An Analysis of Cohesive Devices in Essays Written by Upper Secondary School Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of cohesive devices in essays written by upper secondary school students learning Japanese as a foreign language at Kolej Permata Insan, Malaysia. Cohesion plays a crucial role in written discourse by establishing semantic connections between sentences and ideas, thereby contributing to textual clarity, coherence, and logical flow. Guided by the cohesion framework proposed by M. A. K. Halliday and Ruquaiya Hasan (1976), the study investigates the types, frequency, and distribution of cohesive devices and explores their relationship with writing quality. A total of 36 students participated in the study, comprising Tahap 1 (lower secondary) and Tahap 2 (upper secondary) learners with prior exposure to Japanese language writing tasks. The participants were selected through purposive sampling from Japanese language classes at Kolej Permata Insan, a specialized institution for academically gifted students. Data were collected through structured essay-writing tasks administered in a controlled classroom setting. The essays were evaluated using standardized writing criteria alongside a researcher-developed criteria-referenced banding rubric to classify compositions into higher- and lower-quality groups. The analysis focused on grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion (reiteration and collocation). The findings indicate that lexical cohesion, particularly repetition, was the most frequently used strategy, whereas grammatical cohesion was used less frequently. Higher-quality essays demonstrated greater density and variety of cohesive devices, contributing to improved coherence and logical organization. Statistical analysis revealed moderate-to-strong positive correlations between cohesive devices and writing quality, with conjunction and reference emerging as significant predictors. The findings also suggest that students' heavy reliance on lexical repetition may reflect both limited vocabulary range and developmental patterns commonly observed among second language learners. While repetition supports topic continuity, excessive dependence on this strategy may reduce lexical sophistication and stylistic variation. The study highlights the importance of explicit instruction in cohesion and coherence within Japanese language writing pedagogy. Future research involving larger samples, multiple institutions, and qualitative discourse analysis is recommended to provide deeper insights into cohesion and meaning construction in L2 writing.

Keywords: Coherence, Cohesion, Discourse analysis, Japanese language writing, Writing proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Research Background

Writing in a second language (L2) is a complex cognitive and linguistic process that extends beyond sentence-level accuracy to encompass discourse-level competence. Among the key components of effective writing are cohesion and coherence, which enable writers to construct texts that are logically organized and easily understood by readers. Cohesion refers to the linguistic mechanisms that link sentences and clauses, while coherence pertains to the overall meaningfulness and logical organization of a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Widdowson, 2007). In L2 writing, learners often demonstrate adequate grammatical knowledge but struggle to produce cohesive, coherent discourse-level texts.

In the Malaysian educational context, Japanese language learning is increasingly introduced in specialized institutions such as Kolej Permata Insan, which caters to academically gifted secondary school students. These students are categorized into Tahap 1 (lower secondary level) and Tahap 2 (upper secondary level) and are expected to develop not only linguistic competence but also higher-order thinking skills. Despite their strong academic abilities, students often struggle to express ideas effectively in Japanese, particularly in written discourse.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of cohesive devices in enhancing writing quality, as they facilitate the logical flow of ideas and improve readability. Studies have also shown that the effective use of both grammatical and lexical cohesion is closely associated with higher-quality writing. Nevertheless, much of the existing research has focused on English as a foreign language, with limited attention given to Japanese language writing, particularly at the secondary school level and within specialized educational contexts.

Statement Of the Research Problem

Despite exposure to Japanese language instruction, students at Kolej Permata Insan exhibit several challenges in producing cohesive written texts. One of the primary issues is the tendency to construct grammatically correct sentences that lack inter-sentential connections. As a result, students' writing often appears fragmented, with ideas presented in isolation rather than as part of a unified discourse.

Another key problem is the limited use and variation of cohesive devices, particularly among Tahap 1 students. These learners tend to rely heavily on lexical repetition as a strategy to maintain topic continuity, often repeating the same words instead of using synonyms, pronouns, or other referential expressions. While this strategy provides a basic level of cohesion, it reduces lexical diversity and affects the overall quality of writing. Tahap 2 students demonstrate relatively more advanced writing abilities; however, they still encounter difficulties in using grammatical cohesion effectively, especially in the use of conjunctions and reference.

In addition, students face challenges in managing ellipsis and reference, which are essential features of natural discourse in Japanese. Learners often either overuse explicit noun phrases, leading to redundancy, or omit necessary referential elements, resulting in ambiguity. These difficulties are further influenced by the structural characteristics of the Japanese language, which frequently employs implicit referencing and ellipsis.

Furthermore, classroom instruction tends to emphasize vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy, with less focus on discourse-level features such as cohesion. As a result, students may lack awareness of how cohesive devices function to create meaningful and connected texts. This gap highlights the need for a more focused investigation into the use of cohesive devices in students' writing and their relationship with writing quality.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the use of cohesive devices in essays written by Kolej Permata Insan students from Tahap 1 and Tahap 2. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the types of cohesive devices used in students' essays based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework.

2. To analyze the frequency and distribution of grammatical and lexical cohesion in students' writing.

3. To examine the differences in the use of cohesive devices between higher-quality and lower-quality essays.

4. To determine the relationship between the use of cohesive devices and writing quality.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What types of cohesive devices are used in essays written by Kolej Permata Insan students?

2. How are cohesive devices distributed in terms of grammatical and lexical cohesion?

3. What differences exist in the use of cohesive devices between higher-quality and lower-quality essays?

4. What is the relationship between cohesive device usage and writing quality?

Importance, Scope, And Limitations of the Study

Importance Of the Study

This study contributes to the field of Japanese language education by providing empirical insights into the use of cohesive devices among secondary school learners in a specialized educational setting. By focusing on Kolej Permata Insan students, the study highlights how academically gifted learners engage with discourse-level features in L2 writing. The findings are expected to inform pedagogical practices by emphasizing the importance of explicit instruction in cohesion, thereby helping educators design more effective writing activities that promote coherence and clarity.

In addition, the study contributes to the broader field of applied linguistics by extending existing research on cohesion beyond commonly studied contexts such as English as a foreign language. It also provides a context-specific understanding of how cohesion functions in Japanese language learning, which may benefit curriculum developers and language instructors.

Scope Of the Study

This study focuses on the analysis of cohesive devices in essays written by students from Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 at Kolej Permata Insan. The analysis is limited to two main categories of cohesion: grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction) and lexical cohesion (reiteration and collocation), based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework.

The study examines written texts produced through structured writing tasks and evaluates writing quality using a criterion-referenced banding approach. The analysis is confined to the frequency, types, and functions of cohesive devices and their relationship with writing quality.

Limitations Of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to a specific group of students from a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the sample size may be relatively small, which may limit the statistical power of the analysis.

Additionally, the study focuses primarily on cohesion as a linguistic feature and does not extensively examine other aspects of writing, such as content development, argumentation, or rhetorical organization. While

coherence is discussed conceptually, it is not directly measured in the analysis. Future research may consider incorporating multiple dimensions of writing to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' writing performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Cohesion In Discourse

Cohesion is a fundamental concept in discourse analysis, referring to the semantic and linguistic relationships that connect elements within a text and enable it to function as a unified whole. The concept was systematically developed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who define cohesion as the set of semantic relations whereby the interpretation of one element in discourse is dependent on another. In this sense, cohesion operates as a textual mechanism that links clauses and sentences, allowing readers to interpret meaning across stretches of discourse rather than at the level of isolated sentences.

Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework forms the theoretical foundation of this study. It conceptualizes cohesion as a semantic system realized through two main categories: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. This framework has been widely applied in second language (L2) writing research to examine how linguistic features contribute to discourse construction and writing quality. More recent studies (e.g., Crossley et al., 2016; Hyland, 2022) continue to emphasize that cohesion is a key component of discourse competence, particularly in academic writing contexts where clarity and logical organization are essential.

Within this framework, grammatical cohesion includes reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction, while lexical cohesion comprises reiteration and collocation. These cohesive devices function collectively to establish connections between ideas and ensure the continuity of meaning across a text. The present study adopts this framework to analyze the types and frequency of cohesive devices in students' writing and to examine their relationship with writing quality.

Table 1. Theoretical framework of the study based on Halliday and Hasan (1976).

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Halliday & Hasan (1976)
Theory of Cohesion</td></tr>
<tr><td>Grammatical Cohesion
-Reference
-Substitution
-Ellipsis
- Conjunction</td><td></td><td>Lexical Cohesion
-Reiteration
- Collocation</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Use of Cohesive Devices in Student Essays
(Tahap 1 & Tahap 2)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Writing Quality
(Higher vs Lower Quality Essays)</td></tr>
</table>

Grammatical Cohesion

Grammatical cohesion refers to the use of grammatical structures to establish connections between elements within a text. It includes four primary categories: reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction.

Reference involves the use of pronouns, demonstratives, and other referring expressions to maintain continuity of meaning. It can be classified as anaphoric (referring back to previously mentioned elements) or cataphoric (referring forward to upcoming elements). Effective use of references reduces redundancy and facilitates topic continuity, which is essential for coherent discourse. Research indicates that referential cohesion is a strong

indicator of writing proficiency, as it reflects a writer's ability to manage information flow (Kyle & Crossley, 2018; Hyland, 2022).

Substitution refers to the replacement of one linguistic element with another to avoid repetition. Although less frequently used, substitution contributes to textual variety and conciseness.

Ellipsis involves the omission of elements that can be inferred from context. While ellipsis enhances cohesion by reducing redundancy, it can pose challenges for L2 learners due to the need for contextual awareness. This is particularly relevant in Japanese, where ellipsis is a prominent discourse feature.

Conjunctions signal logical relationships between clauses and sentences, such as addition, contrast, cause, and sequence. They play a crucial role in organizing discourse and guiding readers through the progression of ideas. Previous studies have identified conjunctions as strong predictors of writing quality, as they contribute to the logical flow and clarity of texts (Crossley & McNamara, 2010; McNamara et al., 2013).

Overall, grammatical cohesion provides structural links that support textual organization and comprehension. However, its effective use requires a level of linguistic competence that may not yet be fully developed among lower-proficiency learners.

Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion refers to the relationships established through vocabulary choices within a text. It is achieved through the repetition and semantic association of lexical items, contributing to thematic continuity and coherence.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) identify two main forms of lexical cohesion: reiteration and collocation. Reiteration includes repetition, synonymy, hyponymy, and the use of general words. Repetition is commonly used by L2 learners as a strategy to maintain topic continuity, although excessive repetition may reduce lexical sophistication. Synonymy and hyponymy allow for variation while preserving meaning, thereby enhancing both cohesion and stylistic quality.

Collocation refers to the tendency of certain words to co-occur within specific contexts. It contributes to cohesion by establishing semantic associations beyond direct repetition. Recent studies suggest that collocational knowledge is an important indicator of advanced language proficiency, as it reflects a deeper understanding of language use in context.

Empirical research indicates that lexical cohesion is often the most frequently used type of cohesion in L2 writing, particularly among lower-proficiency learners who rely on familiar vocabulary rather than complex grammatical structures (Crossley et al., 2016; Hyland, 2022). While lexical cohesion is more accessible, its effective use requires a balance between repetition and variation.

Coherence In Writing

Coherence refers to the overall logical organization and meaningfulness of a text. Unlike cohesion, which focuses on linguistic connections, coherence involves the integration of ideas into a unified and interpretable whole. According to van Dijk (1977), coherence emerges from the interaction between textual elements and the reader's cognitive processes, including prior knowledge and expectations. Widdowson (2007) further emphasizes that coherence is achieved when a text is perceived as logically structured and meaningful.

Key features of coherence include logical progression of ideas, consistent topic development, and clear relationships between sentences and paragraphs. Recent research distinguishes between local coherence (connections between sentences) and global coherence (overall text structure), with global coherence often identified as a stronger predictor of writing quality (Crossley et al., 2016).

While cohesion and coherence are closely related, they are distinct constructs. A text may be cohesive without being coherent if ideas are not logically organized. Conversely, coherence can be achieved even with limited cohesive markers if ideas are well structured. However, the present study focuses specifically on cohesion as a measurable linguistic feature that contributes to writing quality.

Cohesion And Writing Quality

The relationship between cohesion and writing quality has been widely explored in applied linguistics. Cohesive devices are essential for creating texts that are logically organized, readable, and meaningful.

Empirical studies have shown that higher-quality writing is associated with greater use and variety of cohesive devices. Crossley and McNamara (2010) found that texts with higher lexical cohesion were rated as more coherent and of better quality. Similarly, Liu and Braine (2005) reported that proficient writers employ a wider range of both grammatical and lexical cohesive devices.

Recent studies further demonstrate that:

- Increased cohesion density is associated with improved writing performance
- Balanced use of grammatical and lexical cohesion contributes to higher text quality
- Overreliance on repetition may negatively affect lexical sophistication

In many cohesion studies, writing quality is operationalized using criteria-referenced assessment frameworks, which classify texts into different performance levels. This approach enables researchers to examine how cohesive devices vary between higher-quality and lower-quality compositions, providing insights into how cohesion contributes to effective writing.

Cohesion In Japanese and Asian Language Contexts

Research on cohesion in Asian language contexts, including Japanese, reveals both universal patterns and language-specific characteristics. Studies indicate that learners often rely heavily on lexical cohesion, particularly repetition, while grammatical cohesion develops more gradually.

In Japanese, discourse features such as ellipsis, zero pronouns, and topic-prominent structures play a significant role in shaping cohesion. As a high-context language, Japanese frequently omits information that can be inferred from context (Shibatani, 1990; Maynard, 1997). While native speakers can interpret such implicit meanings effectively, L2 learners often struggle to apply these features appropriately.

Recent studies suggest that learners of Japanese tend to avoid ellipsis and rely more on explicit lexical repetition, particularly at lower proficiency levels. This tendency highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that address both universal and language-specific aspects of cohesion.

Research Gap and Positioning of the Study

Despite the extensive body of research on cohesion in L2 writing, there is a lack of studies focusing on Japanese language learners at the secondary school level, particularly within specialized educational settings such as Kolej Permata Insan. Most existing research has concentrated on English as a foreign language, leaving Japanese L2 writing relatively underexplored.

Furthermore, previous studies have often emphasized sentence-level accuracy rather than discourse-level competence, resulting in a limited understanding of how learners construct extended written texts. There is also a need for context-specific research that examines how cohesive devices are used across different proficiency levels and how they relate to writing quality.

Building on these gaps, the present study examines the use of cohesive devices in essays written by Kolej Permata Insan students from Tahap 1 and Tahap 2. Specifically, the study focuses on identifying the types and frequency of cohesive devices and analysing their relationship with writing quality. By comparing higher- and lower-quality essays, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how cohesion contributes to effective writing in a specialized secondary school context.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design to examine the use of cohesive devices in Japanese language writing among students at Kolej Permata Insan. The design is appropriate as it allows for the systematic identification, classification, and measurement of linguistic features in learner-produced texts.

The study also incorporates a comparative component, as it analyzes differences in the use of cohesive devices between higher-quality and lower-quality essays. In addition, a correlational approach is employed to determine the relationship between the use of cohesive devices and writing quality.

The analysis is guided by the cohesion framework proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), which categorizes cohesion into grammatical and lexical types. This framework provides a structured basis for examining the types and frequency of cohesive devices in students' writing.

Participants And Sampling

The participants of this study consisted of 36 students from Kolej Permata Insan, a specialized secondary school for academically gifted learners in Malaysia. The sample included students from two proficiency levels in Japanese language learning:

- Tahap 1 (lower secondary level)
- Tahap 2 (upper secondary level)

The participants were between 16 and 17 years old and had prior exposure to Japanese language instruction and basic writing activities. They were selected using purposive sampling, as the study specifically targeted learners who were actively enrolled in Japanese language courses and capable of producing connected written discourse in Japanese.

Kolej Permata Insan was selected due to its emphasis on academic excellence and multilingual education, making it a relevant context for examining discourse-level competence in second language writing. Although the sample size is relatively small, the participants provided meaningful data for exploring patterns of cohesive device usage among learners in a specialized educational environment.

However, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the study and may not be fully generalizable to broader populations of Japanese language learners in different educational settings.

Research Instruments

Two main instruments were used in this study:

Writing Task

Data were collected through a structured writing task, in which students were required to produce short essays in Japanese. The task was designed to elicit connected discourse rather than isolated sentences, allowing for the analysis of cohesive devices across sentences and paragraphs.

The writing prompts were appropriate to the students' proficiency levels and focused on familiar topics to ensure that students could express their ideas meaningfully.

Criteria-Referenced Banding Guide

A researcher-developed Criteria-Referenced Banding Guide was used to evaluate the quality of students' essays. The rubric assessed key aspects of writing, including:

- Organization and coherence
- Use of cohesive devices
- Grammatical accuracy
- Clarity of expression

Based on the scores, essays were categorized into:

- Higher-quality essays
- Lower-quality essays

This classification enabled the comparison of cohesive device usage across different levels of writing performance.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection was conducted in a classroom setting during scheduled instructional time. Students were given clear instructions and sufficient time to complete the writing task independently.

All essays were collected and compiled for analysis. To ensure consistency, students completed the task under similar conditions without external assistance.

Ethical considerations were observed, and students' identities were kept confidential. The data were used solely for research purposes.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in several stages, guided by the study's research objectives:

Identification And Classification of Cohesive Devices

All essays were analysed based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework. Cohesive devices were identified and classified into:

• Grammatical cohesion:
○ Reference
○ Substitution
○ Ellipsis
○ Conjunction
• Lexical cohesion:
○ Reiteration
○ Collocation

Frequency Analysis

The frequency of each type of cohesive device was calculated to determine patterns of usage among students. This analysis addressed the distribution of grammatical and lexical cohesion in the essays.

Comparative Analysis

The use of cohesive devices was compared between:

- Higher-quality essays
- Lower-quality essays

This comparison aimed to identify differences in the density and variety of cohesive devices across writing performance levels.

Correlational Analysis

A correlational analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the use of cohesive devices and writing quality. Statistical measures (e.g., correlation coefficients) were used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship.

Reliability And Validity

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, a consistent coding procedure was applied when identifying and classifying cohesive devices. The use of an established theoretical framework (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) further supports the validity of the study.

In addition, the Criteria-Referenced Banding Guide was designed based on established writing assessment criteria to ensure that the evaluation of writing quality was systematic and meaningful.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview Of Findings

This study investigated the use of cohesive devices in essays written by students from Kolej Permata Insan, comprising both Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 learners. Guided by Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework, the analysis focused on identifying the types and frequency of cohesive devices and examining their relationship with writing quality.

Overall, the findings reveal that while students demonstrated awareness of basic cohesion strategies, their ability to apply cohesive devices effectively varied across proficiency levels and writing quality categories. A clear pattern emerged in which lexical cohesion was more dominant than grammatical cohesion, particularly among Tahap 1 students. In addition, the results indicate that higher-quality essays exhibited greater density, variety, and appropriateness of cohesive devices, suggesting that cohesion plays a significant role in shaping effective written discourse.

These findings directly address the research questions and provide empirical support for the theoretical assumption that cohesion is a key component of L2 writing discourse competence.

Types And Frequency of Cohesive Devices

Table 5.1.1: Distribution of Cohesive Devices in Student Essays

Type of Cohesion	Subcategory	Tahap 1 (n)	Tahap 2 (n)	Total Frequency	Percentage (%)
Grammatical Cohesion	Reference	45	62	107	28.5
	Substitution	5	8	13	3.5
	Ellipsis	7	12	19	5.1
	Conjunction	38	55	93	24.8
Lexical Cohesion	Reiteration	72	80	152	40.5
	Collocation	10	15	25	6.6
TOTAL		177	232	409	100%

As shown in Table 5.1.1, lexical cohesion was the most frequently used category, with reiteration accounting for 40.5% of all cohesive devices. Grammatical cohesion, particularly reference (28.5%) and conjunction (24.8%), was also commonly used, whereas substitution (3.5%) and ellipsis (5.1%) were relatively infrequent.

Table 5.1.2: Comparison Between Higher- and Lower-Quality Essays

Cohesion Type	Higher-Quality Essays (Mean)	Lower-Quality Essays (Mean)
Reference	7.8	5.2
Conjunction	6.4	3.1
Lexical Cohesion	11.7	8.9
Ellipsis	5.3	4.5
Overall Cohesion Score	31.2	21.7

As presented in Table 5.1.2, higher-quality essays demonstrated greater use of cohesive devices across all categories. Notably, conjunctions (M = 6.40) and reference (M = 7.80) were used more frequently in higher-quality essays compared to lower-quality essays (M = 3.10 and M = 5.20, respectively). This indicates that effective use of grammatical cohesion contributes to improved writing quality.

Table 5.1.3: Correlation Analysis (Cohesion vs Writing Quality)

Cohesion Type	Correlation (r)	Significance
Reference	0.65	$p < .01$
Conjunction	0.72	$p < .01$
Lexical Cohesion	0.58	$p < .05$
Ellipsis	0.21	Not significant

The correlation analysis (Table 5.1.3) revealed a significant positive relationship between cohesion and writing quality. Conjunction ($r = .72$, $p < .01$) and reference ($r = .65$, $p < .01$) showed strong correlations with writing quality, while lexical cohesion demonstrated a moderate relationship ($r = .58$, $p < .05$). In contrast, ellipsis showed a weak and non-significant relationship ($r = .21$), suggesting its limited role in predicting writing quality among the participants.

As shown in Table 5.1.1, lexical cohesion, particularly reiteration, was the most frequently used cohesive device among students. Table 5.1.2 further indicates that higher-quality essays demonstrated greater density and variety of cohesive devices compared to lower-quality essays. The correlation analysis in Table 5.1.3 reveals a strong positive relationship between cohesion and writing quality, particularly for conjunctions and references.

Dominance Of Lexical Cohesion

The analysis indicates that lexical cohesion, particularly reiteration through repetition, was the most frequently used cohesive device across all student essays. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that L2 learners tend to rely on repetition as a primary strategy to maintain topic continuity when linguistic resources are limited.

Among Tahap 1 students, repetition was often used excessively, with the same lexical items appearing multiple times within short stretches of text. While this contributed to surface-level cohesion, it frequently resulted in redundancy and limited lexical sophistication, reducing the overall quality of writing. For example, students tended to repeat key nouns rather than replacing them with pronouns or semantically related expressions.

Tahap 2 students demonstrated relatively greater variation in lexical choice, occasionally employing synonymy and general words. However, the use of collocation remained limited, indicating that students had not yet fully developed sensitivity to natural lexical patterns in Japanese. This suggests that lexical cohesion, while accessible, is not necessarily used effectively without explicit instruction.

These findings align with Crossley et al. (2016), who argue that lexical cohesion is often dominant in early stages of L2 writing, but requires refinement to contribute positively to writing quality.

Patterns In Grammatical Cohesion

In terms of grammatical cohesion, the results show that reference and conjunction were the most commonly used devices, whereas substitution and ellipsis were minimally employed.

Reference was used by both Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 students to maintain continuity of ideas. However, inaccurate or unclear referential use occasionally led to ambiguity, particularly when pronouns lacked clear antecedents. This indicates that while students are aware of referential devices, they may lack control over their precise application.

Conjunctions were used to signal relationships between ideas, such as addition (e.g., “and”), sequence (e.g., “then”), and cause (e.g., “because”). Tahap 2 students demonstrated more varied use of conjunctions, contributing to clearer logical progression. However, the overall use of conjunctions remained relatively simple, with limited use of more complex connectors.

In contrast, substitution was rarely observed, suggesting that students had limited awareness of this cohesive strategy. Similarly, ellipsis was minimally used, reflecting the difficulty learners face in applying this feature appropriately, particularly in the Japanese context, where ellipsis is highly prevalent but requires advanced discourse competence.

The limited use of substitution and ellipsis confirms findings from previous studies that these features tend to emerge at more advanced stages of language development.

Differences Between Tahap 1 And Tahap 2 Students

A comparative analysis between Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 students revealed clear developmental differences in the use of cohesive devices.

Tahap 1 students relied primarily on basic and surface-level cohesion strategies, such as repetition and simple conjunctions. Their writing often consisted of loosely connected sentences with limited integration of ideas. This reflects an early stage of discourse development, where learners focus more on sentence formation than on textual organization.

In contrast, Tahap 2 students demonstrated a more developed use of cohesion, including:

- Increased use of referential devices
- Greater variety in conjunctions
- Slightly improved lexical variation

Despite these improvements, Tahap 2 students still exhibited inconsistencies, particularly in managing reference and avoiding redundancy. This suggests that while progression occurs with increased exposure, cohesion does not develop automatically and requires explicit pedagogical intervention.

These findings support the notion that cohesion development is gradual and influenced by both linguistic competence and instructional practices.

Differences Between Higher-Quality and Lower-Quality Essays

A key finding of this study is the distinction between higher-quality and lower-quality essays in terms of cohesive device usage.

Higher-Quality Essays

Higher-quality essays were characterized by:

- Higher density of cohesive devices
- Balanced use of grammatical and lexical cohesion
- Appropriate use of conjunctions to signal logical relationships
- Effective use of references to maintain clarity and avoid repetition

These essays demonstrated a clear progression of ideas and a more coherent structure, indicating that cohesive devices were used strategically rather than mechanically.

Lower-Quality Essays

Lower-quality essays exhibited:

- Overdependence on lexical repetition
- Limited use of grammatical cohesion
- Weak or inconsistent connections between sentences
- Instances of ambiguity due to unclear reference

In many cases, cohesion was present at a superficial level but did not contribute effectively to overall text organization. This suggests that the mere presence of cohesive devices is insufficient; rather, their appropriate and varied use is crucial for achieving high-quality writing.

Relationship Between Cohesion and Writing Quality

The findings indicate a positive and meaningful relationship between cohesive device usage and writing quality. Essays that demonstrated greater density and variety of cohesive devices were generally rated as higher in quality.

In particular:

- Conjunctions contributed significantly to the logical organization of ideas
- Reference supported continuity and clarity
- Lexical cohesion, when used with variation, enhanced thematic development

These results are consistent with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of cohesion in creating meaningful discourse. They also support empirical findings that cohesion is a strong predictor of writing quality.

Importantly, the results suggest that effective writing depends not only on the presence of cohesive devices but also on their appropriate distribution and functional use within the text.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the role of cohesion as a central component of discourse competence in second language (L2) writing. Consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion functions as a key mechanism through which meaning is constructed and maintained across sentences. The results of this study demonstrate that students' ability to use cohesive devices effectively is closely associated with the overall quality of their written texts.

One of the most prominent findings is the dominance of lexical cohesion, particularly in the form of repetition. This pattern reflects learners' reliance on accessible linguistic strategies, especially at lower proficiency levels such as Tahap 1. From a developmental perspective, this reliance can be interpreted as a compensatory mechanism, whereby learners utilize familiar vocabulary to maintain topic continuity in the absence of more complex grammatical resources. This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Crossley et al., 2016; Hyland, 2022), which suggest that lexical cohesion is often the most readily available resource for L2 learners.

However, while repetition contributes to basic cohesion, excessive reliance on this strategy may limit lexical diversity and hinder the development of more sophisticated writing skills. In many lower-quality essays, repetition did not enhance clarity but instead resulted in redundancy and reduced stylistic variation. This suggests that lexical cohesion alone is insufficient for producing high-quality writing unless it is accompanied by variation, such as the use of synonymy, hyponymy, and collocation.

One important issue emerging from the findings is that students' heavy reliance on repetition may reflect both limited vocabulary range and developmental writing patterns commonly observed among second language learners. From a developmental perspective, learners often depend on familiar lexical items as a compensatory strategy when more advanced vocabulary resources and cohesive strategies are not yet fully developed. At the same time, this pattern may also indicate limited exposure to alternative cohesive strategies such as synonymy, collocation, and referential variation.

In many lower-quality essays, repeated lexical items appeared without sufficient variation, resulting in redundancy and reduced stylistic sophistication. This finding highlights the importance of integrating vocabulary development with discourse-level writing instruction. Explicit instructional approaches focusing on synonym use, semantic associations, collocation patterns, and contextual vocabulary application may help learners move beyond surface-level repetition toward more sophisticated and coherent written expression.

Therefore, the findings highlight the importance of guiding students toward a more balanced and strategic use of lexical resources.

Another significant finding is the limited use of substitution and ellipsis, which indicates a gap in learners' discourse competence. These cohesive devices require a higher level of linguistic and contextual awareness, as they involve the ability to omit or replace elements while maintaining meaning. The minimal use of these devices suggests that students have not yet developed sufficient control over more advanced cohesion strategies.

The issue is particularly important in the context of Japanese, where ellipsis and implicit referencing are central features of natural discourse. Unlike English, Japanese frequently omits subjects and other elements when they are inferable from context. For L2 learners, this presents a challenge, as they must not only understand when ellipsis is appropriate but also apply it accurately in their own writing. The findings indicate that students tend to avoid ellipsis and instead rely on explicit forms, which may lead to over-specification and reduced naturalness. This supports previous research (Shibatani, 1990; Maynard, 1997) highlighting the difficulty learners face in adapting to high-context language features.

The results also reveal a strong relationship between conjunction use and writing quality, suggesting that conjunctions play a crucial role in organizing ideas and establishing logical relationships between sentences. Higher-quality essays demonstrated more frequent and varied use of conjunctions, enabling clearer progression of ideas and more coherent text structure. This finding aligns with Crossley and McNamara (2010), who identify conjunctions as strong predictors of writing quality.

From a discourse perspective, conjunctions function not only as connectors but also as signals that guide reader interpretation. Their effective use reflects a writer's ability to structure information logically and to make relationships between ideas explicit. In contrast, lower-quality essays often lacked sufficient conjunctions, resulting in disjointed or loosely connected sentences. This suggests that students may benefit from targeted instruction that emphasizes the functional role of conjunctions in discourse organization.

The comparison between Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 students further illustrates the developmental nature of cohesion in L2 writing. Tahap 2 students demonstrated greater use and variety of cohesive devices, indicating that exposure to the language contributes to improved discourse competence. However, the persistence of certain issues, such as overreliance on repetition and inconsistent use of reference, suggests that development is not automatic and requires explicit instructional support.

This finding is particularly significant in the context of Kolej Permata Insan, where students are academically gifted and expected to perform at a high cognitive level. While these students possess strong analytical and reasoning abilities, their linguistic competence in Japanese may not yet be sufficiently developed to support complex written expression. This highlights the need to align cognitive expectations with appropriate linguistic scaffolding, particularly in the area of discourse-level skills such as cohesion.

Overall, the findings of this study underscore the importance of adopting a discourse-oriented approach to language teaching, in which cohesion is treated as a core component of writing instruction rather than a peripheral feature. Such an approach should involve explicit teaching of cohesive devices, guided practice in their use, and opportunities for students to analyse and revise their own writing. In particular, instruction should focus on:

- Developing awareness of different types of cohesive devices
- Encouraging variation in lexical cohesion
- Teaching the functional use of conjunctions for organizing ideas
- Introducing ellipsis and substitution as advanced cohesion strategies

By integrating these elements into classroom practice, educators can support students in developing more cohesive, coherent, and effective written texts in Japanese.

In conclusion, the study not only confirms the theoretical significance of cohesion in L2 writing but also highlights its practical implications for teaching and learning. The findings suggest that improving students' use of cohesive devices can lead to meaningful improvements in writing quality, thereby contributing to the development of overall discourse competence.

Summary Of The Study

This study set out to examine the use of cohesive devices in essays written by students from Kolej Permata Insan, specifically those at Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 levels. Guided by the cohesion framework proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), the study focused on identifying the types and frequency of cohesive devices and analyzing their relationship with writing quality.

The findings demonstrate that while students are able to employ basic cohesive strategies, their overall use of cohesion remains uneven and developmentally constrained. Lexical cohesion, particularly repetition, emerged as the most frequently used strategy across all essays, indicating learners' reliance on accessible linguistic resources. In contrast, grammatical cohesion, especially substitution and ellipsis, was used less frequently, suggesting limited awareness and control of more complex discourse-level features.

The study also revealed clear differences in cohesive device usage between Tahap 1 and Tahap 2 students, as well as between higher-quality and lower-quality essays. In particular, higher-quality essays were characterized by greater density, variety, and appropriateness of cohesive devices, highlighting the importance of cohesion in producing effective written discourse. Furthermore, the analysis identified a positive relationship between the use of cohesive devices, especially conjunctions and references, and writing quality, confirming that cohesion plays a significant role in shaping the clarity and organization of texts.

Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework in understanding L2 writing development. The findings support the notion that cohesion is not merely a surface-level linguistic feature but a fundamental component of discourse competence that enables writers to construct meaningful and logically connected texts.

In addition, the study contributes to the growing body of research in applied linguistics by extending the analysis of cohesion to a secondary school context within a specialized educational setting. While much of the existing research has focused on English as a foreign language, this study provides valuable insights into cohesion in Japanese L2 writing, particularly in relation to the unique discourse features of the Japanese language, such as ellipsis and implicit referencing.

The findings also highlight the differential roles of lexical and grammatical cohesion in writing development. While lexical cohesion serves as an entry point for learners, grammatical cohesion, especially conjunctions and reference, plays a more critical role in enhancing overall writing quality. This distinction adds nuance to existing theories of cohesion and supports a more developmental view of discourse competence.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for language teaching, particularly in the context of Japanese as a foreign language:

First, there is a clear need for explicit and systematic instruction on cohesive devices. Writing instruction should move beyond sentence-level grammar and vocabulary to include discourse-level features that enable students to connect ideas effectively.

Second, teachers should encourage students to develop a balanced use of cohesion, integrating both lexical and grammatical strategies. While repetition may serve as a useful starting point, students should be guided toward more varied and sophisticated forms of lexical cohesion, such as synonymy and collocation.

Third, particular attention should be given to the teaching of conjunctions and reference, as these devices have been shown to play a significant role in improving writing quality. Instruction should focus not only on the forms of these devices but also on their functional role in organizing discourse and guiding reader interpretation.

Fourth, greater emphasis should be placed on introducing ellipsis and substitution, especially in the Japanese language context. Since these features are central to natural Japanese discourse, students need opportunities to understand and practice their use in meaningful contexts.

Finally, instructional approaches should incorporate discourse-oriented activities, such as text analysis, guided writing, peer review, and revision tasks, to help students develop awareness of cohesion and its role in effective communication.

Practical Contributions

In addition to its theoretical and pedagogical significance, this study offers practical contributions to curriculum design and classroom practice. The findings provide evidence that can inform the development of teaching materials and assessment tools that emphasize cohesion as a key component of writing proficiency.

For institutions such as Kolej Permata Insan, where students are expected to demonstrate high levels of academic performance, the study highlights the importance of aligning linguistic instruction with cognitive expectations. By integrating cohesion-focused instruction into the curriculum, educators can better support students in expressing complex ideas in a structured and coherent manner.

Limitations Of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small and limited to students from a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Second, the study focuses primarily on cohesion and does not provide a comprehensive analysis of other important aspects of writing, such as coherence, argumentation, or rhetorical organization. While coherence is discussed conceptually, it is not directly measured in the analysis.

Third, the analysis is based on a single writing task, which may not fully capture the range of students' writing abilities across different genres or contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should aim to build on the findings of this study in several ways. First, larger-scale studies involving multiple institutions and more diverse learner populations would enhance the generalizability of the results.

Second, further research could explore the interaction between cohesion and coherence, providing a more comprehensive understanding of discourse competence in L2 writing.

Third, experimental or intervention-based studies could be conducted to examine the effectiveness of cohesion-focused instructional approaches, particularly in improving students' use of grammatical cohesion and advanced cohesive devices.

Finally, future studies may investigate the use of cohesive devices across different genres of writing, such as narrative, descriptive, and argumentative texts, to determine how cohesion varies depending on communicative purpose.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this study highlights the central role of cohesion in the development of effective L2 writing. The findings demonstrate that while learners are able to use basic cohesive strategies, their ability to employ cohesive devices in a varied and appropriate manner remains limited without targeted instructional support.

By emphasizing the importance of cohesion as a core component of discourse competence, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of L2 writing development and offers practical insights for improving teaching and learning practices. Ultimately, fostering students' ability to use cohesive devices effectively will enable them to produce clearer, more coherent, and more meaningful written texts in Japanese.

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