

An Analysis of Temporal Conjunctions as Cohesive Devices in Junior High School Students' Recounts Writing

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Abstract: *Temporal cohesion is what lets a reader follow the chronological progression of events in personal recount writing. Existing research on time connectives has mostly examined their distribution, frequency, and grammatical accuracy, leaving contextual appropriateness comparatively underexplored. This study looked at both: how time connectives were distributed and how appropriately they were used to build temporal cohesion in personal recount texts written by Indonesian EFL learners. Using a corpus-assisted qualitative discourse analysis, it examined recount texts from 25 ninth-grade students at MTs 2 Nurul Islam Mojokerto, with the appropriateness analysis covering 25 of those texts. Time connectives were classified using Halliday and Hasan's temporal categories and evaluated through an analytical rubric assessing contextual appropriateness at the discourse level. Sequential connectives dominated the corpus, making up 80.74% of the 135 temporal connectives identified, consistent with the chronological demands of recount writing. But only a small share of students used time connectives consistently well; most texts showed contextual, grammatical, or mechanical problems that weakened temporal cohesion. Frequent connective use, in other words, did not translate into effective cohesion. This study extends existing work on temporal cohesion by evaluating time connectives at the level of discourse function, not just occurrence, showing that effective temporal cohesion depends on the semantic relationships connectives established, not merely how often they appear.*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is often called the hardest skill to develop in EFL learning, since it forces students to manage grammar, vocabulary, and organization at once, and none of that matters if a reader

cannot follow the sequence of ideas (Sa'adah, 2020). Personal recount writing, taught throughout Indonesian junior high schools, makes this especially visible. Unlike descriptive or argumentative texts, a recount depends almost entirely on getting the order of events right, and that order is carried mainly by time connectives such as then, after that, meanwhile, and finally, words that let a reader treat a set of sentences as one continuous account instead of a list. Grammatical accuracy in placing these words is not the same as making them do their job across a full text (Aini, 2018; Istiqomah, Lestari, & Wahyuni, 2025; Syafitri, Octasary, Hardianti, Ratna, & Stenalt, 2023)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohesion is what allows a reader to experience a text as a unified whole rather than a string of separate sentences (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Within Systemic Functional Linguistics, it refers to the semantic relationships that link clauses and sustain meaning across a discourse, realized through resources including reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and conjunction. Conjunction stands out among these because it makes logical and semantic relationships explicit rather than implied. Cohesion, in this sense, is not simply a matter of grammatical correctness, it reflects how well a writer has organized ideas so a reader can follow them as a coherent whole.

Temporal conjunctions carry particular weight in personal recount writing, since the genre is built around reconstructing past events in order (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). A reader expects one event to lead to the next, which means the writer has to mark those transitions clearly. Time connectives do this work by providing four signals namely sequence, simultaneity, precedence, and completion, not as isolated grammatical markers but as tools for organizing an entire narrative. Halliday and Hasan sort these temporal relations into four categories: sequential, simultaneous, preceding, and conclusive. Their framework matters here because it treats a connective's function within the whole text as the point of interest, rather than judging each connective in isolation at the sentence level.

Early work on temporal connectives in EFL writing stayed close to frequency and distribution. Ha (2014) found that Korean university students overused chronological connectives like finally and secondly relative to native English writers. It is grammatically fine but drawn from a narrow repertoire. Riswanto (2021) similarly catalogued conjunctions as cohesive devices in university essays and found they made up a large share of the cohesive devices present, though the analysis stopped at identification and frequency rather than asking how well those conjunctions actually functioned.

Later studies were pushed further into context. Asassfeh, Alshaboul, and Alshboul (2013) looked at both frequency and appropriateness of logical connectors in expository essays and found students sometimes used temporal connectives as decoration or mechanical filler rather than as genuine markers of logical relationships. Alfalagg (2020) showed that individual writing conferences improved students' accuracy with cohesive devices, including temporal conjunctions, by pushing them to choose connectives that actually matched what they meant. Together, this work makes one thing clear: how often a connective appears matters less than whether it's doing its job in context.

Even so, most of this research sits at the university level, leaving secondary-school EFL learners largely unstudied (Alfalagg, 2020; Alshaboul et al., 2013; Ha, 2014; Riswanto, 2021; Sanosi, 2024; Saputra & Hakim, 2020). It has also concentrated on expository and argumentative writing, while personal recount, a genre that depends entirely on chronological structure, has drawn comparatively little attention (Alshaboul et al., 2013; Amayreh & Bin Abdullah, 2022; Ha,

2014; Saputra & Hakim, 2020). And where contextual appropriateness has been examined, it's usually folded into a broader category of logical connectors rather than analyzed through Halliday and Hasan's specific temporal categories across a full recount text (Alfalagg, 2020; Amayreh & Bin Abdullah, 2022; Riswanto, 2021; Yousef Salman Al Shamalat & Binti Abdul Ghani, 2020). The relationship between how often temporal connectives appear and how effectively they build cohesion is, as a result, still not well understood.

This study treats temporal cohesion as something that happens at the discourse level, not something connective frequency can explain on its own. Knowing how often a learner uses time connectives says something about their linguistic choices, but not whether the events in their text actually connect in the right order. Using Halliday and Hasan's framework, this study examines both how often EFL learners use time connectives and how appropriately they use them in personal recount texts, combining a count of occurrences with a discourse-level reading of context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive design with supporting quantitative description to examine how EFL learners use time connectives to build temporal cohesion in personal recount texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Frequency counts alone would have shown how often connectives appeared. Discourse analysis was needed to see whether they worked or whether they established the temporal relationships the writer intended across a complete text.

The study was conducted at MTs 2 Nurul Islam, Mojokerto, Indonesia, with 29 students from Class IX BC 2. Students' personal recount texts were the primary data, compiled into a small learner corpus of authentic writing produced during regular classroom instruction. This corpus formed the basis for identifying, classifying, and analyzing how temporal connectives were used in real, unprompted learner language.

Data was collected through document analysis. Each recount text was read multiple times to locate every temporal connective in the discourse. Connectives were then coded using Halliday and Hasan's (1976) four classification namely, sequential, simultaneous, preceding, and conclusive which producing frequency data on how each category was distributed across the corpus. After the quantitative description, each connective was examined for contextual appropriateness through qualitative discourse analysis. The question was not whether a connective was grammatically correct, but whether it established the temporal relationship it was meant to and kept the recount's chronology intact (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Connectives that were repetitive, mismatched, ambiguous, or simply not doing their job received particular attention, since these cases show most clearly where learners succeeded or struggled to build temporal cohesion.

All texts were coded against Halliday and Hasan's semantic framework throughout, to keep the analysis consistent. Combining frequency counts with discourse-level reading meant the study could describe not just how often temporal connectives appeared, but whether they actually worked.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The learner corpus was analyzed in two stages. All identified time connectives were classified according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) temporal conjunction categories, with frequency and distribution calculated to give an overview of how students used temporal

connectives in their personal recount texts. Each connective was then evaluated against a four-level appropriateness rubric, assessing semantic suitability, grammatical accuracy, and mechanical correctness to determine how well it established a temporal relationship and contributed to the text's cohesion. The use of time connectives on students' writing was scored as Appropriate (3), Inaccurate (2), Inappropriate (1), or Error (0).

The findings are presented in two parts: the distribution of time connectives across the 135 occurrences identified in the learner corpus, and the contextual appropriateness of connective use, evaluated across 25 of the 29 students' personal recount texts. Four students were absent on the day of data collection and were therefore excluded from this stage of the analysis.

Table 1. Distribution of Time Connectives Based on Halliday and Hasan's Temporal Categories

Temporal Category	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
Sequential	109	80.74%	<i>then, after that, next, finally</i>
Conclusive	20	14.81%	<i>finally, in the end, at last</i>
Simultaneous	5	3.70%	<i>while, meanwhile</i>
Preceding	1	0.74%	<i>before</i>
Total	135	100%	-

Table 1 below shows that the learner corpus contained 135 occurrences of time connectives across Halliday and Hasan's four temporal categories. Sequential connectives accounted for the large majority, at 109 occurrences (80.74%). Conclusive connectives followed at 20 occurrences (14.81%). Simultaneous connectives occurred five times (3.70%), and preceding connectives just once (0.74%), the lowest frequency in the corpus.

Table 2. Contextual Appropriateness of Time Connective Use in Students' Personal Recount Texts

Appropriateness Level	Criteria	Number of Texts	Percentage (%)	Excerpt
Appropriate	Time connectives accurately establish temporal relationships with correct grammatical and mechanical realization.	4	16%	"...After that, I went to school."
Inaccurate	Time connectives establish appropriate temporal relationships but contain grammatical or mechanical inaccuracies.	9	36%	"After that I go to school."
Inappropriate	Time connectives are grammatically acceptable but fail to establish the intended temporal relationships.	9	36%	"Before I woke up, I brushed my teeth."
Error	Time connectives contain	3	12%	"Then because

	semantic, grammatical, and/or mechanical errors that hinder temporal cohesion.		"I go school."
Total	-	25	100%

Table 2 summarizes the contextual appropriateness of time connective use across the 25 students' personal recount texts. Only four texts (16%) were classified as Appropriate. The Inaccurate and Inappropriate categories were evenly split, with nine texts (36%) each. Inaccurate texts generally conveyed the correct temporal relationship but contained grammatical or mechanical inconsistencies, while Inappropriate texts were grammatically acceptable but failed to establish the intended temporal sequence. The remaining three texts (12%) were classified as Error, where semantic, grammatical, and mechanical problems together undermined temporal cohesion.

Most students attempted to use time connectives in their recount texts, but only a small number did so with consistent effectiveness. Most texts showed some degree of contextual, grammatical, or mechanical difficulty that undercuts temporal cohesion. These patterns raise questions about what specifically made connective use effective or ineffective across the corpus. The following section takes up that question, using representative excerpts from each appropriateness level.

Discussion

Sequential connectives dominated the learner corpus, making up 80.74% of all temporal connectives identified. This tracks with what the recount genre demands: writers reconstructing past experience in chronological order lean heavily on markers that establish succession (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Students' frequent use of then, after that, and next likely reflects awareness of that chronological structure rather than any particular preference for those words. Alshaboul et al. (2013) found sequential connectives used regularly to organize written discourse; Ha (2014) found a similarly narrow repertoire of chronological markers in his corpus. Amayreh and Abdullah (2022) found the same functional pattern, though with temporal conjunctions occurring less often overall than additive ones. Read together, these studies point to sequential connectives as the default cohesive resource whenever a genre requires chronological narration.

But frequency and effectiveness are not the same thing, and the appropriateness analysis makes that gap visible. Only four texts (16%) qualified as Appropriate; the rest showed contextual, grammatical, or mechanical problems of varying severity. The even split between Inaccurate and Inappropriate texts (36% each) is telling: students struggled both with producing grammatically sound connectives and with choosing ones that matched the actual temporal relationship between events. This lines up with a core claim from Halliday and Hasan, that cohesion is a semantic relation, not just the presence of a connective (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). A connective only does cohesive work if it accurately reflects what is happening between the events it links. High frequency, on its own, tells you nothing about whether that is happening. Al Shamalat and Ghani (2020) found a similarly weak relationship between conjunction frequency and writing quality overall; Sanosi (2024) made a related point, noting that frequency counts can identify usage patterns without explaining whether those connectives actually function in context.

The difficulty here goes beyond grammar. Students clearly recognized recount writing's chronological demands, which is why sequential markers show up so often, but the

appropriateness data suggests many of those connectives were not doing real semantic work. They were placed as signals of "this happened next," without necessarily tracking the actual relationship between events. Saputra and Hakim (2020) found something similar, learners using cohesive devices without much conscious grasp of what those devices were doing. Alfalagg (2020) found that this gap closed only with individualized feedback specifically targeting contextual appropriateness, not just correctness. What this points to is that effective temporal cohesion needs discourse competence, not just grammatical knowledge. Knowing which connective to reach for requires understanding the relationship being expressed, not just recognizing that a signal is needed.

For teaching, this suggests connective instruction needs to move past vocabulary lists and grammatical drilling. Students need to work with how connectives function across whole texts, on how different connectives carry different temporal meanings, and how a grammatically fine choice can still break cohesion if it is the wrong one for the context. Discourse analysis tasks, guided revision, and contextual feedback are likely to do more here than sentence-level accuracy exercises. More broadly, this study's approach of pairing connective frequency with contextual evaluation suggests that measuring temporal cohesion by frequency alone misses the part that matters whether connectives meaningfully organize a text's chronology, not just how many appear.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how EFL learners use time connectives to build temporal cohesion in personal recount texts, looking at both distribution and contextual appropriateness. Sequential connectives dominated, which fits the chronological demands of recount writing. But the appropriateness analysis told a different story: frequent connective use did not translate into effective cohesion, since only a small share of students used temporal connectives consistently well. Temporal cohesion, in other words, is not just about how often a cohesive device appears. It depends on whether that device actually builds a meaningful semantic relationship between events across the text.

Most prior work on conjunctions in EFL writing has focused on frequency, variety, or grammatical accuracy alone. This study instead paired corpus-based frequency counts with discourse-level appropriateness evaluation, extending Halliday and Hasan's framework to show that temporal cohesion depends on how connectives function in context, not just how often they show up. For teaching, these points toward treating temporal connectives as more than isolated grammar items: instruction should engage with their semantic and discourse function in building a coherent text.

The study is limited to personal recount texts from a single Islamic junior high school, so the findings may not generalize to other educational settings or writing genres. Future research could examine temporal cohesion across different genres, education levels, and learner populations, using larger corpora and additional qualitative methods, to build a fuller picture of how learners develop this kind of discourse competence.

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