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Grammatical Cohesion Errors In Students' Descriptive Writing At SMAN 4 Pamekasan

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Abstract

Grammatical cohesion is essential for creating coherent and meaningful texts, yet many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students struggle to use cohesive devices appropriately. This study aimed to identify the types of grammatical cohesion errors and determine the most dominant error in students' descriptive writing. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected from 20 descriptive essays written by eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 4 Pamekasan. The data were analyzed using Halliday and Hasan's grammatical cohesion framework and Dulay et al.'s Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The findings revealed 37 grammatical cohesion errors, comprising 26 reference errors (70.27%) and 11 conjunction errors (29.73%). Furthermore, misformation was the most dominant error category with 23 occurrences (62.16%), followed by omission (27.03%) and addition (10.81%). The results indicate that students experience greater difficulty in accurately using reference devices, particularly in selecting appropriate pronouns for non-human referents. Consequently, the study concludes that writing instruction must shift from basic sentence-level grammar toward explicit, contrastive scaffolding to help students overcome cross-linguistic interference and improve their overall writing cohesion.

Keywords: grammatical cohesion; descriptive writing; error analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary globalized era, English proficiency is a fundamental competency that enables learners to access global knowledge and participate in international academic discourse (Al-khresheh et al., 2025; Salih & Omar, 2021; Xu et al., 2025). Among the four core language skills, writing is widely recognized as the most complex productive skill, requiring not only grammatical accuracy but also the logical organization of ideas (Al-khresheh, 2024; Karimova et al., 2026). Effective writing allows students to convey their thoughts in a structured, coherent, and academic manner, making it a critical determinant of their overall educational success and readiness for wider academic contexts.

At the secondary education level, mastering various writing genres, particularly descriptive text, is essential for developing students' linguistic and cognitive abilities in alignment with the national curriculum's emphasis on targeted competencies (Suryadi & Erlangga, 2025; Ulya & Widhiyanto, 2026). Descriptive writing trains learners to articulate specific details about people, places, or things using appropriate language features and generic structures (Sipayung et al., 2021). To ensure these descriptions are logically followed by readers, writers must employ grammatical cohesive devices, such as references and conjunctions, which are crucial for connecting clauses and creating a unified, meaningful discourse.

Despite the importance of cohesion, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students frequently encounter significant challenges in utilizing these cohesive devices appropriately (Alawerdy & Alalwi, 2022; Bui, 2022; Khalil & Abu-Ayyash, 2023). Many learners possess adequate vocabulary but struggle to sequence words into logically connected texts (Marzuki et al., 2023; R. S. Siregar, 2025). This difficulty often manifests in the inaccurate use of references and conjunctions, which disrupts the semantic flow and creates ambiguity. When students fail to maintain consistency in referring to subjects or misuse conjunctions to link ideas, the resulting texts lack coherence and force readers to infer the intended meaning (Aritonang et al., 2025; Sihite et al., 2025).

Preliminary observations at SMAN 4 Pamekasan corroborate this issue, revealing frequent grammatical cohesion errors in students' descriptive writing, such as misapplying pronouns for non-human referents and inappropriately using conjunctions to express illogical relationships. While recent studies have explored these issues, they tend to isolate specific errors; for instance, Harahap et al (2023) focused exclusively on personal pronoun errors, while other recent research has predominantly examined conjunction misuse without addressing reference inconsistencies. This fragmented approach leaves a gap in understanding how reference and conjunction errors

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simultaneously affect the overall quality of students' descriptive writing.

To address this gap, this study aims to comprehensively identify the types of grammatical cohesion errors—specifically reference and conjunction errors—and determine the most dominant type found in the descriptive writing of eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 4 Pamekasan. By integrating grammatical cohesion frameworks with error analysis taxonomy, this research seeks to provide a dual-layered understanding of students' syntactical and semantic struggles. The findings are expected to offer practical pedagogical implications, guiding English teachers in designing explicit, contrastive writing instruction to enhance students' textual cohesion.

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to systematically identify and analyze grammatical cohesion errors in students' descriptive writing. The research was conducted at SMAN 4 Pamekasan during the 2025/2026 academic year. The population comprised 36 eleventh-grade students, from which 20 descriptive essays were purposively selected as the sample based on their completeness and adherence to the research criteria. The primary data source was the students' written assignments, which were collected through documentation to ensure the authenticity of their linguistic performance. This approach allowed the researcher to capture genuine, unmanipulated evidence of the students' ability to utilize cohesive devices, specifically focusing on how they constructed meaning through references and conjunctions in their texts.

The data analysis was conducted using an interactive model encompassing data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Initially, the texts were carefully read to identify and mark cohesion issues, which were then classified into reference and conjunction errors based on Halliday & Hasan (2014) grammatical cohesion framework. Subsequently, these errors were further categorized into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering using Dulay et al (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, followed by frequency and percentage calculations to determine the most dominant error types. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study implemented rigorous credibility measures, including strict document preservation, systematic coding, meticulous cross-checking against the original texts, and theoretical triangulation to guarantee the accuracy and validity of the error classifications.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Overview of Grammatical Cohesion Errors in Students' Descriptive Writing

The analysis of twenty descriptive texts written by eleventh-grade students revealed the presence of grammatical cohesion errors that affected the overall quality of their writing. The researcher identified a total of thirty-seven errors distributed unevenly across the students' texts, indicating varying levels of proficiency in maintaining textual cohesion. Some students demonstrated better control over cohesive devices, producing texts with minimal errors, while others struggled significantly with connecting ideas logically and maintaining referential consistency throughout their descriptions. This variation suggests that students possess different degrees of understanding regarding how grammatical cohesion functions in descriptive writing.

The errors discovered were not randomly distributed but showed clear patterns that pointed to specific areas of difficulty. The majority of students encountered problems when attempting to use reference items appropriately, particularly when selecting pronouns to refer to people, animals, or objects in their descriptions. Additionally, students frequently misused conjunctions when connecting clauses and sentences, which disrupted the logical flow of their ideas. These findings indicate that the challenges students faced were not merely about grammatical accuracy but also about understanding how different parts of a text relate to one another semantically and syntactically.

Table 1. Distribution of Grammatical Cohesion Errors across Students

Student Code	Reference Errors (f1)	Conjunction Errors (f2)	Total Errors (N)
S-01	1	1	2
S-02	9	1	10
S-03	3	0	3
S-04	0	1	1
S-05	1	0	1
S-06	2	0	2
S-07	1	0	1
S-08	1	2	3
S-09	1	1	2
S-10	1	0	1

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S-11	0	0	0
S-12	0	0	0
S-13	6	0	6
S-14	0	0	0
S-15	0	1	1
S-16	0	0	0
S-17	0	1	1
S-18	0	2	2
S-19	0	1	1
S-20	0	0	0
TOTAL	**26**	**11**	**37**

The distribution table demonstrates that grammatical cohesion errors were not uniformly spread among all students, with some producing no errors while others generated multiple mistakes. Student S-02 exhibited the highest number of errors with ten instances, predominantly reference errors, suggesting significant difficulty in maintaining referential consistency. In contrast, students S-11, S-12, S-14, S-16, and S-20 produced texts without any identifiable grammatical cohesion errors, indicating stronger command over cohesive devices. This disparity highlights the need for differentiated instruction that addresses individual student needs while providing targeted support for those who struggle with specific aspects of grammatical cohesion.

Reference Errors in Descriptive Writing

Reference errors emerged as the most prevalent type of grammatical cohesion error in the students' descriptive writing, accounting for twenty-six instances or seventy point two seven percent of the total errors identified. These errors occurred when students failed to establish clear relationships between referents and the reference items used to point back to them, creating ambiguity and disrupting textual coherence. The most common manifestation of reference errors involved the inappropriate selection of pronouns, particularly when students used personal pronouns such as "he," "she," "her," or "his" to refer to animals or objects that should have been referenced using "it" or "its." This pattern suggests that students struggled with understanding the grammatical rules governing pronoun selection based on the nature of the referent.

Several concrete examples from the students' texts illustrate the nature of reference errors. In one instance, a student wrote "Her name is Cerry, she is cute and playful" when

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describing a cat, inappropriately using feminine pronouns for an animal whose gender was not specified. The sentence should have been revised to "Its name is Cerry. It is cute and playful" to maintain grammatical accuracy. Another example appeared in the sentence "I have a nice bird, he always chirps in the morning," where the student used the masculine pronoun "he" to refer to a bird. The correct form should be "I have a nice bird. It always chirps in the morning," demonstrating the need for students to understand that animals are typically referred to using neutral pronouns unless their gender is explicitly emphasized.

Reference omission also occurred when students failed to include necessary reference items, leaving sentences incomplete and unclear. For example, one student wrote "My friend is Mutia, is from Pangantenan," omitting the subject pronoun "she" after introducing the person's name. The sentence required revision to "My friend is Mutia, and she is from Pangantenan" to establish a clear connection between the referent and the subsequent clause. Similarly, another student produced the incomplete sentence "Is from Teja Barat," completely omitting the subject reference before the verb. These omission errors demonstrate that students sometimes overlooked the fundamental requirement of including explicit reference items to maintain sentence completeness and textual cohesion.

Conjunction Errors in Descriptive Writing

Conjunction errors constituted the second type of grammatical cohesion error found in the students' descriptive writing, appearing eleven times or representing twenty-nine point seven three percent of the total errors. Although less frequent than reference errors, conjunction errors significantly impacted the logical flow and coherence of students' texts by disrupting the relationships between clauses and sentences. These errors manifested in two primary forms: conjunction omission, where students failed to use necessary conjunctions to connect related ideas, and conjunction addition, where students inserted unnecessary conjunctions that did not serve a meaningful connecting function. Both types of errors revealed students' incomplete understanding of how conjunctions function to signal logical relationships within texts.

Conjunction omission errors occurred when students neglected to include conjunctions between related clauses, creating choppy or disconnected sentences. For instance, one student wrote "I have a nice bird, he always chirps in the morning" without using a conjunction to link the two related clauses. The sentence would have been more cohesive if revised to "I have a nice bird, and it always chirps in the morning," with the conjunction "and" clearly connecting the two ideas. Another example appeared in the sentence "My friend is Mutia, is from Pangantenan," where the

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conjunction "and" was omitted between two pieces of information about the same person. These omissions made the relationships between ideas less explicit and forced readers to infer connections that should have been clearly signaled through appropriate conjunction use.

Conjunction addition errors emerged when students inserted unnecessary conjunctions, particularly placing "and" after a full stop where it served no connecting function. One student wrote "It is cute and playful. And I love my cat very much," inappropriately beginning a new sentence with "And" when the two ideas were already separated into distinct sentences. The revised version "It is cute and playful. I love my cat very much" eliminated the unnecessary conjunction and improved sentence effectiveness. Similarly, another student produced "The beach is clean and comfortable. And the wind is cool," demonstrating a tendency to overuse "and" at the beginning of sentences. This pattern suggests that students may have been attempting to create connections between ideas but lacked understanding of when conjunctions are actually needed versus when ideas are sufficiently connected through proximity and context.

Error Categories Based on Surface Strategy Taxonomy

The grammatical cohesion errors identified in students' descriptive writing were further classified using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which categorizes errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This classification revealed that misformation errors dominated the data with twenty-three occurrences or sixty-two point one six percent of the total errors, indicating that students' primary difficulty lay in using incorrect forms of cohesive devices rather than completely omitting them or placing them in wrong positions. The prevalence of misformation errors suggests that students possessed some awareness of the need for cohesive devices but lacked full mastery of the appropriate forms, particularly in selecting correct pronouns for different types of referents. This partial knowledge manifested in systematic errors where students attempted to use cohesive devices but selected forms that did not match their intended referents.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Grammatical Cohesion Errors by Category

No	Type of Cohesion	Omission	Addition	Misformation	Misordering	Total (f)	Percentage (%)
1	Reference	3	0	23	0	26	70.27%
2	Conjunction	7	4	0	0	11	29.73%
Total (f)		10	4	23	0	37	100%
Percentage (%)		27.03%	10.81%	62.16%	0%	100%	

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The table clearly demonstrates that misformation errors were overwhelmingly concentrated in reference errors, with all twenty-three misformation instances occurring in the reference category. This pattern indicates that students consistently attempted to use reference items but frequently selected inappropriate pronoun forms, such as using gendered pronouns for animals or objects. Omission errors appeared in both reference and conjunction categories, with three reference omissions and seven conjunction omissions, suggesting that students sometimes completely failed to include necessary cohesive devices. Addition errors occurred exclusively in the conjunction category with four instances, reflecting students' tendency to insert unnecessary conjunctions, particularly "and," at sentence beginnings. Notably, no misordering errors were found in the data, indicating that when students did use cohesive devices, they generally placed them in syntactically appropriate positions.

The distribution of error categories reveals important insights about students' developing understanding of grammatical cohesion. The absence of misordering errors suggests that students had acquired basic knowledge about where cohesive devices should be positioned within sentences. However, the high frequency of misformation errors, particularly in reference use, indicates that students struggled with the semantic aspects of cohesion, specifically matching pronouns to their appropriate referents based on characteristics such as animacy and gender. The presence of both omission and addition errors further demonstrates that students had not yet fully internalized when cohesive devices are necessary versus when they are redundant, leading to inconsistent application of conjunctions in their writing.

Dominant Error Patterns and Their Implications

The analysis of grammatical cohesion errors revealed clear patterns that have significant implications for understanding students' writing difficulties. Reference errors, particularly those involving pronoun misformation, emerged as the most problematic aspect of grammatical cohesion in students' descriptive writing. This dominance suggests that students face substantial challenges in maintaining consistency between pronouns and their referents, especially when describing animals and objects. The systematic nature of these errors, where students consistently applied human pronouns to non-human entities, indicates that the problem extends beyond simple carelessness or lack of attention. Instead, it points to deeper issues related to students' understanding of English pronoun systems and how they differ from the pronoun systems in their native languages.

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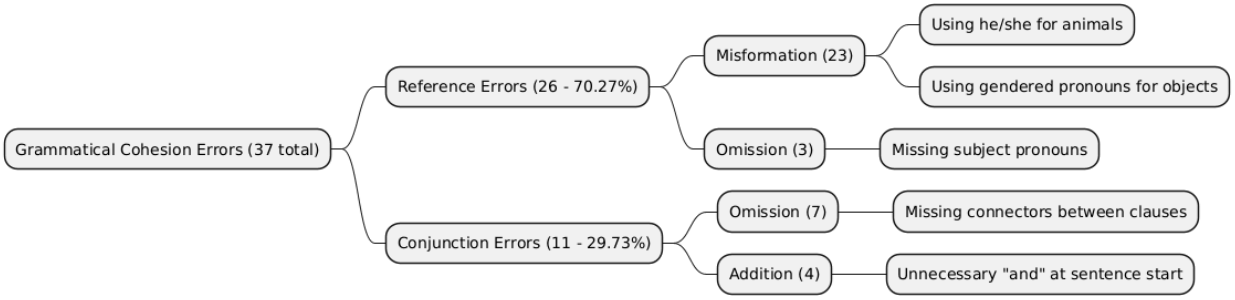


Figure 1. Distribution of Grammatical Cohesion Error Types

The mind map diagram illustrates the hierarchical structure of grammatical cohesion errors, clearly showing that reference errors with misformation as the primary subcategory represent the largest portion of students' difficulties. The visual representation emphasizes how errors branch from the two main types of cohesion into specific error categories, making it easier to understand the relationships between different error types. This visualization supports the quantitative findings by providing a clear overview of where students' primary challenges lie, highlighting that the overwhelming majority of errors stem from incorrect pronoun selection rather than complete absence of cohesive devices or structural misplacement.

The predominance of reference misformation errors suggests that students require targeted instruction focusing on pronoun selection and referential consistency. Teachers should implement activities that explicitly address the differences between English pronoun usage and the pronoun systems students are familiar with from their first languages. Such instruction should include contrastive analysis helping students recognize when to use "it" versus "he" or "she," particularly when describing animals and objects in descriptive texts. Additionally, students would benefit from practice activities that require them to identify referents in texts, match pronouns to their appropriate antecedents, and revise sentences containing unclear or inappropriate references. These targeted interventions could help students develop greater awareness of referential relationships and improve their ability to maintain cohesion throughout their descriptive writing.

The patterns observed in conjunction errors also warrant specific pedagogical attention, particularly regarding when conjunctions are necessary versus redundant. Students demonstrated confusion about the function of conjunctions, sometimes omitting them when logical connections needed to be explicitly signaled and other times adding them unnecessarily at sentence

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beginnings. Instruction should focus on helping students understand the specific logical relationships that different conjunctions express, such as addition, contrast, cause and effect, and sequence. Practice activities could include analyzing well-written descriptive texts to identify how conjunctions connect ideas, revising sentences with missing or unnecessary conjunctions, and composing texts with deliberate attention to logical connectors. By developing students' understanding of conjunction functions and appropriate usage contexts, teachers can help them create more coherent and logically connected descriptive texts.

Overall, the findings indicate that improving students' grammatical cohesion requires moving beyond basic sentence-level grammar instruction toward more comprehensive approaches that address how ideas connect across sentences and paragraphs. Students need explicit guidance in recognizing referential relationships, selecting appropriate cohesive devices, and understanding the logical connections between ideas. The systematic patterns of errors discovered in this study provide clear direction for developing targeted instructional strategies that address students' specific difficulties with reference and conjunction use. By implementing contrastive, contextual, and explicit teaching approaches, educators can support students in developing the cohesive writing skills necessary for producing clear, coherent, and academically appropriate descriptive texts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that grammatical cohesion errors, particularly reference misformation and conjunction omission or addition, significantly hinder the coherence of students' descriptive writing. The dominance of reference errors indicates that students struggle to maintain consistent semantic connections between referents and pronouns throughout their texts. This difficulty aligns with the observations of Indah & Yahmun (2022), Jefanya et al (2025), and Syafnida & Ardi (2020), who emphasize that mastering specific language features and generic structures is essential for producing coherent and accurate descriptive texts. When students fail to utilize cohesive devices appropriately, the textual unity is disrupted, preventing readers from easily visualizing the described subjects and ultimately undermining the fundamental communicative purpose of descriptive writing.

Specifically, the high frequency of reference misformation, such as inappropriately using gendered pronouns like "he" or "she" for animals and objects, was identified as the most critical issue in the students' writing. This finding strongly corroborates the recent study by Li & Akram (2024) and Zahra et al (2021), which similarly concluded that the misuse of personal pronouns is

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the most frequent grammatical cohesion error in students' descriptive texts. Sterner (2022) noted that such vague or inconsistent references create ambiguity and disrupt the logical flow of ideas. The consistency between the present study and Harahap's research highlights a persistent, systemic challenge among EFL learners in applying English pronoun rules to non-human referents, a problem that is likely exacerbated by first-language interference from Indonesian or local languages.

In addition to reference issues, conjunction errors, particularly the unnecessary addition of "and" at the beginning of sentences and the omission of necessary connectors, were found to impair the syntactic and logical flow of the texts. While students attempted to link clauses, their inaccurate application of conjunctions resulted in fragmented or illogical relationships between ideas. This struggle with logical sequencing reflects a broader challenge in meeting the national curriculum's expectations for meaningful and structured learning. As outlined by Amrullah et al (2025), Fitri & Yulistianti (2025), and J. Siregar et al (2023), students are expected to develop targeted competencies that enable them to construct well-organized and purposeful texts, a goal that remains unfulfilled when basic cohesive devices are misapplied or overused without considering their semantic functions.

The persistence of these cohesion errors suggests a noticeable gap between the curriculum's ambitious goals and the students' actual linguistic performance in productive skills. González-pérez & Ramírez-montoya (2022), González-salamanca et al (2020), and Ilomäki et al (2023) argue that the current educational framework emphasizes targeted competencies, active participation, and the development of literacy to support students' independence in the digital era. However, the prevalence of grammatical cohesion errors in this study indicates that students have not yet fully internalized the structural and semantic rules required for academic writing. The discrepancy between the curriculum's emphasis on meaningful learning and the students' syntactical struggles underscores the need for more focused, explicit interventions at the secondary education level to bridge this competency gap.

Consequently, addressing these cohesive breakdowns requires a pedagogical shift from traditional, sentence-level grammar instruction toward explicit, contrastive, and contextual scaffolding. Teachers must actively guide students in recognizing the differences between their native language structures and English cohesive devices, particularly in pronoun selection and conjunction usage. By integrating these targeted strategies, educators can help students bridge the gap between their vocabulary knowledge and their ability to produce logically connected texts. Ultimately, this approach will not only reduce grammatical cohesion errors but also

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empower students to meet the comprehensive writing competencies demanded by contemporary educational standards and improve their overall academic literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that reference errors, particularly pronoun misformation, represent the most dominant grammatical cohesion problem in students' descriptive writing, accounting for 70.27% of all errors identified, while conjunction errors constitute 29.73%. The prevalence of misformation errors (62.16%) indicates that students' primary challenge lies not in the absence of cohesive devices but in their inaccurate application, especially when selecting pronouns for non-human referents. These findings underscore the urgent need for English teachers to shift writing instruction from basic sentence-level grammar toward explicit, contrastive, and contextual scaffolding that directly addresses cross-linguistic interference and helps students master the semantic and syntactic functions of cohesive devices. Future research should expand upon these insights by investigating grammatical cohesion across different writing genres, larger student populations, and various educational levels to provide more comprehensive understanding of EFL learners' cohesive writing challenges.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into the grammatical cohesion errors in students' descriptive writing, several avenues remain for future research to expand upon these findings. First, subsequent studies should investigate grammatical cohesion across different writing genres, such as recount, narrative, and analytical exposition texts, to determine whether the types and frequencies of cohesion errors vary depending on the communicative purpose and generic structure of the text. Additionally, expanding the research scope to include larger, more diverse student cohorts across various educational levels—ranging from junior high schools to university contexts—would help establish a more comprehensive understanding of how cohesive writing skills develop over time and how error patterns shift as learners' linguistic proficiency increases.

Second, future research could delve deeper into the cognitive and linguistic factors contributing to these errors, particularly the specific impact of first language interference from Indonesian and local languages like Madurese. Employing qualitative methods such as think-aloud protocols or in-depth interviews could provide richer data on the students' decision-making processes when selecting pronouns and conjunctions. Finally, to translate these findings into

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practical classroom solutions, future studies should explore the effectiveness of targeted pedagogical interventions. Conducting Classroom Action Research (CAR) or quasi-experimental designs to test explicit, contrastive instruction on grammatical cohesion would be highly beneficial in determining the most effective instructional strategies for helping EFL learners overcome these persistent writing challenges and produce more coherent, academically sound texts.

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