As for the three types of cohesive devices that became problematic for the students. [Ong \(2011\)](#) who investigated cohesive errors in expository compositions of EFL learners in China, also revealed that the students had difficulty using reference, followed by a conjunction and lexical cohesion. The corresponding result could be caused by similar participants where both Indonesia and China regarded English to be a foreign language.

Thus, the students’ first language played a heavy role in their cohesive device selection due to the interference during the acquisition. In this research, the researcher realized that it took more work to understand the students’ sentences due to the inappropriate usage of cohesive devices. According to [Ong \(2011\)](#), inappropriate use of cohesive devices could easily lead the readers to misunderstand the initial intention of the writer. Thus, the readers could not comprehend the points that the writer was trying to convey. Afterward, [Rassouli and Abbasvandi \(2013\)](#) regarded cohesion as one of the paramount factors that must be focused on in writing. Without cohesion, a text could only be built by several unrelated sentences. [Adiantika \(2015\)](#) also mentioned that cohesive devices allowed a text to preserve consistency and connectedness throughout the passage. As a part of writing ability, cohesive devices held a great stance of importance in a piece of writing, and it is the most crucial characteristic ([Rahman, 2013](#)).

Problems encountered in using the cohesive devices

The interview result showed that the students’ difficulty in using cohesive devices is engrained in common reasons. When they were asked about the use of cohesive devices in their essays, their answers showed several themes related to their mistakes. The most common reason was revealed as pure errors, followed by the absence of knowledge, overuse (due to their assumptions or predictions), and lack of writing practice. Each of these answers is explained in the following sub-sections.

Pure error

Most of the students answered that their mistakes were due to pure error. It means that when the students were shown their errors in using a cohesive device, they could instantly recognize that their sentence contained an error. For example, when the researchers showed S27 the errors she made in her writing, she immediately corrected the use of ‘her’ while referring to her father, which should be ‘his’. She informed:

E10: “Ooh, right. It is wrong. It should be ‘his’, not ‘her’. I am sorry, I am not careful”. (S27)

S24, despite being reluctant at first, also identified and confessed her mistake when shown the results of her essay.

E11: “Um... I don’t really know what’s wrong, but is it because I did not use a comma after this ‘so?’ I was rushing because I am afraid, I will be late (to submit the essay)”. (S24)

Another student, S9, gave a similar response as well. She was shown her essay and pointed out how she used 'neither' in an incorrect way. She realized her error immediately and responded:

E12: "Yes, yes, I'm sorry Miss. Not 'didn't bring jacket', actually (it should be) 'bring a jacket'. So, the sentence is 'Neither me nor my family bring a jacket'. I did not re-read my writing". (S9)

From the interview responses, as shown above, they knew how to use cohesive devices correctly. However, errors were made due to their carelessness during the writing process. This reason could connect with another reason: the lack of time to write. Practicing students need sufficient time and opportunity to strengthen their knowledge in writing. This finding corresponded with Adiantika (2015), who claimed that following students' difficulty in applying cohesive devices appropriately is due to insufficient training and guidance in using cohesive devices. In this regard, students need more opportunities and guidance provided by English teachers to improve their ability to use cohesive devices correctly.

Absence of knowledge

The second reason for their mistakes in using cohesive devices was their absence of knowledge. When asked about their errors, they did not know why they were incorrectly used. It means they did not know enough about using cohesive devices correctly. S3, regarding her sentence of 'I think your idea is safer than me' (which should be 'I think your idea is safer than mine') revealed that she had no idea why her sentence was incorrect. She said:

E13: "What? Hm...I think this sentence is correct Miss". (S3)

According to S3, her sentence was correct, and the reference was also used appropriately. In this regard, S27 also felt that there was nothing wrong with her sentence 'I just look my sister and my young sister play the sand' (which should be 'I just look at my sister and my younger sister play in the sand'). She informed:

E14: "Wait, let me read it again...is this wrong Miss? 'I look my sister and my young sister play the sand'. Yeah, no Miss, there is nothing wrong (with it)". (S27)

When they were informed of their mistakes, they were surprised and informed that some of the cohesive devices were not taught by their previous teachers. They further informed that even though they commonly found the words of conjunctions and references when reading English materials or textbooks, they only focused on the main idea of the text or sentence. In this regard, they only read texts to get the content ideas but ignore how cohesive devices were used in the texts. They did not pay special attention to the cohesive devices they encountered, and it led to the absence of knowledge on how to use some of the cohesive devices correctly. According to Nilopa et al. (2017), it was important for students to be provided with the knowledge of cohesion and the skill of cohesive devices. It means that

English teachers should teach their students to ensure they have proper knowledge about how to use cohesive devices correctly.

Overuse

Another reason was the overuse of cohesive devices when the students felt the need to use a cohesive device even though it was unnecessary. For example, S24, who used three 'because' in one sentence, said she wanted to make her sentence clear, so she used 'because' to explain her story.

E15: "I used 'because' many times because I want to tell about my vacation. Using 'because' is important so people can understand me, so I can keep on explaining what happened during that time and connecting them with 'because'". (S24)

S19 also overused a conjunction when she paired 'although' with 'but', when 'although' was sufficient to write her sentence without adding the conjunction 'but'. She answered:

E16: "Although I went to grandma's house 3 years ago, but I and my cousin is near'. It means I am close with my cousin even though I only met her three years ago. That's why I used 'although' here, and 'but' here". (S19)

E16 shows a good case of mother-tongue interference. In Indonesian, it is common for its native speakers to add 'but' following 'although' clauses. Since it is a native grammatical feature, this does not cause any comprehension problems in Indonesian, but it might be problematic in English.

Lack of writing practice

The students also admitted that they rarely wrote in English. They only write when their English teachers asked them to (i.e., gave a writing assignment or homework). S15 said she did not often write since she had no time to practice independently. She informed:

E17: "I have a lot of homework and exercises, so I can't write in English often. But the teacher sometimes gives us writing assignments just like this". (S15)

Similarly, S4 also did not write often. According to her, writing in English was difficult, so she was not fond of writing in English. She informed:

E18: "I don't write in English often, because I don't really like it. English is difficult, so I have to think hard when I try to write. I often forget the words that I want to write. It is also difficult to translate Indonesian into English". (S4)

Hence, the lack of writing practice made the students struggle to use cohesive devices properly. The researchers found it difficult to read their essays due to the incoherency of the use of these devices and grammar problems. Meanwhile, there should be a correlation between the use of cohesive devices and the readability of a text. In this case, [Ghasemi](#)

(2013) asserted a connection between the use of cohesive devices and the quality of writing. It means that the inappropriate use of cohesive devices by the students could potentially obstruct their achievement in developing their writing skills.

Based on the students' reasons, it seemed that learning how to use cohesive devices properly takes time and practice. Indeed, [Dastjerdi and Samian \(2011\)](#) noted that learning to write efficiently is a long process; thus, it requires much practice and sometimes explicit and formal instruction. These Acehnese students are not alone in the struggle. It was common for EFL learners to face the same difficulties. According to [Shokrpour and Fallahzadeh \(2007\)](#), EFL learners tend to find cohesion and coherence to be the most problematic factors influencing their writing tasks. Furthermore, [Nugraheni \(2016\)](#) stated it was common for non-native speakers to face a problem regarding using cohesive devices in writing English essays.

Due to this matter, [Rassouli and Abbasvandi \(2013\)](#) stated that English learners should study more about establishing clear relations between sentences and connecting the statements in a text. In addition, [Adiantika \(2015\)](#) argued that students need to be encouraged to make sure their text flows through a sequence of sentences. In this case, [Dastjerdi and Samian \(2011\)](#) believe that when students cannot acquire the skills to write their ideas into a coherent text, their writing process is quite tricky and effortful.

Conclusion

This research sets out to find the types of cohesive devices in EFL students in Aceh, Indonesia, on recount text composition and identify the types that were problematic to them. The investigation into the types of devices has shown that all five types of cohesive devices (reference, conjunction, lexical cohesion, ellipsis, substitution) were present in students' texts. The finding on the problematic device type revealed that students struggled the most with conjunction, followed by reference and lexical cohesion. The error causes that were cited during the interview with selected students were pure error/slips, lack of knowledge, overuse of devices, and lack of writing practices. Hence, considering these findings, it is paramount that English teachers pay serious attention to the use of cohesive devices in students' writing and not ignore the errors made by students when using these devices. Particular attention should be made to the devices where they make the most errors and guide them to their correct use. It is also essential to provide more writing opportunities for them, especially an emphasis on practicing the right and appropriate use of cohesive devices.

The findings in this research are subject to at least three limitations. First, the small samples mean the result cannot be generalized to a broader population, especially EFL countries. Second, only one type of text (recount) was used in this research. It limits the interpretation of the findings to this topic only. Finally, the student participants were those living in residential schools where established/regular interaction in English is in place. Therefore, the results do not represent students who go to public schools with limited English-speaking opportunities among peers. Furthermore, further research could include non-residential school students, investigate the use of cohesive devices in other text types, and even investigate spoken English (students' utterances, conversations, and speeches).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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