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JALL (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literacy), ISSN 2598-8530, February, Vol. 10 No. 1, 2026  
Received: December 06<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Accepted: January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026. Published February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2026

## A CASE STUDY OF COHESION IN ACADEMIC TEXTS THROUGH SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates cohesion in undergraduate thesis abstracts written by Indonesian English Department students using a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. The data comprise 20 English thesis abstracts collected purposively from three public and private universities in Indonesia (2020–2024). A qualitative descriptive method was applied to examine grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction) and lexical cohesion (repetition, synonymy, antonymy, collocation) following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). The findings indicate that reference and conjunction are the most frequently employed grammatical cohesive devices. However, several problems occur, particularly unclear antecedents in demonstrative and personal references (e.g., it, this) and illogical use of conjunctive relations (e.g., therefore without causal logic). In terms of lexical cohesion, repetition dominates, while the use of synonymy and collocation remains limited, reducing lexical variation and weakening argument clarity. These findings suggest that explicit instruction on cohesive meaning relations through SFL-based academic writing pedagogy may enhance students' competence in producing clearer and more coherent abstracts.*

**Keywords:** Cohesion, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Thesis Abstracts, Lexical Cohesion, Grammatical Cohesion

### INTRODUCTION

English functions as the dominant language of international academic communication, enabling global dissemination of research findings and scholarly interaction (Hyland, 2004). Despite this prominence, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners continue to face challenges in producing academic texts that are coherent and cohesive, particularly in compact genres such as thesis abstracts. Abstract writing requires high informational density while maintaining logical continuity across objectives, methods, findings, and conclusions (Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2012).

One recurring problem in students' abstract writing is the ineffective deployment of cohesion devices. Cohesion is essential for guiding readers to interpret relationships between clauses and sentences, ensuring that meaning is connected and accessible. Previous research has noted that EFL student writers frequently struggle with reference

clarity and logical connector accuracy, which may disrupt argument flow and reduce readability (Coffin et al., 2003; Liu, 2010). However, while many studies mention cohesion problems generally, fewer provide detailed classifications of cohesive patterns and errors using a systematic linguistic model that connects form, function, and meaning.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday, conceptualizes language as a meaning-making resource shaped by social contexts. Within SFL, cohesion is part of the textual metafunction, which enables texts to become unified and interpretable (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Cohesion is commonly divided into grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction) and lexical cohesion (repetition, synonymy, antonymy, collocation). This framework offers analytical clarity in identifying how student writers build textual continuity and where breakdowns occur.

Although Indonesian-based studies have documented cohesion problems in student writing (Darmayanti, 2021; Sugiarto, 2024), there remains a need for more focused analysis of thesis abstracts as a distinct academic genre and for linking cohesion patterns to pedagogical implications. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining cohesion device usage and common cohesion errors in Indonesian undergraduate thesis abstracts through an SFL approach.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of cohesion devices are most dominant in Indonesian undergraduate thesis abstracts?
2. What common cohesion errors occur, and how do they affect clarity?
3. What pedagogical implications can be drawn from an SFL-based cohesion analysis for academic writing instruction?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Cohesion refers to the linguistic resources that create semantic ties within a text, allowing readers to interpret sentences as meaningfully related rather than isolated (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In academic writing, cohesion is closely tied to clarity, organization, and rhetorical effectiveness, particularly in short, information-dense texts such as abstracts.

From an SFL perspective, cohesion operates at both grammatical and lexical levels. Grammatical cohesion includes reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction, while lexical cohesion involves repetition and semantic relations among vocabulary items such as synonymy, antonymy, and collocation. These resources support continuity of participants, ideas, and logical progression, especially in expository academic genres (Martin & Rose, 2007).

Previous studies have frequently found that EFL student writers rely heavily on a limited range of cohesion devices, particularly reference and repetition. Liu (2010), for instance, reported that demonstrative references such as *this* and *it* are often used without clear antecedents, producing ambiguity. Similarly, research on Indonesian academic writing indicates that lexical cohesion is often maintained through repetition, but excessive repetition may reduce academic tone and lexical richness (Darmayanti, 2021; Sugiarto, and Siregar, 2023). However, many earlier cohesion studies remain descriptive and do not adequately compare patterns across contexts or connect findings to pedagogical strategies. Moreover, international scholarship on academic writing cohesion has highlighted the importance of teaching cohesion as meaning relations rather than merely as surface markers (Hyland, 2004).

Synthesis and research gap: while cohesion research has emphasized its importance in academic writing, fewer studies have specifically examined Indonesian undergraduate thesis abstracts using a detailed SFL cohesion taxonomy while also identifying errors and pedagogical implications. This study contributes by linking cohesive device distribution, common misuse patterns, and clarity impact in thesis abstract writing.

In addition, abstracts represent a unique academic genre because they compress complex research information into a highly condensed structure. Unlike full chapters or articles, abstracts must communicate purpose, method, results, and conclusions within a limited word count, which increases the need for effective cohesion. When cohesive ties are weak, readers may struggle to follow relationships between research elements, resulting in misinterpretation of the study's focus or findings. Therefore, analyzing cohesion in abstracts provides a strategic entry point for understanding broader academic writing competence.

From an SFL-based genre perspective, abstract writing can be understood not only as the arrangement of information, but also as the strategic organization of meanings through cohesive relations. SFL emphasizes that texts are functional and context-dependent, meaning cohesion should be interpreted as a resource that supports meaning-making rather than simply a grammatical feature. Consequently, cohesive devices such as reference chains and conjunction patterns become indicators of how writers develop and maintain textual continuity in academic discourse.

Despite the importance of cohesion, EFL writers often face difficulties in applying cohesive devices appropriately because their knowledge is frequently limited to surface-level rules. For example, students may insert conjunctions such as *however* or *therefore* because they appear “academic,” without fully understanding the semantic relation they represent. Similarly, repetitive word choice may emerge not only from limited vocabulary but also from uncertainty about synonym accuracy and academic register. These challenges demonstrate that cohesion errors are not merely linguistic mistakes but also reflect deeper issues related to discourse competence.

Furthermore, cohesive effectiveness is closely related to how readers perceive textual clarity and credibility. A well-written abstract is expected to guide the reader smoothly through the logical progression of the research narrative. When cohesive ties are inaccurate or inconsistent, the abstract may appear fragmented and less persuasive, reducing its ability to represent the research effectively. In this sense, cohesion is not only a textual feature but also an essential rhetorical tool that shapes how academic work is evaluated and understood.

Finally, the pedagogical implications of cohesion research remain highly relevant for academic writing instruction, particularly in EFL university contexts. Integrating SFL into writing pedagogy allows students to develop metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to recognize how meaning relations are constructed across sentences and paragraphs. Instead of memorizing connectors or pronouns mechanically, students can learn to use cohesion strategically to support argument development and logical structure. Thus, the findings of cohesion analysis may contribute to more effective academic writing training and curriculum design in higher education

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design with an SFL-based text analysis approach. The data consist of 20 undergraduate thesis abstracts written in English by Indonesian English Department students from three universities (public and private), published between 2020 and 2024. Abstracts were collected from open-access institutional repositories and selected purposively based on the following criteria:

1. written in English,
2. containing standard abstract components (objective, method, results, conclusion),
3. original student work with similarity score below 15% (based on repository metadata or screening records).

### ***Data Analysis Procedures***

Data were analyzed in three stages:

1. Cohesion identification: each abstract was examined for grammatical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction) and lexical cohesion (repetition, synonymy, antonymy, collocation) based on Halliday and Matthiessen (2014).
2. Error classification: cohesion-related errors were categorized using indicators adapted from Hyland (2004), including ambiguous reference, illogical conjunction use, and excessive repetition.
3. Clarity interpretation using a 1–5 scale: each abstract was assigned a clarity score to represent the effect of cohesion on readability.

### ***Operationalization of Clarity Rating Scale***

To improve transparency, clarity scores were guided by the following rubric:

1. (Very confusing): frequent unclear references, illogical connectors, and disrupted information flow.
2. (Confusing): cohesion errors occur repeatedly and reduce interpretability.
3. (Moderately clear): minor cohesion issues, general meaning still recoverable.
4. (Clear): cohesive relations are mostly accurate, text flows logically.
5. (Very clear): cohesive devices are consistently accurate, minimal ambiguity.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

Data validity was supported through expert triangulation involving two lecturers

with SFL expertise, who reviewed 20% of the abstracts randomly. An audit trail documenting coding decisions was also maintained to ensure transparency.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Dominance of Grammatical Cohesion**

The analysis shows that grammatical cohesion devices, particularly reference and conjunction, were the most frequently used cohesive resources across the abstracts. Writers commonly used personal and demonstrative references (*it, this, they*) to maintain continuity across sentences. However, many instances contained unclear antecedents, creating ambiguity and weakening meaning progression.

Example (anonymized excerpt):

“This study investigates students’ motivation in learning English. This shows that motivation affects achievement.”

In this case, *this* is ambiguous because it is unclear whether it refers to the study, the investigation, or the motivational factor itself. Conjunctions were also widely applied to signal relationships such as addition (*moreover, in addition*) and cause-effect (*therefore, thus*). Nevertheless, some conjunctions were used inaccurately, indicating difficulties in expressing logical relations.

Example (anonymized excerpt):

“The data were collected through interviews. Therefore, the researcher analyzed the questionnaire results.”

Here, *therefore* incorrectly implies causality between unrelated actions.

### **2. Lexical Cohesion and Limited Variation**

Lexical cohesion was predominantly achieved through repetition of key terms such as *research, students, learning, and result*. While repetition supports topic continuity, excessive repetition was found to reduce lexical richness and create monotonous expression. Synonymy and collocation appeared but were less frequent, indicating limited lexical flexibility in academic vocabulary use.

### **3. Common Cohesion Errors and Their Impact on Clarity**

The most frequent cohesion errors were:

- ambiguous reference (unclear pronoun antecedents),

- illogical conjunction usage,
- excessive repetition without variation.

Abstracts containing repeated ambiguous references typically received low clarity scores (1–2), while texts with clear reference chains and appropriate conjunctions tended to score higher (4–5). This supports the argument that cohesion quality is directly linked to academic readability and textual clarity.

Table 1. Summary of Grammatical and Lexical Cohesion Found in Journal Abstracts

No	Abstract Topic	Dominant Grammatical Cohesion	Dominant Lexical Cohesion	Common Error Identified
1	Code-switching in EFL Classrooms	Reference, Conjunction	Repetition	Ambiguous pronoun ( <i>it, this</i> )
2	Blended Learning Implementation	Conjunction	Synonymy	Illogical use of <i>therefore</i>
3	Pragmatic Failure in English Dialogues	Reference	Collocation	Overused word <i>failure</i>
4	Reading Comprehension Strategies	Reference, Conjunction	Repetition	No clear antecedent for <i>they</i>
5	Error Analysis in Writing	Reference	Repetition	Redundant repetition of key terms
6	EFL Learner Motivation	Reference, Conjunction	Synonymy	Overuse of <i>students</i> without variation
7	Language Attitudes among Teenagers	Reference	Repetition, Synonymy	Ambiguity in subject pronouns
8	English Collocation Errors in Essays	Conjunction	Collocation	Lack of cohesive connectors
9	Integrating Technology in Writing Classes	Reference, Conjunction	Repetition	Excessive use of <i>technology</i>
10	Gender Differences in Speaking Skills	Reference	Repetition, Synonymy	Unclear pronoun reference ( <i>this result</i> )

11	Teacher's Feedback in Writing Improvement	Reference, Conjunction	Synonymy	Misused <i>however</i> without contrast
12	Sociolinguistic Analysis of Advertisements	Conjunction	Repetition, Antonymy	Logical disconnection between ideas
13	EFL Learner Autonomy	Reference	Repetition	Vague reference to <i>this study</i>
14	Use of Humor in Classroom Interaction	Reference, Conjunction	Synonymy	Awkward repetition of <i>humor</i>
15	Politeness Strategies in Requests	Reference	Synonymy, Repetition	Lack of clear antecedent
16	Listening Anxiety in English Classes	Reference	Repetition	Overuse of general terms ( <i>students, lesson</i> )
17	Vocabulary Learning through Mobile Apps	Reference, Conjunction	Collocation, Repetition	Inaccurate use of <i>thus</i>
18	English Code-Mixing in Social Media	Reference	Repetition	Confused use of <i>they</i>
19	Gender Representation in News Articles	Conjunction	Synonymy, Antonymy	Poor transition using <i>furthermore</i>
20	Error Types in EFL Narrative Writing	Reference	Repetition, Collocation	Repetitive mention of <i>error</i>

Table 1 summarizes cohesion patterns in 20 abstracts. The table is intended to show how different topics still tend to rely on similar cohesive strategies, particularly references and conjunctions, while lexical cohesion is often maintained through repetition. The “Common Error Identified” column highlights typical cohesion problems found across topics.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cohesion in Indonesian undergraduate English thesis abstracts is mainly constructed through grammatical cohesion, especially reference and

conjunction. However, cohesion problems such as ambiguous pronoun references and illogical connector usage frequently reduce textual clarity and weaken meaning continuity. Lexical cohesion is largely maintained through repetition, while more advanced lexical strategies such as synonymy and collocation remain limited, resulting in reduced lexical variety and academic sophistication.

From an SFL perspective, these findings suggest that students demonstrate awareness of cohesion as part of the textual metafunction, yet their functional control of cohesive meaning relations remains underdeveloped. Therefore, academic writing instruction should integrate SFL-based pedagogy that explicitly teaches how cohesive devices operate semantically and rhetorically in abstract writing.

Future research may expand the dataset to include full thesis chapters, compare cohesion strategies across universities, or investigate the role of disciplinary variation and institutional writing practices in shaping cohesion choices.

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