

USE OF COHESIVE DEVICES IN PARAGRAPH WRITING BY EFL STUDENTS AT ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTERS IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This research explores Vietnamese EFL students' use of cohesive devices in paragraph writing. Eighty Vietnamese EFL learners in four pre-intermediate English classes at two English centers in Vietnam each wrote five paragraphs about five different topics via learning blogs, yielding a corpus of 400 paragraphs. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion taxonomy was employed to identify and analyse the cohesive devices used. The results of the study show that the learners employed a wide range of cohesive markers in their paragraphs and the large majority of them were grammatical in nature; lexical cohesive means were used to a much smaller extent and mainly involved repetition. Of the grammatical cohesive types, use of reference and conjunction was common while substitution and ellipsis were infrequently used. The study provides important pedagogical implications for EFL writing instruction in regard to the employment of cohesive devices in written language production.

Keywords: cohesive devices, paragraph writing, Vietnamese EFL learners

1. Introduction

Writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) is a complex meaning-making and problem-solving process (González, 2017) which could be very challenging for EFL learners. The challenges could be associated with a lack of vocabulary, grammar, word choice (Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020; Enneifer, 2021) or idea organisation and connection (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). The quality of a written text, among many other factors, depends on how ideas are connected within it, and the connectivity of ideas is thus very important. As such, building cohesion properly would help learners to improve their writing ability by articulating their ideas clearly and logically. Cohesion has been found to correlate with effective writing (Cho & Shin, 2014; Crossley & McNamara, 2016; Nasser, 2017).

Many studies have been conducted in the field of cohesion around the world (e.g., Bahaziq, 2016; Chanyoo, 2018; Saputra & Hakim, 2020; Yang & Sun, 2012), but they tend to focus on essay writing and students in university. In Vietnam, to the best of our knowledge, there is limited research in the form of unpublished thesis related to cohesion, namely errors in using cohesive devices (Tran, 2005), cohesive devices in English textbooks (Bui, 2011; Cao, 2012), or EFL teachers' written texts (Bui et al., 2021). Little has been known about the use of

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cohesive devices in paragraph writing by learners at English centers in Vietnam. This group of learners are also under-represented in research of this kind in the world as well. Therefore, a study on cohesion in paragraphs produced by EFL learners at English centers is a necessary response to this empirical gap in extant research. The present study was thus set out to investigate the use of cohesive devices in paragraph writing by Vietnamese EFL pre-intermediate learners at two English centers. In particular, it aimed to answer the following research question: What types of cohesive devices are used by Vietnamese pre-intermediate EFL students in paragraph writing? The research has hoped to provide important pedagogical recommendations for both teachers and students in writing paragraphs and inform further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cohesion

The introduction of Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy about cohesion in English has drawn much attention to the issue of cohesion in written language production. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 4), "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and define it as a text. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another." In this sense, cohesion essentially denotes the semantic interrelationship which could be achieved through cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In Reid's (1992) words, cohesive devices are "words or phrases that act as signals to the reader; those words or phrases make what is being stated relate to what has already been stated or what soon will be stated" (p. 81). In simple terms, cohesion is the explicit use of cohesive devices to indicate the semantic ties in a text to enhance the links between what precedes and what follows (Rahman, 2013) and as such, cohesion enhances the quality of the written text (Cho & Shin, 2014; Crossley & McNamara, 2016; Nasser, 2017). In other words, it is the connectivity between the pieces of a given text that is established through the use of devices that make them to be inter-related and inter-dependent (Kwan & Yunus, 2014).

In particular regard to paragraph writing, a paragraph is centered around one main idea which is typically the topic sentence of the paragraph (Hogue, 2008). Although there are different types of paragraph writing (e.g., descriptive, argumentative, expository, narrative, process) (Savage & Shafiei, 2007), to achieve textual linkage within the paragraph, the topic of the paragraph and its supporting ideas need to be connected to allow the reader to perceive their semantic relationships. Research has shown that use of cohesive devices enhances the quality of the written text (e.g., Crossley & McNamara, 2016; Liu & Braine, 2005) as its readability depends on how the semantic relations are established within it beside the reader's background knowledge (Tabari & Johnson, 2023).

2.2. Cohesive Devices

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesive devices fall into two broad types: grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. The former consists of subcategories of reference, substitution and ellipsis, whereas reiteration and collocation are subsumed in the latter.

In the category of grammatical cohesion, *reference* is described as "the relationship between an element of the text or something else by reference to which it is interpreted in the given instance" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 308). Three types of reference are personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. Firstly, as its name indicates,

personal reference is often expressed through personal pronouns (e.g., *I, you, she, he, it, we, they*), possessive (e.g., *mine, yours, hers, theirs, his, ours*), and possessive determiners (*my, your, our, their, her, his*). Secondly, demonstrative reference is “essentially a form of verbal pointing. The speaker identifies the referent by locating it on a scale of proximity” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 57). As such, it is achieved by determiners (e.g., *the, this, there, that, those*) and demonstrative adverbs (e.g., *here, there, then*). Lastly, comparative reference shows comparison between one thing and another. Comparative reference is often realised through the use of adjectives and adverbs for comparison such as *similar, different, more, less*, etc. (He is very talkative, but his sister is *different*. She is quiet.).

One more form of grammatical cohesion is *substitution* which is the replacement of one item by another. Three types of substitution are nominal (-Could you pass me the book? -Which **one**?), verbal (Linh likes pop music and so **do** I) and clausal (He thinks children should not be allowed to use smart phones, but I don't think **so**).

Ellipsis refers to the omission of an element that is mentioned earlier in a text (Bahazig, 2016). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), ellipsis could be viewed as a form of substitution where the omitted item is still understood. Ellipsis is divided into three main types: nominal, verbal and clausal. In nominal ellipsis, the noun is omitted (My parents love Japanese very much. Both want to travel to Japan one day.) while verbal ellipsis involves the omission of the verb (-Have you finished? -Yes, I have.). As its name suggests, clausal ellipsis occurs when a clause is dropped (-When will you return? - (I will return) Next week.).

As Halliday and Hasan (1976) described, *conjunction* is a special type of cohesion being mainly grammatical but with a lexical unit in it. According to these authors, “conjunctive elements are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings; they are not primarily devices for reaching out into the proceeding (or following text), but they express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in discourse” (p. 222). They are categorised into four groups: 1) additive (e.g., *and, or, furthermore, similarly, in addition*), 2) adversative (e.g., *but, on the other hand, nevertheless*), 3) casual (e.g., *so, consequently, for this reason, it follows from this*) and 4) temporal (e.g., *then, after that, an hour later, finally, at last*).

Lexical cohesive devices are composed of reiteration and collocation in Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy. *Reiteration* is defined as two items that denote the same referent and could be repeated or have similar meanings in a text. Reiteration is displayed through repetition, synonyms, antonyms, superordinates and hyponyms. The last two can also be referred to as ‘sense relations’ between more general and specific expressions. For example, ‘animal’ is a superordinate of ‘dog’ and ‘cat’ while ‘dog’ and ‘cat’ are hyponyms of ‘animal’. Similarly, ‘flowers’ and ‘fountains’ are hyponyms of ‘garden’ in this sentence: “*She knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest **garden**. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright **flowers** and those cool **fountains**.*” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 648).

Collocation is a combination of lexical items that co-occur. It means the co-occurrence of words in certain contexts. It could be verb-noun collocation, adjective-noun collocation, noun-noun collocation, etc. Examples of each type and sub-type of cohesive devices are further presented in the methodology section.

Overall, the cohesion framework by Halliday and Hasan (1976) provides a comprehensive and explicit guide for exploring text connectivity since it “helps to analyze the association between text and its context or the way in which a text is organized” (Yang & Sun,

p. 32). It has thus been selected as a theoretical foundation for analysing cohesive devices in written texts produced by ESL/EFL learners over the decades (e.g., Cho & Shin, 2014; Liu & Braine, 2005; Nasser, 2017; Nirwanto, 2021; Yang & Sun, 2012). Although recent research might shed light on how formulaic language or lexical bundles which are not addressed in Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework could enhance textual cohesion (e.g., Boers, 2020; Kim & Kessler, 2022), the use of such multi-word items or expanded categories of collocations, might not be present in all kinds of texts, especially those produced by low proficiency learners. The cohesion scheme by Halliday and Hasan (1976) is particularly useful for exploring overall textual cohesion and quantifying cohesive devices for its explicitness and multi-dimensional components. Following the above-mentioned researchers, it was therefore employed in the current research to investigate how Vietnamese EFL learners at a low proficiency level used cohesive devices in their written paragraphs.

2.3. Previous Studies

There have been two lines of research on cohesion: one is on the errors associated with use of cohesive means and the other is on the occurrence of cohesive devices in EFL writing of different types. Relevant to the scope of the present study, this review is confined to research that has explored the different categories of cohesive devices used in EFL learners' writings.

A number of studies have investigated the use of cohesive devices in essay writing. For example, Liu and Braine (2005) examined the use of cohesive devices by collecting 50 argumentative compositions created by Chinese undergraduate non-English majors. The results show that the students used a variety of cohesive markers in their writing with lexical devices being most common, followed by reference and conjunction. This contradicts what was found in Bahaziq's (2016) study that there was little evidence of students' use of lexical devices while reference was frequently used, followed by conjunctions.

In another EFL context, Alarcon (2013) examined lexical cohesion used by undergraduate Filipino students and found that repetition was most frequent, followed by antonyms, superordinates and hyponyms while collocations were used less frequently. Furthermore, there was no significant relationship between lexical cohesion and writing quality. Similarly, the findings of Chanyoo's (2018) study revealed that Thai university students used reiteration most, especially repetition and synonymy. Reference was the second most popular type, followed by conjunction and ellipsis. Clearly, reference was one of the most frequently used cohesive devices across groups of learners in these studies.

This trend could be further seen through the works of other researchers who focus on EFL learners in other contexts. For example, Saputra and Hakim (2020) studied types of cohesive devices used in argumentative essays written by high-achieving college students in Indonesia. The results showed that various kinds of cohesive devices were employed, particularly reference with the definite article '*the*'. In terms of lexical cohesion, students used synonyms more than other cohesive markers. Another recent study on Indonesian EFL learners (Nirwanto, 2021) also found reference, conjunction and repetition were most common while ellipsis and substitution were not used at all in opinion essays.

The findings so far on the use of cohesive devices in essay writing have been mixed, with certain types of cohesive markers being used more frequently than others. This could be due to the different groups of EFL learners whose first languages are not the same and the different types of essay writing involved.

In relation to paragraph writing, research has been carried out with undergraduate

students in universities. For example, Saadat and Alavi (2018) examined the use of grammatical cohesive devices in two types of paragraphs (cause-effect and chronology) written by Iranian EFL university learners and native speakers. They used the taxonomy of Halliday and Hasan (1976) to guide their data analysis and found that reference was widely used, followed by conjunction, ellipsis and substitution in both types of paragraph. In the same vein, reference and conjunction also topped the list of the most frequently used means of cohesion for native speakers. Similar findings were also found in a recent study by Nurhidayat et al. (2021) where undergraduate students at an Indonesian university frequently employed reference, conjunction and repetition of the same words.

The studies which are reviewed above largely focused on university students and essay writing. The common findings were that certain types of cohesive ties were employed more than others and the frequency of use of different types of cohesive devices somehow varied among context-specific groups of EFL learners. The different types of writing such as essay or paragraph writing could be an influence and so do the topics of the writing tasks. More research is clearly needed into the use of cohesive devices by learners in different contexts to better understand how cohesion is established, especially in paragraph writing.

In Vietnam, there have not been many studies related to this field. Studies in Vietnam are mainly in the form of unpublished theses and tend to focus on university or high school students. This line of research has examined errors in using cohesive devices (Tran, 2005) and use of cohesive devices in English textbooks (Bui, 2011; Cao, 2012) or in EFL teachers' written texts (Bui et al., 2021). Little empirical knowledge is known about Vietnamese EFL learners at English language centers using cohesive devices in their paragraph writing. The present study thus fills this gap. To do so, Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion taxonomy was employed to identify the cohesive devices used in students' paragraphs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Eighty pre-intermediate level students who enrolled in an English communication course intended for an A2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), participated in this research on a voluntary basis. They were informed of the research and of the fact that their information would be kept confidential and they could withdraw from the study any time without any consequence. They all gave their consent before data collection began.

The eighty participants were from four different classes of the same above-mentioned course at two English centers in a city in Vietnam. Five were high school students and 75 were adults who worked in different job areas. They were aged from 14 to 32, with 34 males and 46 females and had learned English since they were in Grade 6. They were studying *Face2Face – PreIntermediate level* by Chris Redston and Gillie Cunningham – Cambridge University Press as the coursebook. Although the learners were in the same course, their language proficiency levels varied from A1 to B1, as observed by their teacher.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The written paragraphs were collected through blogs as a channel for students to practice writing. According to Zhang (2009, p. 67), blogs “though not originally created for use in language education, have formidable potential as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing class.” In this research, blogs were used at the time of data collection by the teachers in charge

as they were an appropriate platform for students to practice writing in the Covid-19 pandemic situation (of the periods from March to June, 2021). In addition, Collins (2014) mentioned that blogs could help students produce their work in a comfortable manner.

The procedure of collecting samples of written paragraphs was as follows. Firstly, a teacher-student blog was created on the website www.blogger.com. Next, explanations were given to the learners in the four target classes on how to use the blog as a tool for paragraph writing and the learners were guided to create an account. Then they accessed the blog and wrote one paragraph with the topic given on a weekly basis. Each student wrote five paragraphs in five consecutive weeks. The length requirement of each paragraph was from 80-90 words. Students wrote their paragraphs as assignments at home, so the time was unlimited and they also could use any resources as they wished. These assignments were for the purpose of additional practice, not for formal grading. That being said, students were reminded that their paragraphs i) should be relevant to the topic, ii) have a clear topic sentence, iii) should flow well, and iv) should be well written without many lexical/grammatical errors. No specific requirements related to cohesion were made known to students for these assignments so that they could write as they normally did. However, for the in-class progress test, students' writing was evaluated in terms of Content, Organisation and Language. Regarding the organisational dimension, the requirement for cohesion at the target A2 level focused on the employment of 'basic, high-frequency linking words and text connectivity was rated on a scale from one to five (from unconnected text, though with very occasional use of simple linking words such as "and" to well-connected text with appropriate use of numerous high-frequency connectors.

In total, 400 paragraphs were collected for the analysis of cohesive devices. The mean length of the paragraphs were 90 words on average. Below are five topics students were required to write about. These topics were selected because they were specified in the course book in use at the time of data collection. As can be seen from the task prompts, the written paragraphs were generally texts for both academic and communicative purposes as they were required in the syllabus.

Topic 1: Write a short paragraph (from 80-90 words) about the causes and effects of water pollution.

Topic 2: Write a short paragraph (around 80-90 words) about a wild animal that you know.

Topic 3: Write a short paragraph (around 80-90 words) about a special holiday that you like.

Topic 4: Write a short paragraph (around 80-90 words) about one of your special experiences that make you remember the most in your life.

Topic 5: Write a short paragraph (around 80-90 words) about a special place that you have traveled to.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis of use of cohesive devices in learners' writing was based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework. This framework has been employed by many researchers (e.g., Cho & Shin, 2014; Liu & Braine, 2005; Nasser, 2017; Nirwanto, 2021; Yang & Sun, 2012) since it is considered comprehensive, explicit and easy to understand and as such, it enhances the reliability of data coding.

The first author and an experienced researcher who had a Master degree in Theory and

Methodology in English Language Teaching with an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 7.5 (or C1 equivalent, according to the CEFR) coded 100 randomly selected paragraphs (25% of the data) for the frequencies of cohesive devices independently. The latter acted as the second coder who had been trained to identify cohesive markers in students' essays by using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework before official coding started. The inter-rater reliability results calculated by agreement percentages were from 83% to 100% for identification of each of the categories of cohesive devices. These are considered acceptable inter-reliability values, according to Yin (2015). The first author then coded the remaining paragraphs for the occurrence of cohesive devices.

Analysis of the cohesive devices in learners' paragraphs is as follows:

- i) The written paragraphs were read and reread at least three times to identify the cohesive devices used in each paragraph. Cross-checking was conducted to ensure accuracy.
- ii) The cohesive devices used were noted and manually tagged for their types, according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion taxonomy.
- iii) The data from each paragraph and all the paragraphs were entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for automatic calculation of frequencies.

Below are examples of categories of cohesive devices as they were from the data:

3.3.1. Grammatical Cohesion

3.3.1.1. Reference

Demonstrative reference:

There is a big tree in city's centre and people can pray there. (S15, Class 2)

During Tet, most families enjoy this special holiday by preparing dishes such as Chung cake, Tet cake, braised meat and eggs, etc. These are considered as traditional and typical dishes of Vietnam. (S1, Class 4)

Personal reference:

Tet is an important traditional day of Vietnamese people and **it** is a beautiful time of the year. (S4, Class 3)

Dolphins are carnivores, and **they** eat meat. (S8, Class 4)

Comparative reference:

I really enjoy traveling, it seems to be **bigger** than all my other hobbies. (S6, Class 1)

3.3.1.2. Substitution

Nominal substitution:

The young members will wish the elderly for healthiness and long life, and then, they will receive meaningful red envelopes from the aged **ones**. (S20, Class 4)

Verbal substitution:

Most of wild animals here roam around the highland and so **does** it. (T2, S71, Class 4)

Tourists love this city and you **will**, too. (S40, Class 2)

3.3.1.3. Ellipsis

Nominal ellipsis:

My friend and I like Valentine very much and **both** always looking forward to this special day. (S65, Class 4)

3.3.1.4. Conjunction

Additive: This forest is beautiful **and** has many kinds of animals **and** many ancient trees. (S27, Class 2)

Adversative: I have had the opportunity to visit many countries, **but** Thailand is the most impressive place for me. (T1, S15, Class 1)

Causal: I really like Tet holiday **because** it is one of the most meaningful festivals I have known. (S12, Class 1)

Temporal: **Half an hour later**, there were no one left in the classroom. (S18, Class 1)

3.3.2. Lexical Cohesion

Reiteration:

Repetition: If they do not process the waste properly, that waste will be dangerous to human if we drink the water contained it. (S3, Class 2)

Synonym: It also has some advantages for the government. These benefits could be a reason for water pollution. (S 14, Class 3)

Antonym: It has many high and ancient trees... We can climb some low ones. (S74, Class 4)

Superordinate/Hyponym: They enjoy some featured foods like Banh Tet, Banh Chung and many Tet's sweets. (S50, Class 2)

Collocation:

We **ran out of fuel** at that time. (S8, Class 1)

The percentage of each type of cohesive devices used was calculated out of the total cohesive items in the paragraphs.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the different types of cohesive devices used in students' written paragraphs. In total, 4,237 cohesive devices were used and a majority of them were grammatical in nature (90.7%), leaving lexical cohesion accounting for 9.3% (4% and 5.3% for reiteration and collocation respectively). Reference, one form of grammatical cohesive markers, was the most popular, accounting for 51%, followed by conjunction (38.5%). Substitution and ellipsis were used but to a very small extent, 1% and 0.2 % respectively. In the following sections, each type of cohesive means is presented in greater details.

Table 1

Frequency of Cohesive Devices Used by Students

	Types of cohesive devices	Frequency	%
Grammatical	Reference	2,162	51
	Substitution	43	1.0
	Ellipsis	8	0.2
	Conjunction	1,633	38.5
	<i>Total</i>	3,846	90.7

Lexical	Collocation	168	4.0
	Reiteration	223	5.3
	Total	391	9.3
TOTAL		4,237	100

4.1. Use of Reference

Table 2 shows that students used different types of reference. Of the totality of 2,162 reference devices in use, personal reference (49.6%) was more frequent than the other reference types. Demonstrative reference followed (46.1%) and comparative reference was least used (4.3%).

Table 2

Students' Use of Reference

Type of reference	Frequency	%
Demonstrative	996	46.1
Comparative	94	4.3
Personal	1,072	49.6
Total	2,162	100

4.1.1. The Use of Demonstrative Reference

In total, there were 996 instances of demonstrative reference. The frequency of each demonstrative device was calculated out of the total demonstrative devices as shown in Table 3. Most common were demonstrative reference items such as “the” (57.3%), “this” (15.7%) and “that” (11.3%). There were only 8 instances of “these” (0.8%) whereas “those” was not used at all. In addition, “which” and “there” were used at 5.2% and 9.7% respectively.

Table 3

Students' Use of Demonstrative Reference

Demonstrative reference	Frequency	%
The	571	57.3
This	156	15.7
That	112	11.3
These	8	0.8
Those	0	0
Which	52	5.2
There	97	9.7
Total	996	100

4.1.2 The Use of Personal Reference

The frequency of each personal reference was calculated out of the total cases (1,072) and the results are shown in Table 4. The students used various personal reference items, of which “It/Its” and “Their” were common (36.3% and 22.2% respectively). The remaining

examples of personal reference were used with a low frequency (from 1% to 5.9%) except “Me/My” (11.8%). In addition, “Us” was infrequently used (only 0.3%).

Table 4*Learners’ Use of Personal Reference*

Personal reference	Frequency	%
I	48	4.5
Me/My	126	11.8
She	24	2.2
Her	15	1.4
He	34	3.2
Him/His	19	1.8
We	11	1
Us	3	0.3
Our	63	5.9
They	39	3.6
Them	45	4.2
Their	238	22.2
You/Your	18	1.7
It/Its	389	36.3
Total	1,072	100

4.1.3. The Use of Comparative Reference

The results (Table 5) revealed that of the 94 cases of comparative reference, students used certain items more often than others: “So” (34.1%), “Like” (13.8%), “As” (22.3%) and “More” (10.6%). Other examples of comparative reference were also used, though not frequently: “Much” (6.4%), “Less” (4.3%) and “Better” (8.5%).

Table 5*Students’ Use of Comparative Reference*

Comparative reference	Frequency	%
Like	13	13.8
As	21	22.3
So	32	34.1
Much	6	6.4
More	10	10.6
Less	4	4.3
Better	8	8.5
Total	94	100

4.2. The Use of Substitution

The frequency of substitution devices is shown in Table 6. There were 43 instances of substitution in total, of which verbal substitution was employed more often than the nominal type, 58.8% and 41.2% respectively. No clausal substitution was used at all in the data.

Table 6

Students' Use of Substitution

	Frequency	%
Nominal	19	41.2
Verbal	24	58.8
Clausal	0	0
Total	43	100

4.3. Students' Use of Ellipsis

There were only 8 instances of nominal ellipsis in all the paragraphs and students did not use any items in the category of verbal or clausal ellipsis.

4.4. Use of Conjunction

The results in Table 7 show that of the 1,633 cases of conjunction, students tended to use additives (60%) more frequently than other devices. The order of frequency of use of the other types was temporal (24.6%), causal (9.1%) and adversative (6.3%).

Table 7

Students' Use of Conjunction

	Frequency	%
Additive	979	60
Adversative	103	6.3
Causal	149	9.1
Temporal	402	24.6
Total	1,633	100

Table 8 indicates the frequency of use of specific conjunctions in students' paragraphs. "And" was most common (58.5%) while "For example", "such as", "Also" and "Besides" were used with a much lower frequency (5.3%, 6.5%, 7.7% and 9%). Some items were infrequently used such as "In addition", "For instance", "Moreover", "Furthermore", "Or" and "Then", from 1.1% to 3.4%.

As shown in Table 7 mentioned earlier, students used adversative conjunction to a smaller extent than the other types (6.3%). In particular, Table 9 reveals that of all types of adversative conjunction, "Although" and "but" were more frequent than others (54.4% and 43.7% respectively). On the other hand, the adversative "In fact" was used just two times (1.9%) and there was an absence of other adversative conjunctions such as *even though*, *despite*, *in spite of*, *whereas* and so on.

As for the use of causal conjunction, the results (Table 10) show that students used mostly “Because/because of” and “So” (55% and 34.3% respectively). In addition, they used “Therefore” (4.7%) and “For/For this” (6%) much less frequently.

In terms of temporal conjunction, the results (Table 11) show that there were 402 instances of temporal conjunction. In particular, “First/Firstly/First of all”, “Second/Secondly”, and “Third/Thirdly” were used with a larger proportion than others (20.6%, 20.1%, and 18.7% respectively). Next common were “Finally” (9.5%), “Now” (9.2%), “In conclusion” (6.5%), here (5.7%) and “In general” (4.5%). The remaining “then” and “after” were used to a far smaller extent, 2.2 % and 3% respectively.

Table 8*Types of Additive Conjunction Used by Students*

Types of additive conjunction used	Frequency	%
And	573	58.5
In addition	28	2.7
For example	52	5.3
For instance	14	1.4
Moreover	33	3.4
Furthermore	11	1.1
Such as	63	6.5
Also	75	7.7
Besides	88	9.0
Or	17	1.8
Then	25	2.6
Total	979	100%

Table 9*Types of Adversative Conjunctions Used by Students*

Types of adversative conjunctions used	Frequency	%
Although	56	54.4
But	45	43.7
In fact	2	1.9
Total	103	100

Table 10*Types of Causal Conjunction Used by Students*

Types of clausal conjunction used	Frequency	%
Because/because of	82	55.0
So	51	34.3
Therefore	7	4.7
For/For this	9	6.0
Total	149	100

Table 11*Types of Temporal Conjunctions Used by Students*

Temporal conjunctions used	Frequency	%
First/Firstly/First of all	83	20.6
Second/Secondly	81	20.1
Third/Thirdly	75	18.7
Finally	38	9.5
Then	9	2.2
After	12	3.0
In conclusion	26	6.5
In general	18	4.5
Now	37	9.2
Here	23	5.7
Total	402	100

4.5. Students' Use of Lexical Cohesion

Table 12 shows the frequency of lexical cohesion used in students' paragraphs. It can be seen that reiteration (57%) was used more often than collocation (43%). Nearly half of the reiteration cases involved repetition (45.8%) while the remaining (synonyms, antonyms and superordinates or hyponyms) were used with a lower frequency (17%, 14.8% and 22.4% respectively) (Table 13).

Table 12*Students' Use of Lexical Cohesion*

Lexical cohesive devices	Frequency	%
Collocation	168	43
Reiteration	223	57
Total	391	100

Table 13*Students' Use of Types of Reiteration Lexical Devices*

Types of reiteration used	Frequency	%
Repetition	102	45.8
Synonyms	38	17.0
Antonyms	33	14.8
Superordinates/Hyponyms	50	22.4
Total	223	100

5. Discussion

The present study set out to explore the use of cohesive devices in 400 paragraphs written by EFL learners in an English communication course at two English centers in Vietnam.

The results show that students used mainly grammatical cohesive devices to connect ideas within their written paragraphs whereas they used lexical cohesion tools much less frequently. Particularly, reference and conjunction were most common while substitution and ellipsis were used very occasionally. The findings generally agree with those of prior studies on paragraph writing (e.g., Nurhidayat et al., 2021; Saadat & Alavi, 2018). This could be because establishing cohesion through lexical means was perhaps more challenging to the students in the present study. They were not at an advanced level of proficiency, thus they may have lacked lexical means to connect ideas within their paragraphs. At the same time, the findings of the present study differ from other research (e.g., Chanyoo, 2018; Liu & Braine, 2005; Rahman, 2013) which found that lexical cohesion was dominant in argumentative writing. This could perhaps be explained by the difference in the students' proficiency levels in the two studies and the nature of paragraph writing and argumentative essay writing. The latter could entail complex concepts to encode, which might have inclined use of relevant lexical words in argumentation. Though lexical cohesion was used much less frequently than grammatical cohesion, of the lexical cohesive devices, repetition was prevalent. This has been a common finding across studies (e.g., Alarcon, 2013; Chanyoo, 2018) and could be related to students' limited vocabulary size, and their lower proficiency level, which led to repetition.

Notably, the students in the present study used mostly personal reference followed by conjunction. This result is broadly in line with those of previous research (Bahaziq, 2016; Nirwanto, 2021; Nurhidayat et al., 2021; Saadat & Alavi, 2018). It could be that students tended to use reference to express their personal experience or tell stories as all the writing topics except Topic 1 were related to personal experience. It is worth noting that students employed certain items in each category of cohesion more than others. This echoes findings of Saputra and Hakim's (2020) research and might indicate a role of writing types in eliciting the use of different cohesive markers. Further research is clearly needed to shed light on the potential effects of writing types.

Finally, ellipsis and substitution had very small proportions of use, which is in agreement with other previous studies (e.g., Nirwanto, 2021). An explanation for very low frequency of ellipsis and substitution might be due to the fact that they are used more often in spoken language than written language, as Halliday and Hasan (1976) pointed out. It could be that the students in the present study might not be aware of ellipsis and substitution as cohesive tools. In other words, these cohesive means might be new to them and research has shown that students only use cohesive devices that they are familiar with (Rahman, 2013). Another possible explanation could be related to how cohesion is assessed at this low level of proficiency. The students in the present study employed 'high frequency' or 'basic' linking words perhaps because these were required of their target level (A2) in this course. This might point to the finding that more advanced learners tended to use more implicit cohesive cues to build cohesion in their written text (Crossley et al., 2011). Yang and Sun (2012) also found that lower proficiency learners used simple cohesive tools that could be found in oral discourse than higher proficiency counterparts. That said, variation of use among individual learners should need further attention in future research.

6. Implications and Conclusions

The current study examined the types of cohesive devices that the Vietnamese EFL students at two English centers in Vietnam employed in their paragraph writing. It found predominant use of grammatical cohesive ties, of which reference and conjunction were more

common than the other types and certain items were more frequently employed than others. Of the lexical cohesion markers, re-iteration was employed with a higher frequency than collocation, and repetition was the most common of all reiteration means. The findings of the study suggest some implications for both teachers in teaching and students in learning and using cohesive ties in writing.

First of all, that students used lexical cohesive devices to a much smaller extent than grammatical cohesive means could suggest that teachers might need to introduce lexical cohesion as a way to link ideas in writing to students. This could be done through explicit teaching through exercises or through exposure to language input samples which illustrate how to establish cohesion through use of vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms and collocation in writing. Note that for low proficiency learners, specific guidance on how to use these lexical means should be provided and lexical cohesion should additionally target their level. Semantic mapping which helps students to visualise a concept, their categories and word networking (Dilek & Yuruk, 2013) could be a useful point of reference for teachers. In this respect, asking students to label the different categories in a semantic map (Johnson & Pearson, 1984, as cited in Dilek & Yuruk, 2013) could be a practical pre-writing activity to build cohesion through lexical means. In so doing, students can expand their vocabulary to avoid repetition of the same words in writing. Equally important, opportunities should be created for students to use means of lexical cohesion that are not quite often used in their writing. In addition, absence or little use of certain grammatical cohesive devices such as substitution and ellipsis might suggest a lack of attention or awareness of how they could help build connection within the paragraph, suggesting training students through language-focused activities as well as writing practice. Finally, teachers should provide more writing models embedded with cohesive devices to raise students' awareness of the ways grammatical and lexical items could enhance the connectivity of the ideas within a text. That being said, again, the teacher should consider learners' proficiency levels in order to inform them of how cohesion could be appropriately achieved in writing. For the low proficiency students in the present study, as text connectivity was evaluated via the use of basic or high-frequency connectors, they might have focused on using those 'basic' linking words only. Yet, the teacher might need to provide an explicit taxonomy of cohesive devices that their target students should be able to use, including lexical means as long as they align with students' level. Even in the same course, students might differ in proficiency levels, which thus makes it pedagogically practical to introduce various tools to build cohesion within a paragraph for low proficiency and advanced students to draw on as needs arise. It is equally important that the teacher consider the different types of paragraph writing to guide students appropriately through using cohesive devices.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, it was carried out with a quite small sample of 80 learners and they wrote their paragraphs as homework tasks, which could have allowed them access to different resources. The results therefore could not be generalised to other settings and testing conditions. Furthermore, the present study only documented the occurrence of the different types of cohesive devices, the quality of their use (errors) should be an additional avenue for future research that could inform teacher feedback in writing classes. Topic might have an impact on language use in written language production (Lee et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Yoon, 2017), so further studies that examine the occurrence of cohesive devices in paragraph writing based on different topics would provide further insights. The paragraphs collected for analysis in the present study did not focus on one particular type, but covered a wider range of writing types including cause-effect, expository and descriptive writing. A more fine-grained approach to analysis could entail examining how students use cohesive markers in

each kind of paragraph writing to obtain richer insights. In addition, paragraphs in the present study were collected via learning blogs, which could have provided different results from other conditions. Future studies could consider other platforms for students to write. Finally, other factors affecting students' writing such as psychology, teaching materials, and writing genres should be paid attention to in future research.

Despite the shortcomings, the study has contributed to existing scholarship on use of cohesive devices in paragraph writing by low proficiency EFL learners at English centers, an underrepresented group in research of this kind.

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VIỆC SỬ DỤNG PHƯƠNG TIỆN LIÊN KẾT TRONG VIẾT ĐOẠN VĂN CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRUNG TÂM TIẾNG ANH Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu việc sử dụng phương tiện liên kết (cohesive devices) trong viết đoạn văn của người Việt Nam học tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ 80 người học tiếng Anh ở bốn lớp học tiếng Anh tiền trung cấp tại hai trung tâm tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam. Mỗi người học viết 5 đoạn văn về 5 chủ đề khác nhau qua nền tảng nhật ký học tập trực tuyến (learning blogs), và tổng khối dữ liệu thu được gồm 400 đoạn văn tiếng Anh. Mô hình phân loại phương tiện liên kết của Halliday và Hasan (1976) được sử dụng để phân tích phương tiện liên kết mà người học sử dụng. Kết quả cho thấy đa số phương tiện liên kết được sử dụng là liên kết ngữ pháp, trong khi đó, phương tiện liên kết ngữ vựng được sử dụng với tần suất ít hơn nhiều và chủ yếu là lặp lại từ (repetition). Trong phương tiện liên kết ngữ pháp, tham chiếu (reference) và từ nối (conjunction) được sử dụng khá phổ biến, trong khi đó, thay thế (substitution) và tính lược (ellipsis) hiếm khi được sử dụng. Từ kết quả thu được, nghiên cứu thảo luận hàm ý sư phạm cho việc dạy kỹ năng viết và sử dụng phương tiện liên kết trong bài viết đối với người học tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: phương tiện liên kết, viết đoạn văn, người Việt Nam học tiếng Anh