

An analysis on the use of cohesive devices in improving students' ability in writing recount text at the ninth grade of SMP Negeri 1 Siantar

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the use of cohesive devices in improving students' ability to write recount texts at the ninth grade of SMP Negeri 1 Siantar. A qualitative research design was employed, with data collected from 30 students' written texts based on their personal experiences. The analysis was guided by Halliday and Hasan's cohesion framework, which includes grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion. The findings revealed a total of 1,025 cohesive devices, with reference (38.82%) and conjunction (34.14%) as the most dominant types, followed by lexical cohesion (26.04%). In contrast, substitution (0.68%) and ellipsis (0.29%) were rarely used. These results indicate that students possess a basic understanding of cohesion, particularly in organizing ideas and maintaining textual flow. However, their use of cohesive devices remains limited in variation and sophistication. Therefore, more explicit instruction and practice are recommended to enhance students' mastery of diverse cohesive strategies and improve overall writing quality.

Keyword: cohesive devices; recount text; writing ability; EFL students; cohesion

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a fundamental skill in English language learning that enables students to communicate ideas in a clear, structured, and meaningful way. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing is often considered one of the most challenging skills because it requires the integration of vocabulary, grammar, and organization. Many students experience difficulties when attempting to express their thoughts in written form due to limited linguistic competence and lack of practice. Recent studies highlight that writing proficiency is influenced not only by grammatical accuracy but also by the ability to organize ideas effectively (Rahman et al., 2023).

In Indonesian junior high schools, writing is an essential component of the English curriculum, particularly in producing various text types such as descriptive, narrative, and recount texts. Recount text plays a significant role in helping students retell past experiences in a logical sequence. However, writing a good recount text requires more than simply listing events; students must be able to connect ideas coherently and logically. Research shows that narrative and recount writing heavily depend on the appropriate use of cohesive devices to maintain the flow of ideas (Tabari & Johnson, 2023).

One crucial aspect that determines the quality of writing is cohesion. Cohesion refers to the use of linguistic elements that connect sentences and ideas within a text, such as reference words, conjunctions, substitution, and lexical repetition (Herman et al., 2024). These elements help readers understand the relationship between different parts of the text. Without proper cohesion, a piece of writing may appear fragmented and difficult to follow. Cohesion has been identified as a key factor in determining writing quality and readability (Karatayeva, 2025).

Despite its importance, many students still struggle with the use of cohesive devices in writing. Previous studies have shown that learners often misuse or underuse cohesive devices, resulting in unclear and poorly organized texts. For instance, research conducted by Wilfitri and Fatimah (2020) found that students frequently made errors in using conjunctions and references in their academic writing. Similarly, recent

findings indicate that EFL learners tend to have limited awareness of how cohesive devices function within a text (Sanosi, 2024; Lumbangaol et al., 2024).

Moreover, the relationship between cohesive devices and writing quality has been widely discussed in recent literature. Studies reveal that there is a significant positive correlation between the appropriate use of cohesive devices and students' writing performance. Texts that employ a variety of cohesive devices effectively tend to receive higher quality scores because they are easier to understand and more logically structured (Feliks et al., 2024).

In classroom practice, however, writing instruction often emphasizes grammar and vocabulary rather than discourse-level features such as cohesion. As a result, students may be able to construct grammatically correct sentences but still struggle to produce coherent paragraphs. This issue suggests that teaching strategies need to place greater emphasis on the use of cohesive devices as part of writing instruction. Research indicates that targeted instruction focusing on cohesion can significantly improve students' writing ability (Karatayeva, 2025).

Based on preliminary observations at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar, ninth-grade students still encounter difficulties in writing recount texts, particularly in linking ideas between sentences and paragraphs. Their writing often lacks coherence due to improper or limited use of cohesive devices. This problem highlights the need for a deeper analysis of how students use cohesive devices in their writing and how these devices contribute to their overall writing ability.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the use of cohesive devices in improving students' ability to write recount texts at the ninth grade of SMP Negeri 1 Siantar. Specifically, this research seeks to identify the types of cohesive devices used by students, examine their frequency of use, and evaluate their effectiveness in enhancing writing quality. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for teachers, students, and researchers in improving writing instruction and learning outcomes in EFL contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in a second or foreign language is widely recognized as a complex and multifaceted skill that requires not only grammatical competence but also discourse-level mastery. Recent studies emphasize that effective writing involves the integration of linguistic, cognitive, and organizational skills, particularly in constructing meaningful and coherent texts. Learners often face challenges in organizing ideas and maintaining logical flow, which significantly affects the overall quality of their writing (Rahman et al., 2023; Rumapea et al., 2025). These challenges are especially evident in EFL contexts, where students must simultaneously manage language form and content development.

One of the essential components of effective writing is cohesion, which refers to the linguistic mechanisms that link sentences and ideas within a text. Cohesive devices function as connectors that help readers interpret relationships between different parts of a text, thereby enhancing readability and comprehension. According to Lestari et al. (2023), cohesive devices play a crucial role in establishing unity and continuity in writing, particularly in narrative and recount texts (Sastromiharjo et al., 2024). Without adequate cohesion, texts may appear disjointed, making it difficult for readers to follow the writer's intended meaning.

Cohesive devices are generally categorized into several types, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These categories serve different functions in linking ideas across sentences and paragraphs. Research by Nurhidayat et al. (2021) indicates that students tend to rely heavily on certain types of cohesive devices, such as conjunctions, while underutilizing others like substitution and ellipsis (Simanjuntak et al., 2025). This imbalance often leads to repetitive and less sophisticated writing, suggesting that students require more comprehensive instruction on the variety and function of cohesive devices.

In addition, the use of cohesive devices has been shown to significantly influence writing quality. Empirical studies demonstrate that texts with a higher frequency and more appropriate use of cohesive devices tend to receive better evaluations in terms of coherence and clarity. For instance, Feliks et al. (2024) found a strong positive correlation between the use of cohesive devices and students' writing performance, particularly in academic contexts (Girsang et al., 2025; Marbun et al., 2025). This finding supports the idea that cohesion is not merely a linguistic feature but a key determinant of effective written communication.

Recent research has also explored the development of cohesion over time, highlighting its dynamic nature in second language writing. A longitudinal study by Tabari and Wind (2026) revealed that students' use of cohesive devices evolves gradually and is influenced by instructional practices and task types. The study further indicates that cohesion development is not linear but varies across individuals, suggesting the need for continuous and targeted instruction in writing classrooms.

Furthermore, comparative studies have shown that EFL learners often face difficulties in using cohesive devices effectively compared to native speakers. Rahayu et al. (2022) found that Indonesian learners tend to exhibit limited variation in cohesive device usage and often rely on basic forms, which affects the sophistication of their writing. This limitation highlights the importance of providing explicit instruction and practice opportunities to help students develop a wider range of cohesive strategies.

In the context of recount text writing, cohesive devices are particularly important because this text type requires the chronological organization of events. The ability to connect events logically and smoothly is essential for producing a coherent recount. Studies focusing on students' recount writing reveal that inadequate use of cohesive devices often results in fragmented narratives and unclear sequences of events (Lestari et al., 2023). Therefore, mastering cohesive devices is crucial for improving students' ability to write effective recount texts.

Based on the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that cohesive devices play a vital role in enhancing writing quality, particularly in EFL contexts. However, many students still struggle to use these devices effectively due to limited knowledge and insufficient practice. Previous studies have highlighted various issues related to the misuse, overuse, or underuse of cohesive devices, as well as their impact on writing performance. Despite these findings, there is still a need for further research focusing specifically on junior high school students' use of cohesive devices in recount text writing. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how cohesive devices are used by ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar and how their use contributes to students' writing ability.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to analyze the use of cohesive devices in students' recount text writing. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it focuses on understanding language phenomena in depth, particularly how students use cohesive devices in their natural writing context. According to Creswell (2021), qualitative research aims to explore and interpret the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social or human problems. In this study, the researcher examined students' written texts to identify patterns, types, and problems in the use of cohesive devices.

The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to conduct a detailed textual analysis of students' writing rather than relying solely on numerical data. This approach is supported by recent studies emphasizing that qualitative text analysis is effective in investigating linguistic features such as cohesion and coherence in EFL writing (Mackey & Gass, 2022). Therefore, this design was considered suitable for achieving the objectives of the study.

B. Data Source

The subjects of this research were ninth-grade students of class IX-2 at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar, consisting of 30 students. This class was selected because the students had already learned recount texts as part of the English curriculum. Their written recount texts served as the primary data source for analyzing the use of cohesive devices. Students' written texts are considered authentic data that reflect their actual writing ability and linguistic competence. As noted in recent EFL research, students' written products provide valuable insights into their language use, particularly in terms of discourse features such as cohesion (Hyland, 2019). Therefore, analyzing students' recount texts enabled the researcher to examine how cohesive devices were naturally used in real classroom settings.

The object of this research was the use of cohesive devices in students' recount texts. The study focused on analyzing how cohesive devices contribute to improving students' ability in writing recount texts, identifying the problems faced by students, and examining the types of cohesive devices frequently used. The analysis was based on the cohesion framework proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), which classifies cohesion into grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion (repetition and collocation). Although this theory is classical, it remains widely used in recent studies on discourse analysis and writing research due to its comprehensive framework (Wang et al., 2024). This framework guided the researcher in identifying and categorizing cohesive devices found in students' texts.

C. Research Instrument

In this qualitative study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument responsible for collecting and analyzing the data. This is consistent with qualitative research principles, where the researcher plays a central role in interpreting data and drawing conclusions (Creswell, 2021).

The primary data were obtained through a written essay test. Students were instructed to write a recount text entitled “*Our School’s Independence Day Celebration (17 August)*”, based on their personal experiences during the celebration activities at school. This topic was chosen because it allowed students to describe real and meaningful experiences, such as flag ceremonies, competitions, and class activities. As a result, each text produced was unique and reflected individual perspectives.

The writing task also aligned with the generic structure of a recount text, which includes orientation (introducing the background of the event), events (describing the sequence of activities), and reorientation (providing personal reflection). Students were asked to write naturally without receiving explicit instruction on cohesive devices. This approach was intended to capture the authentic use of cohesion in students’ writing, as suggested by recent research emphasizing the importance of naturalistic data collection in language studies (Rose & McKinley, 2020).

D. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began by administering the writing task to the students during classroom instruction. Students were given clear instructions regarding the topic and structure of the recount text but were not guided on the use of specific cohesive devices. This ensured that the data reflected students’ genuine writing ability.

After the writing task was completed, all students’ texts were collected and prepared for analysis. The researcher then carefully read and reviewed each text to identify the use of cohesive devices. This process involved multiple readings to ensure accuracy and consistency in identifying linguistic features.

E. Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The researcher classified and analyzed cohesive devices based on the framework of Halliday and Hasan (1976). A data classification table was prepared to systematically record the types of cohesive devices used in each text.

The analysis focused on two main categories:

1. Grammatical cohesion, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction
2. Lexical cohesion, including repetition and collocation

Each occurrence of cohesive devices was identified, categorized, and counted to determine the frequency and patterns of use. This procedure allowed the researcher to identify dominant types of cohesive devices as well as common errors made by students.

Furthermore, the analysis evaluated how the use of cohesive devices contributed to the overall quality of students’ writing, particularly in terms of clarity, organization, and coherence. This approach is consistent with recent qualitative studies that emphasize the importance of discourse analysis in understanding students’ writing development (Wang et al., 2024).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Distribution of Cohesive Devices in Students’ Recount Texts

To enhance clarity, the distribution of cohesive devices is presented in a simplified analytical table showing the total frequency and the mean per student.

Table 1. Summary of Cohesive Devices Used by Students

Type of Cohesive Device	Total Frequency	Mean per Student (n = 30)	Rank
Reference	398	13.27	1
Conjunction	350	11.67	2
Lexical Cohesion	267	8.90	3
Substitution	7	0.23	4
Ellipsis	3	0.10	5
Total	1025	34.17	—

In addition to the summary above, variation in student performance can be observed through the total number of cohesive devices used.

Table 2. Total Cohesive Devices per Student (Grouped)

Range of Total Use	Number of Students	Interpretation
50–60	2	Very High Use
40–49	6	High Use
30–39	12	Moderate Use
20–29	10	Low Use

The results indicate that most students fall within the moderate to low categories, suggesting that although cohesive devices are used, their application is not yet optimal.

From Table 1, it is evident that reference (398 occurrences) is the most dominant cohesive device. This suggests that students rely heavily on pronouns and referring expressions to maintain continuity between sentences. Conjunctions (350 occurrences) are also widely used, indicating that students are able to sequence events logically, which is essential in recount texts.

Lexical cohesion (267 occurrences) appears frequently but lacks variation. Most students depend on repetition rather than synonymy or collocation, which limits the richness of their writing. Meanwhile, substitution (7 occurrences) and ellipsis (3 occurrences) are rarely used, indicating that these more complex cohesive devices have not yet been fully mastered.

B. Percentage of Cohesive Devices

To provide a proportional perspective, the frequency of cohesive devices is presented in percentage form.

Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Cohesive Devices

Type of Cohesive Device	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reference	398	38.82%
Conjunction	350	34.14%
Lexical Cohesion	267	26.04%
Substitution	7	0.68%
Ellipsis	3	0.29%
Total	1025	100%

The percentage distribution confirms that reference and conjunction dominate students' writing, accounting for more than 70% of all cohesive devices used. This indicates that students are capable of maintaining basic connections between ideas, particularly in structuring chronological events. However, the minimal use of substitution and ellipsis highlights a significant gap in students' mastery of more advanced cohesive strategies.

These findings suggest that students tend to rely on simpler and more explicit forms of cohesion, which may limit the overall sophistication of their writing.

Overall, the results demonstrate that while students have begun to apply cohesive devices in their writing, their usage remains uneven and limited in variety. This imbalance affects the coherence, flexibility, and overall quality of their recount texts.

C. Discussion

This section interprets the findings of the study by relating them to current theories and empirical studies on cohesive devices in EFL writing. The discussion highlights how students' use of cohesive devices reflects their writing ability, particularly in constructing recount texts.

The findings reveal that reference is the most dominant cohesive device used by students. This indicates that learners rely heavily on pronouns and other referring expressions to maintain connections between sentences. Such reliance suggests that students possess a basic understanding of textual cohesion, particularly in avoiding repetition and maintaining continuity. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that reference is one of the earliest and most frequently acquired cohesive features in second language writing due to its relatively simple application (Wang et al., 2024).

The high frequency of conjunctions further demonstrates students' ability to organize ideas logically. In recount texts, conjunctions play a crucial role in sequencing events and expressing relationships such as addition, cause, and time. The findings suggest that students are able to construct chronological narratives using connectors such as *then*, *after that*, and *because*. This supports previous research indicating that conjunctions significantly contribute to coherence by structuring the flow of information within a text (Gutwinski, 2011).

Regarding lexical cohesion, the results show that students frequently use repetition to maintain connections between ideas. While this indicates an awareness of lexical cohesion, the limited use of synonyms or varied vocabulary reflects restricted lexical resources. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that lexical sophistication and variation are closely linked to writing quality, and that overreliance on repetition may reduce textual richness (Fernandez, 2021). Therefore, although cohesion is achieved, the overall effectiveness and sophistication of the writing may still be limited.

In contrast, substitution and ellipsis are rarely used by students. Their minimal occurrence suggests that these more complex cohesive devices have not yet been fully understood or mastered. These devices require a deeper level of grammatical and discourse competence, as they involve replacing or omitting elements while maintaining meaning. The absence of such devices in students' writing reflects a tendency to rely on

more explicit and surface-level forms of cohesion. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies, where EFL learners tend to avoid complex cohesive structures due to limited proficiency (Lee et al., 2019).

The percentage analysis further confirms that students depend largely on reference and conjunction, which together account for more than 70% of the total cohesive devices used. This indicates that students are able to achieve basic coherence in their writing; however, their use of cohesive devices remains limited in range and variety. Effective writing requires not only the presence of cohesive devices but also their appropriate and varied use across contexts (Wu et al., 2024). The lack of diversity in cohesive strategies suggests that students' writing development is still at an intermediate level.

Moreover, the variation in the number of cohesive devices used among students reflects differences in writing proficiency. Students who used a higher number of cohesive devices tended to produce more organized and coherent texts, while those with fewer cohesive devices often struggled to connect ideas effectively. This finding supports the view that cohesion is an important indicator of writing quality and is closely associated with overall language proficiency (Crossley et al., 2019).

Overall, the findings indicate that students have developed a foundational ability to use cohesive devices in writing recount texts. However, their reliance on a limited range of devices, particularly reference and conjunction, highlights the need for more comprehensive instruction. Teachers should emphasize not only the function of cohesive devices but also encourage students to use a wider variety of cohesive strategies, including substitution, ellipsis, and more advanced forms of lexical cohesion. By doing so, students can improve the coherence, variety, and overall quality of their writing.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that ninth-grade students of class IX-2 at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar have demonstrated a basic ability in using cohesive devices in writing recount texts. The analysis shows that students predominantly use reference and conjunction as their main cohesive strategies, followed by lexical cohesion, while substitution and ellipsis are rarely employed. This indicates that students are able to maintain general connections between sentences and organize events chronologically, which are essential features of recount texts.

However, the use of cohesive devices among students remains uneven and limited in variation. Although cohesion is present in their writing, it tends to rely on simple and repetitive forms, particularly through pronouns and basic conjunctions. The limited use of more complex cohesive devices, along with the lack of lexical variation, suggests that students' writing proficiency is still developing. As a result, their texts may achieve basic coherence but lack flexibility, richness, and sophistication in expressing ideas.

Therefore, it is important for English teachers to provide more focused instruction on the use of cohesive devices, especially those that are less frequently used, such as substitution, ellipsis, and more varied forms of lexical cohesion. Encouraging students to practice using a wider range of cohesive strategies can help improve the clarity, organization, and overall quality of their writing.

Furthermore, future research is recommended to explore instructional techniques that effectively enhance students' mastery of cohesion across different text types and educational contexts.

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