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An SFL analysis of cohesion in B2 first argumentative essays: A case of Tunisian high-schoolers

Najla Fki

Abstract

The tools Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) offer to carry out text analysis and descriptions of language in pedagogical settings have attested their usefulness in assisting and empowering educators worldwide (DE Oliveira, 2015). Drawing specifically on SFL's textual resources, this study underscores the utility of cohesive markers in examining learners' progress in EFL environments. It particularly focuses on Tunisian B2 First students, a population that received scant attention in the literature. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) system of COHESION, including both grammatical and lexical devices, is adopted as a framework of analysis. The main aim is to evaluate the progress of B2 Tunisian high-schoolers in argumentative essay writing which is one of the requirements for obtaining the B2 First Cambridge certificate. To this end, a corpus of students' essays is purposively sampled to be compared with an equal corpus of model essays marked by the examiners for perfect scores in the essay genre. A scheme is developed to quantify the instances of cohesion following three main criteria: (a) frequency, (b) variety, and (c) appropriateness. The analysis shows that, in terms of quantity, the model essays use more cohesive devices than the Tunisian ones, especially at the level of lexical cohesion. As for the quality, some weaknesses are detected in the Tunisian sample in relation to the limited variety of cohesive markers and their occasional misuse. Implications for enhancing Tunisian writers' proficiency can be drawn both on the short and long terms. Provisionally, the few detected differences can be a starting point towards immediate remediation for the sampled Tunisian learners with more recycling of cohesion ties. On the long run, the results serve as feedback on how to improve textbook adaptation to fit the level of Tunisian learners and tweak it according to the B2 First specifications for future Tunisian B2 candidates.

Keywords

SFL; cohesion; B2 First; Tunisian high-schoolers; argumentative essays

Introduction

Developed with language teaching “firmly in mind”, SFL has repeatedly demonstrated its effectiveness in foreign and second English language teaching contexts (McCabe et al. 2015, 1). Among the areas which received focal attention is writing proficiency as one

of the hardest skills to master for L2 students (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Actually, while constructing a text, skills in organization, in addition to lexis and grammar, are primordial for merit-worthy writing (Al Shamalat & Ghani 2020). Accordingly, the bulk of studies in that direction have shown a particular interest in examining the use of cohesive devices being one of the basic aspects in the textual metafunction of meaning making at the discourse level (Meisuo 2000; Jalilifar 2009; Kalajahi & Abdullah 2015). It has been concluded that, overall, the frequency and variety of grammatical and lexical markers of cohesion correlate statistically with quality scores (Al Shamalat & Ghani 2020).

When it comes to academic argumentative essays, the focus of the present study, this genre had its fair share of scrutiny from international research (Crossley et al. 2013; Kılıç et al. 2016; Priangan et al. 2020). Locally, however, few endeavors (Bouziri 2023) hinted to the efficacy of cohesive markers and their contribution to bettering the overall quality of Tunisian argumentative writings. Additionally, compared to extensive work in other contexts, less attention was directed to studying learners' performance at the textual level, specifically in rated Cambridge B2 First argumentative essays (Chen & Baker 2016). In fact, the literature is replete with research which spotlighted criterial discourse features and lexical bundles (Hawkins & Filipović 2012; Gaillat et al. 2021) across the different proficiency levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), focusing on the totality of written tasks irrespective of their genre. Moreover, while some studies such as the one conducted by Fiallos (2024) focused exclusively on B2 argumentative essays, they investigated learners' writing skills in general rather than specifically targeting the textual features of organization. Accordingly, due to their broad scope, limited are the conclusions which could be drawn from these studies about the cohesive ties used by L2 learners in the argumentative essay task of the B2 First standardized exam.

Building on this extensive repertoire of research and attempting to cover the aforementioned gaps, this paper purports to investigate the use of cohesive devices in the under-explored extra-curricular context of English learning for Tunisian pre-schoolers prior to taking the B2 First Cambridge exam. SFL analysis tools of cohesion – both

lexical and grammatical – will be leveraged to guide the teacher-researcher in the evaluation of students’ literacy development in argumentative essay writing while equally empowering them to understand their progress and ultimately better their written productions.

1. Cohesion: An SFL perspective

According to Halliday and Hasan (2013, 1), what distinguishes a “text” from “a collection of unrelated sentences” is its unity. Indeed, defined as a semantic unit of meaning, a text can be called so only when it exhibits properties of “texture” (Halliday & Hasan 1976, 2). The latter is reflected in a suite of linguistic features – generally referred to as lexico-grammatical resources – which “originate in the textual meta-function and are collectively known as the system of COHESION” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 603). To develop a text rhetorically, “cohesive selections” are made out of four main types of resources, resulting in the creation of both “logogenetic patterns” – referred to by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, 607) as reference, ellipsis and substitution, and lexical cohesion – and “logico-semantic” patterns referred to as conjunctions.

1.1. Grammatical cohesion

To use Halliday and Hasan’s (2013, 5) terms, “cohesion is expressed partly through the grammar”, establishing bonds via three grammatical forms known as CONJUNCTION, REFERENCE, SUBSTITUTION and ELLIPSIS. Starting with the first manifestation of grammatical cohesion, the conjunction, this system works as an ancillary resource to the clause complex whereby “clue words” are provided about the type of logico-semantic relations that hold “between text spans of varying extent” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 609). Cohesive conjunctions can, therefore, be used to connect clause complexes, sentences or even higher text segments such as paragraphs (Uru et al. 2021). While doing so, they express three main relations, namely elaboration, extension and enhancement (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Each of these relations is further classified into sub-types as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Cohesive Conjunctions (Adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, 613/4)

Types	Subtypes		Examples
elaboration	Apposition	Expository	in other words, that is, I mean
		Exemplifying	for example, for instance, to illustrate
	Clarification	Corrective	or rather, at least, to be more precise
		Distractive	by the way, incidentally
		Dismissive	in any case, anyway, leaving that aside
		Particularizing	in particular, more especially
		Resumptive	to resume, to get back to the point
		Summative	in short, to sum up, in conclusion, briefly
		verificative	actually, as a matter of fact, indeed
Extension	Addition	Positive	and, also, moreover, in addition
		Negative	nor
		Adversative	but, yet, on the other hand, however
	Variation	Replacive	on the contrary, instead

			Subtractive	apart from that, except for that
			Alternative	alternatively
enhancing	spatio-temporal			then, next, before that, soon, meanwhile
	Manner	Comparison		likewise, similarly, in a different way
		Means		thus, thereby, by such means
		causal- conditional	causal	General
	specific: result			as a result, in consequence
	specific: reason			on account of this, for that reason
	specific: purpose			for that purpose, with this in view
		Conditional	Positive	then, in that case, under the circumstances
	Negative		otherwise, if not	
	Concessive		in other respects, elsewhere	

Compared to conjunctions which operate between whole clauses, the second grammatically cohesive form, reference, relates “single elements that have a function within the clause” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 605). Those elements, according to Martin (2001), refer to participants or circumstances whose identities can be recoverable. Reference items can point to elements outwards (exophoric) or inwards (endophoric), and backwards (anaphoric) or forwards (cataphoric) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Halliday and Hasan (1976) further highlight the richness of this grammatical type of cohesion when they identify three distinct types of reference, namely personal (*he, you, mine, their, its, one*), demonstrative (*this,*

those, here, there) and comparative (*identical, similarly, different, better, more*). In this study, it is to be checked if the sample of B2 Tunisian essays reflects learners' awareness of these nuances in the system of REFERENCE and whether it includes appropriate choices that enhance text coherence.

Very similar to reference in its anaphoric nature, the third forms of grammatical cohesion are substitution and ellipsis referring to adjacent elements in previous discourse. Operating at the level of wording rather than meaning – which sets them apart from reference – these resources represent “variants of the same type of cohesive relation” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 635). Nonetheless, the two forms should be distinguished for the differences they display. Starting with ellipsis, it occurs when parts of a structure are deleted because they are presumably recoverable from earlier discourse as in example (1) (Halliday & Hasan 1976, 143).

- (1) Would you like to hear another verse? I know twelve more [Ø: *verses*].

The omitted item “*verses*” in (1) is substituted by nothing in the original sentence. Interpreting the structure, thus, requires the receiver to supply the ellipsed element by referring back to the preceding text. In substitution, however, there is a clear indication that something is left out because the omitted parts are replaced by a substitute like in example (2) (Halliday & Hasan 1976, 89).

- (2) My axe is too blunt. I must get a sharper *one*.

To avoid the repetition of the word “*axe*”, the substitute form “*one*” in (2) is used as a “place holding device”, indicating the location of the deleted item and holding the identical grammatical function of Head of a nominal group (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 635). Overall, in both of these cases of grammatical cohesion, the use of ellipsed elements – whether in the form of ellipsis or substitution – suggests their “lack of prominence” and the intention to highlight other parts of discourse instead (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 635).

1.2. Lexical cohesion

Complementary to its grammatical counterpart, lexical cohesion is realized through the choice of “open system items” carried out at the level of lexis (Martin 2001, 7). These lexical items are organized into a network of relations known as repetition, synonymy, hyponymy, meronymy and collocation (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Described by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, 644) as the “most direct form of lexical cohesion”, repetition occurs when the same morphological form of an item or one of its inflected variants (eg. *dine*, *diner*, *dining*, *dinner*) appear in the text to refer back to it. As for synonymy, it is detectable when two items with similar meanings (eg. *ascent/climb*) co-occur in the text without necessarily having the same referent (Halliday & Hasan 1976, 278). Hyponyms and meronyms are very similar lexical relations as the first means “to be a kind of” (eg. *fruit* as a kind of *food*) while the second refers to being “part of” (eg. *trunk*, *branch*, *leaf* as part of *tree*) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 648). The last lexical cohesive relation is that of collocation which appears in the text when there is a “systematic relationship between a pair of words” which have a tendency to always co-exist in the same environment (eg. *candle ... flame ... flicker*) (Halliday & Hasan 1976, 285/6).

Taken altogether, perceiving each instance of the above-discussed cohesion types as a ‘tie’ “makes it possible to analyze a text in terms of its cohesive properties, and give a systematic account of its patterns of texture” (Halliday & Hasan 2013, 4). This, in turn, can give insights into possible similarities and differences among writers from different proficiency levels or across genres in the frequency and types of ties they typically employ. This area of research is what numerous studies have been centered on as clarified more in the forthcoming section.

1.3. Cohesion in previous SFL studies

Because of its effective role in determining “the developmental aspects of writing quality” (Mohseni & Samadian 2019, 219), cohesion received considerable attention from researchers in different EFL settings. In the academic context, for instance, a comprehensive study summarizing the state of the art on the use of cohesion in 20 research articles indicated that repetition (40%) and

reference (35%) are the most frequent cohesive markers employed by L2 writers worldwide (Uru et al. 2021). In the same vein, Kailani (2017) investigated cohesion in the ESP context on a different academic genre – nursing care reports – and found that Indonesian nursing students deploy lexical cohesion, specifically repetition, and reference the most. They also pointed out that the students have an issue of over repeating items instead of using other lexical ties such as hyponymy and meronymy which are still under-developed at that level.

Moving to descriptive genres, another context where studies on cohesion abound, Mohseni and Samadian's (2019) study of 40 descriptive essays produced by Iranian intermediate EFL learners showed that reference (57%) and conjunction (41%) are the most recurrent types of grammatical cohesion whereas repetition (79%) accounted for the highest percentage of lexical cohesion. Likewise, the examination of 128 descriptive English texts by Kuwaiti students of English in the College of Arts revealed that there is an overuse of certain types of cohesive devices, notably reference, lexical cohesion and conjunction, against the very rare presence of other devices such as substitution and ellipsis, which was explained by the learners' lack of competence in dealing with cohesive ties (Alzankawi 2017). In line with these findings, the literature on argumentative texts displays a more apparent, recurrent and even extra use of repetition (Adiantika 2015; Rodliyah & Liani 2022). This has been accounted for by the learners' lack of vocabulary and low lexical proficiency (Mohseni & Samadian 2019) as well as the challenges posed by the argumentative genre proper (Horverak 2018).

All in all, it can be concluded that there is a recurrent pattern in the use of cohesive devices reported in previous studies, with a clear prioritization of repetition, reference and conjunction. Yet, which of these ties takes the lead in the writings of EFL learners differs depending on the proficiency and level of the learners. The divergence in the findings of these studies has also been explained by the particularities of context and genre, which hold distinct cultural and situational norms. In this regard, it is important to be familiar with the generic and contextual features of the analyzed genre in this study, B2 First argumentative essays, to have an accurate reading of the findings at a later phase.

2. The argumentative genre: B2 first essays

Within the SFL framework, there is an extricable link between language as a meaning-making instrument and the notion of context as the highest stratum in the stratification of language (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Texts, as realizations of meanings, thus, “construe and are construed by the social and cultural context” (McCabe et al. 2015, 2). The latter refers to a composite construct which “extends ... from the overall contextual potential of a community to the contextual instances involving particular people interacting and exchanging meanings on particular occasions” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014,32). In other words, context encompasses, on the one hand, the specific situation where the text is produced including elements like the participants, subject matter, rhetorical mode and medium of interaction (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014), and on the other, “a higher level system – the context of culture” appertaining to a broadly-agreed upon set of “conventions defined by communities” and giving rise to distinct genre types (Figueiredo 2010, 125/126). This approach to context is relevant to the current study in that it allows examining cohesive ties as part of “the system” which is “‘instantiated’ in the form of text” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, 27).

This study takes the essays of B2 First learners produced in the specific setting of L2 teaching as an instance of text within the generic boundaries of argumentative writing. Argumentation is a basic component in the curricula of various educational systems all over the world. Its pervasive implementation in different teaching contexts across grade levels is due to its critical role in academic success (Pramoolsook & Qian 2013). In fact, L2 learners’ “ability to write well-constructed arguments with persuasive supporting evidence” is a core requirement not only in many national assignments and tests but also in most international examinations (Liem 2018, 59). Being no exception, the high-stakes Cambridge English exam, B2 First, includes a compulsory task in the writing paper which requires candidates to produce a 140/190-word essay and outline their stance towards a controversial topic. Specifically, B2 test-takers have to agree and/or disagree, give opinion and reasons for it, compare and contrast ideas and ultimately reach a conclusion (Cambridge Assessment English 2020). To express these

functions, B2 learners are urged to use “a variety of linking words and cohesive devices” as explicitly stated in the task descriptors for the sub-scale of “organization” (Cambridge Assessment English 2020, 33).

Multiple studies have, however, proven that L2 learners’ ability to “create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of ... a wide range of connectors” (Council of Europe 2001, 28) – as standardized by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – is a recurrent challenge in argumentative genres. Horverak (2018), for example, concluded that L2 writers are less effective in linking arguments because they tend to use simple conjunctions and fewer lexical ties than L1 writers. In the Tunisian context, Bouziri (2023) noted that pre-service teachers’ argumentative essays reflect issues of inappropriacy in the use of transition words and pronominal reference. The utmost challenge can, therefore, be boiled down to L2 learners’ failure to produce both varied and appropriate cohesive ties. In this regard, the current study attempts to uncover any existing problems for B2 First Tunisian candidates in using relevant cohesive tools for the argumentative writing task so that remediation strategies can be advanced before the end of instruction. To this end, a comparative analysis of Tunisian essays and Cambridge model essays is carried out as explained further in the methodology section.

3. Methodology

This study samples a total of 56 argumentative essays counting 10 461 words. The corpus is collected from Tunisian as well as international B2 First learners for comparative purposes. It is equally divided into two sub-corpora as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Description of the sampled sub-corpora

	Sub-corpus 1	Sub-corpus 2	Total
Population	Tunisian	International	
Code	TE (Tunisian Essays)	ME (Model Essays)	
Source	Tunisian learners	Cambridge English website	
Number of texts	29	27	56
Number of words	5230	5231	10461

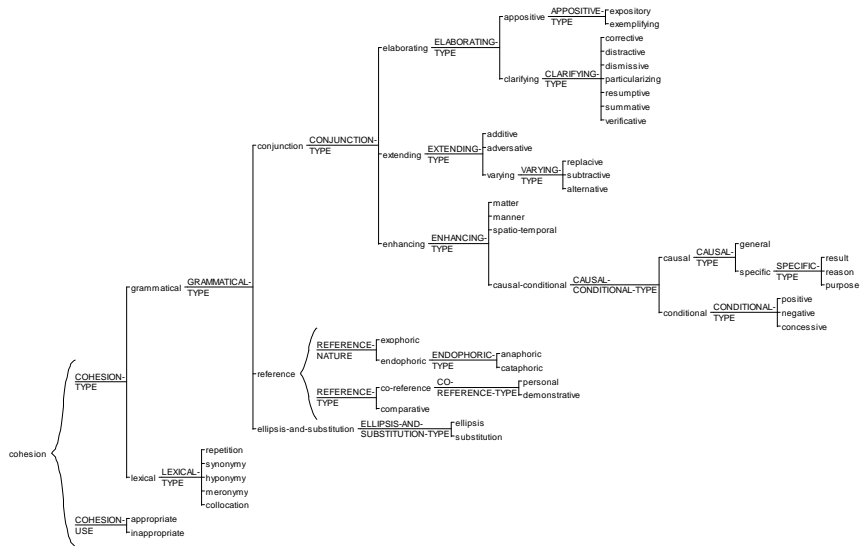
As mentioned in Table 2, Sub-corpus 1, totaling 29 argumentative essays, is coded as TE since it is amassed from a group of 10 Tunisian B2 First (First Certificate in English) learners from the city of Sfax. The participants take extracurricular classes at a private language training center to be certified in the B2 level (upper intermediate) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The candidates, who are 17 years old, started instruction at the beginning of the academic year 2022-2023 and completed a preparation course of 180 hours with a frequency of 3 hours per week. All participants sat for a placement test prior to the course to make sure their level corresponds to B1. While all of them scored high in the placement test, they seemed to struggle in the writing paper as they performed the lowest in it. The sampling method is purposive since the teacher-researcher is concerned only with essays which are produced at the end of instruction to make sure all course points related to cohesion have been covered. Moreover, sub-corpus 1 includes only essays produced by learners who missed no classes and who made the decision to sit for the B2 exam because they will be back for 10 more extensive sessions of training (30 hours) where remediation and feedback are possible before the date of the final exam.

As for sub-corpus 2, it is made up of 27 Model Essays (ME) amounting to 5231 words. It is conveniently culled from the official website of Cambridge English (Cambridge English 2003) to ensure that all essays received a full mark (5 out of 5) in the sub-scale of “organization”. The writers of these essays are international learners

who have already passed their B2 First exam with perfect scores in the writing task. It should be noted that the textbook used during instruction of Tunisian learners includes samples from these Cambridge essays which work as models to guide the learners while developing their own essays. Both sub-corpora comprise varied themes to ensure that the topic does not affect the choice of cohesive markers.

To analyze the corpus, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach drawing on tools of analysis from the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. As a first step, the quantification of cohesive markers was carried out using version 2.8.17 of the UAM CorpusTool software (O'Donnell 2012). This annotation tool allowed manual tagging and automatic classification of cohesive ties by type and accuracy as well as comparison of frequencies between different datasets with the chi-square significance value. The teacher-researcher carefully consulted the specifications checklist for the use of cohesion in the B2 First writing rubric and accordingly developed a scheme (Figure 1) based on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) model. The scheme, thus, reflects the cohesion points mentioned in the exam descriptors and addressed in class. Qualitatively, specific instances of the most common cohesive devices from both sub-corpora were analyzed in their context to understand the differences in their use and frequency.

Figure 1: Annotation Scheme of Cohesion (based on Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)



4. Results and discussion

The results of this study are presented along two sections: the first reports on the quantity and variety of cohesive markers used by Tunisian and international learners whereas the second addresses the extent to which these devices are accurate. Quantitative and qualitative analyses are undertaken simultaneously and their outcome is discussed in light of previous research.

4.1. Frequency and variety of cohesive devices

In order to check if Tunisian learners actually use a dense range of “linking words to mark clearly the relationship between ideas” while building their arguments (Council of Europe, 35), the totality of cohesive devices employed in sub-corpus 1 (TE) is calculated and compared with that of Cambridge essays (ME).

Table 3: Overall frequency of cohesion types in both sub-corpora

Feature	ME		TE		Chisqu	Signif.
	N	Percent	N	Percent		
COHESION	N=979		N=773			
Grammatical	333	34%	319	41%	9.73	+++
Lexical	646	66%	454	59%	9.73	+++

As displayed in Table 3, cohesive ties are more frequently used in the ME sub-corpus than in TE. This draws attention to the fact that Tunisian learners are still developing their writing skills when it comes to discourse organization and so their focus needs to be directed more to that during the remediation sessions. This finding confirms previous studies which concluded that L2 learners in different contexts often exhibit fewer uses of cohesive markers than more proficient learners (Pramoolsook & Qian 2013; Horverak 2018; Rodliyah & Liani 2022).

Concerning the different types of cohesion used in the sample, Table 3 shows that, in both sub-corpora, there is a predominance of lexical cohesion over the grammatical type, which is more apparent in the ME sub-corpus. This discrepancy can be rendered to the intersection of lexical markers with another important feature within B2 essays which is “vocabulary and lexis”. In fact, the choice of lexical items contributes to the richness of text in terms of vocabulary use, which can in turn boost the score for the sub-scale of “Language” in addition to “Organization” (Cambridge Assessment English 2020, 35). However, Tunisian learners reflect a lower use of lexical cohesive ties than ME writers whose linguistic proficiency in lexis appears to be more advanced. Indeed, as proven in the literature, L2 learners tend to employ “more lexis as their lexical proficiency level promoted” (Mohseni & Samadian 2019, 219). This point is to be illustrated further while dealing with lexical cohesion proper in Section (4.1.2). To compensate for the lower occurrences of lexis, Tunisian writers use more grammatical devices than ME. One reason for this might be the explicit and direct nature of grammatical connectors which makes them easier to deal with than the more subtle and ambiguous lexical ties (Halliday & Hasan 1976). To understand better these preliminary results, deeper

analyses are conducted on the realizations of each of the major types of cohesion.

4.1.1. Grammatical cohesion realizations

The three main systems of grammatical cohesion are examined in terms of frequency and variety to pin down any similarities or differences between the sampled sub-corpora. Starting with the frequency counts of conjunction, reference, ellipsis and substitution, the final scores are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Frequency of grammatical cohesive systems in both sub-corpora

Feature	ME		TE	
	N	%	N	%
Conjunction	137	41%	151	47%
Reference	190	57%	163	51%
Ellipsis & substitution	6	1.8%	5	1.6%

With reference to Table 4, irrespective of the writers (Tunisian or international), reference relations are statistically the most dominant in the corpus, followed closely by conjunctions at the expense of ellipsis and substitution which lag behind with very meager percentages. On the one hand, the frequency of grammatical cohesion types in the analyzed sub-corpora aligns with other collected corpora across countries and levels. Priangan et al. (2020), for instance, noted that Indonesian undergraduate students had a tendency to use reference more frequently than any other grammatical devices in their argumentative essays. Likewise, Afriani (2018) concluded that the argumentative writings of college students exhibit a proclivity for reference (44.3%), followed by conjunction (14.8%) against the spare uses of substitution (0.8%) and ellipsis (0.5%). Jemadi (2017) signaled that the low percentage of substitution and ellipsis across varied contexts is understandable since those two types of cohesive devices are a feature of spoken rather than written texts. In the case of this study, one more justification for the avoidance of ellipsis is the lack of familiarity with this device which will be more extensively covered in later

Cambridge levels such as C1 and C2. Indeed, ellipsis and substitution are not explicitly covered in particular lessons within the B2 First syllabus, and so the learners might not be confident enough to use them in their writings yet.

On the other hand, this study is different from the mentioned literature in the more balanced use of reference and conjunction compared to the over-reliance on reference (sometimes reaching 90%) for many EFL learners in other environments (Alarcon & Morales 2011). This can be explained, first, by the nature of the B2 First task which requires an explicit focus on linkers and connectors within and across paragraphs. Second, the amount of exposure to conjunctions is more frequent in terms of lessons and practice activities compared to reference which is occasionally encountered in separate reading tasks rather than extensively taught.

While cohesion frequency is an important indicator of text quality, it is not the sole one. Variety is what can also determine if these abundant grammatical uses are relevant or not to the overall organization of the text. When examining the different realizations of the predominant relation of reference (Table 5), more differences than similarities can be drawn across sub-corpora, which points to several weaknesses in the Tunisian learners' essays.

Table 5: Comparison of reference types across sub-corpora

Feature	ME		TE		Chisqu	Signif
	N	%	N	%		
Exophoric	38	20%	83	51%	37.23	+++
endophoric	152	80%	80	49%	37.23	+++
anaphoric	146	96%	80	100%	3.24	+
cataphoric	6	4%	0	0%	3.24	+
co-reference	162	85%	157	96%	12.32	+++
Comparative	28	15%	6	4%	12.32	+++
personal	118	73%	127	81%	2.90	+
demonstrative	44	27%	30	19%	2.90	+

First of all, a close look at the significance scores in Table 5 indicates that the most striking difference occurs at the level of exophoric uses of reference. Contrary to ME where endophoric reference features prominently, TE exhibit preferences for exophoric patterns.

- (3) **TE:** In addition, playing sports activities with *your* friends helps *you* uplift *your* spirits, improve *your* leadership skills and most importantly make strong bonds with *your* friends, unlike playing on *your* own with lack of sport spirits and competitive atmosphere.
- (4) **TE:** Being single and living in *your* own house alone is way less stressful than living with *your* wife and kids. *You* will have less problems and less responsibilities. Moreover, *you* will have freedom to do what *you* love without anything holding *you* back like the family responsibilities such as school and the house.

In excerpts (3) and (4), the Tunisian writers are building the whole argument around an imaginary reader who is an external participant in discourse and whose reference is contextual. As outlined by Halliday and Hasan (1976), the second personals “*you/your*” are typical instances of exophoric reference for they point to the situational environment rather than to the text proper. In other words, to interpret their reference, the reader needs to search for external clues outside rather than inside the text. Thus, such uses do not add much to the internal organization of a text and they are more commonly found in conversational genres and narrative written texts (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). What is more problematic in the above examples from the TE corpus is that the interpretation of “*you*” is ambiguous as it is not clear if the students are referring to the reader who is the examiner of the task, if “*you*” is meant to be a reference to the writer to avoid the use of first person pronouns, or if they are referring to the category of people adopting the same opinion as them. A fourth possibility is what Halliday and Hasan (1976, 53) refer to as “generalized exophoric reference” where “*you*” can be “any human individual”. This use is acceptable in institutionalized contexts but it can be confusing in argumentative essays and is likely to reduce the strength of the argument since it generalizes rather than specifies or exemplifies to whom the

argument applies. Although the Tunisian learners have been warned of such uses during instruction, their essays reveal an overreliance on them, which means that more recycling is needed with this particular kind of input.

Second, TE exhibit less variety in using cataphoric and demonstrative types of reference and lower instances of comparative reference (Table 5). Actually, though infrequent in other contexts too (Alarcon & Morales 2011), comparative markers, in particular, should be a defining feature of B2 argumentative essays for they allow writers to compare and contrast ideas and points of view, which is a basic communicative function for this genre.

(5) **ME:** To sum up, music may be a good therapy for some people when they are feeling low, but for others it can have the opposite effect. There are many other activities which people can do which are *equally*, if not *more*, effective.

(6) **TE:** Many people prefer to work at home thinking it's way too easier. But I hold a *different* opinion for several reasons.

The use of comparative reference in these examples from both sub-corpora aids in reaching a final conclusion (5) and firmly establishing one's stance as different from the mainstream opinion (6). Their rare presence in TE might suggest that Tunisian learners find these types challenging and so more exposure to them is called for. While the B2 textbook includes some tasks that explicitly train candidates in identifying reference and referents in certain reading passages, they need more practice in producing such devices in the writing task.

On the opposite of reference, Tunisian learners are more in line with their international counterparts while employing conjunctions. Indeed, the frequency of the three main realizations of conjunctive markers is similar across sub-corpora as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6: Realizations of conjunction markers in both sub-corpora

		ME		TE			
Feature	N	%	N	%	Chisqu	Signif.	
CONJUNCTION-TYPE	N=137		N=151				
Elaborating	29	21%	27	18%	0.50		
Extending	65	47%	81	54%	1.10		
Enhancing	43	31%	43	28%	0.29		
ELABORATING-TYPE							
Appositive	12	41%	5	19%	3.46	+	
Clarifying	17	59%	22	81%	3.46	+	
APPOSITIVE-TYPE							
Expository	0	0%	0	0%	0.00		
Exemplifying	12	100%	5	100%	0.00		
EXTENDING-TYPE							
Additive	31	48%	49	61%	2.39		
Adversative	32	49%	31	38%	1.77		
Varying	2	3%	1	1%	0.61		
ENHANCING-TYPE							
Matter	1	2%	0	0%	1.01		
Manner	0	0%	0	0%	0.00		
Spatio-temporal	29	68%	28	65%	0.05		
causal-conditional	13	30%	15	35%	0.21		
CAUSAL-TYPE							
General	6	50%	1 1	100%	7.44	+++	
Specific	6	50%	0	0%	7.44	+++	

From the percentages reported in Table 6, it can be deduced that the use of conjunctions is among the most noticeable similarities across both samples, and it can be considered as an area of strength for the Tunisian participants since they are very consistent in employing the relevant types of relations for the studied genre. Indeed, they give prominence to extending realizations of conjunctive markers, as in examples (7) and (8), rather than enhancing and elaborating types.

(7) **TE: *Moreover***, adopting this way of working can affect your health; you will become more active instead of rotting in your room. ***In addition***, you will start to take your work much seriously ... You will ***also*** avoid the risk of becoming an introvert, an isolated person.

(8) **TE:** “Money can’t buy happiness” a common statement that most of us would agree on. ***However***, that doesn’t explain the high rates of happiness in rich countries ... and the low rates of happiness in poor countries ... Overall, money is the way to prosperity and stability which can provide satisfaction and happiness, ***but*** it’s a double-aged weapon as it could lead to very serious harm.

The additive conjunctions of extension in example (7) allow for the accumulation of evidence to support the writer’s point of view whereas the contrastive markers used in extract (8) help in the advancement of counterarguments and in establishing a nuanced stance towards a controversial topic. These two sub-types of extension are, therefore, frequent in the studied sample because they assist the learners in transmitting the communicative functions of argumentative essays, which has also been proven true for other L2 learners (Alarcon & Morales 2011; Rodliyah & Liani 2022). Their use is also a sign of proficiency since Tunisian learners employ a varied repertoire of extending linkers ranging from very simple (*and, also, besides*) to more sophisticated ones (*furthermore, moreover, in addition*).

Reexamining Table 6, the only statistically notable difference between both sub-corpora in relation to the use of conjunctions is apparent at the level of causal enhancing relations whose occurrence is more balanced in ME than in TE. The latter are found to rely

exclusively on the general type of this relation, overusing markers like *so* and *therefore* as in excerpts (9) and (10).

(9) **TE:** nowadays, the expenses of a wedding are getting higher and also the cost of a house. *So* I should earn enough money first ...

(10) **TE:** I truly believe working on school/college projects with your classmates is more efficient ... as you will share thoughts ... *Therefore*, everyone is likely to expand their knowledge and enlighten their minds through others' visions towards different topics.

(11) **ME:** the use of technology ... can give some sportspeople an unfair advantage over others. *For this reason*, full-length swimsuits and ... 'superbikes' have now both been banned from some swimming and cycling competitions.

The choice of the general causal conjunctions in examples (9/10) results in a lack of precision as it is not clear if the semantic relation expressed is that of result, purpose or reason. Example (11), however, shows the more advanced level of international writers who deploy more specific causal linkers that signal their mastery of top-tier conjunctions (*for this reason*, *as a result*, *consequently*). Added to that, though not as significant, the less frequent use of appositive conjunctions in the TE sub-corpus is also indicative of their less developed proficiency in using conjunctions.

(12) **ME:** Secondly, we should try to recycle as much as we can at home in order to cut down on household waste. *For example*, if everybody brought their old bottles to a bottle bank instead of dumping them, there would have been less waste in the natural landscape.

The use of exemplifying appositive conjunctions like in example (12) highlights the international learners' awareness of the efficiency of exemplification in argumentative essays and its empowering effect in illustrating their ideas to build solid arguments. Consequently, such uses need to be modeled and practiced more in class for Tunisian learners.

4.1.2. Lexical cohesion realizations

As established at the beginning of Section (4.1), lexical cohesion is preponderantly found in the sampled corpus compared to its grammatical agnate (Table 3). This prevalent occurrence comes in support of several EFL studies (Crowhurst 1987; Hellalet 2013; Rodliyah & Liani 2022) which additionally confirmed the dominance of repetition as the number one pick of L2 writers in various learning environments. Therefore, the results delineated in Table 7, showing repetition as holding the highest scores over all other lexical relations in the studied samples, are in accordance with the literature.

Table 7: Distribution of lexical cohesion types in both sub-corpora

Feature	ME		TE		Chisqu	Signif.
	N	%	N	%		
Repetition	392	61%	319	70%	10.71	+++
Synonymy	80	12%	61	14%	0.26	
Hyponymy	48	7%	17	4%	6.51	+++
Meronymy	30	5%	16	3%	0.83	
Collocation	96	15%	41	9%	8.31	+++

In the context of this study, more than just being a ubiquitous feature of non-native learners, repetition is sometimes an inescapable choice in the specific B2 First essay type considering that “some words may unavoidably appear often as a result of being the topic of the task” (Cambridge Assessment English 2020, 35). In that case, repetition can signal the candidates’ efforts to stay focused on the topic by having a linking thread. On the other hand, repeating the same terms can become counter-effective and undermine cohesion when it is overdone. In fact, what is noticeable from Table 7 is the more salient use of repetition in the sub-corpus of TE compared to that of ME which exhibit more variety in using other lexical relations such as hyponymy and collocation.

(13) **TE:** Besides, people are often *using cars* in their daily activities. Nevertheless, the excessive *use of cars* leads

to high levels of air pollution. It seems to me that young people can try *using* public transport, cycling or walking instead of *using cars*. (overuse of repetition)

(14) **ME:** Second, a very good idea is to stop *using cars* so much and start *cycling* or *walking* a little more. For example, instead of *commuting by car*, we can try to do it *on foot* or *by bike*. (collocation, synonymy)

Relying on the definition provided by Cambridge Assessment English (2020, 35), Example 13 is a typical instance of repetition overuse “where candidates repeatedly use the same word because they do not have the resources to use another term or phrase the same idea in another way”. This is not the case for the more proficient international writers who reflect greater variety in their choices of lexical ties to address the same topic in extract 14. Example 13 and the like from the TE sub-corpus showcase the occasional instances where Tunisian participants overuse repeated items though they are not the main topic of the essay. Those instances contradict with B2 First requirements specifying that, “at higher levels, candidates [are expected to] make increasing use of a greater variety of words, fixed phrases, collocations” (Cambridge Assessment English 2020, 35). In fact, overusing items is not the only weakness in the sampled Tunisian essays. Other traces of inappropriacy are drawn at the level of other cohesive ties as explained further in the next section.

4.2. Appropriateness of cohesive uses

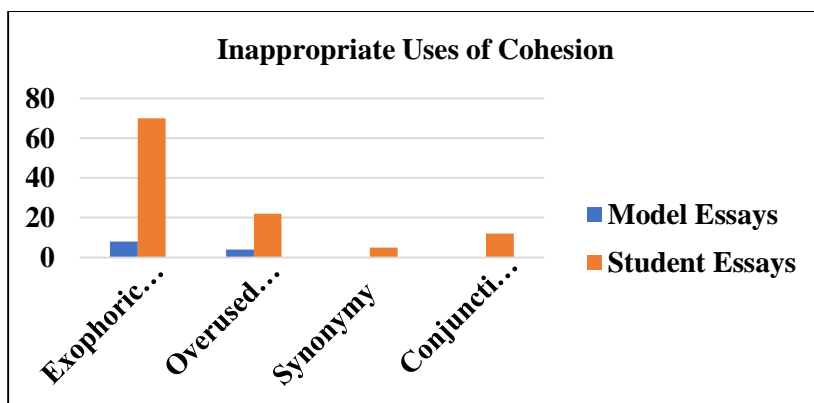
Added to frequency and variety, the accuracy of the used cohesive devices in the Tunisian samples can help reach a final conclusion about the performance of the participants and how far they are from the expected proficiency level. The codification of cohesive ties as appropriate or not has been judged following Halliday and Hasan’s model (1976) of cohesion. Following previous studies (Alarcon & Morales 2011; Rodliyah & Liani 2022), an item is tagged as “inappropriate” if it is misused (omitted, unnecessarily added, wrongly selected) or overused. Additionally, an inter-rater reliability test is conducted by a colleague teaching the same level at the same school. The results relevant to this criterion are exposed in Table 8.

Table 8: Frequency of appropriate and inappropriate uses of cohesion in both sub-corpora

	ME		TE		Chisqu Signif.	
COHESION- USE	N=979		N=773			
Appropriate	966	99%	664	86%	108.78	+++
Inappropriate	13	1%	109	14%	108.78	+++

Referring to the statistics in Table 8, it can be deduced that the overwhelming majority of cohesion uses are appropriate in both sub-corpora. This finding points to promising signs of development in Tunisian learners' mastery of cohesion, especially when compared to the abundance of cohesion errors reported in similar studies (Hellalet 2013; Rodliyah & Liani 2022). Nonetheless, compared to the desired target of ME where errors in cohesion are barely traced, the Tunisian learners should pay more attention to minimize the errors they commit while linking ideas in argumentative essays. In order for the teacher-researcher to be informed about these types of inadequacies and give corrective feedback accordingly, the frequency of each inappropriate cohesive use is further calculated (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Inappropriate realizations of cohesion across sub-corpora



It is found that exophoric reference displays the highest misuses of cohesion followed by repetition and conjunctions. Since overuses of repetition have been dealt with in the previous section (4.1.2), focus will be directed to analyzing some occurrences of misused conjunctions and exophora.

(15) **TE:** First, when an unpredicted accident occurs *you* should pay for the surgery, medicaments, etc. Moreover, nowadays no *one* can study and learn without paying *his* bills especially in higher levels. Second, being up-to-date is something convenient for *me*.

(16) **TE:** *And also* you have more freedom to do what you want.

(17) **TE:** The basic human needs like food and shelter are not given for free. **But** we also need to take care of our health.

(18) **TE:** *In access*, it can be a way to buy luxurious gadgets and secondary items.

Starting with exophoric reference, not only do Tunisian learners overuse it but they also reflect inconsistency in employing pronominals like in example (15), which increases the chances of confusion as “coreferentiality is crucial to resolve ... ambiguity” (Halliday & Hasan 1976, 2). As for conjunctions, they do not constitute a major area of inaccuracy. The few detected errors are related to using double conjunctions of the same type (16), using an inadequate conjunction that does not express the intended logico-semantic relation (17) or inventing an inexistent conjunction (18).

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

This study examined the use of cohesion in argumentative B2 essays of Tunisian high-schoolers and compared it to Model Essays of international learners from Cambridge in the aim of tracking the participants’ progress in writing proficiency before they take the B2 first exam. The findings showed that, overall, there were more similarities than differences across both sub-corpora, suggesting the continual development of Tunisian learners and their progress towards reaching the desired level. Indeed, opposite to previous research which outlined weaknesses in the use of conjunctions for EFL learners (Pramoolsook & Qian 2013; Horverak 2018), the

present study highlighted the frequent, varied and consistent utilization of conjunctive markers as a forte in B2 TE. Added to that, TE were in tune with ME in their abundant use of lexical ties. These results corroborate the body of literature on lexical cohesion being the primary choice of EFL learners across genres and grade levels (Hellalet 2013).

Despite these promising similarities and strengths, most of the noted differences between sub-corpora were statistically significant and should therefore be addressed by the teacher-researcher to minimize cohesion errors and boost the final scores. First, quantitatively, cohesive devices were found to be more frequent in Cambridge ME. This difference resulted from the lower use of lexical cohesion in TE which is an area of weakness for Tunisian candidates. Second, this study additionally showed the overreliance of Tunisian learners on the lexical relation of repetition as a sign of deviation from native speakers' natural uses of cohesion. This stands in concomitance with what many scholars have concluded about lexical cohesion being developmental and how repetition is bound to decrease with grade level (Hellalet 2013). Finally, the sampled TEs displayed less variety and more inappropriateness in the use of exophoric reference, which undermined cohesive ties to some extent.

Apart from enriching the literature on the study of cohesion in under-explored EFL settings and confirming the empowering nature of SFL tools in new pedagogical contexts, this small-scale piece of research can entice future extensive studies on the use of cohesive markers in Cambridge examinations for Tunisian learners. The findings primarily serve as feedback for the sampled students and teacher-researcher to improve the quality of writing argumentative essays before sitting for the final exam but can additionally have implications on prospective B2 learners. For example, input related to cohesion – specifically reference and lexical ties – in B2 courses should be more recycled with future candidates to minimize the spotted weaknesses from the start of instruction. Moreover, in-depth explanations and more practice of rarely used devices such as ellipsis and substitution need to be carried out on a regular basis along the academic year.

Giving detailed written corrective feedback which specifically targets cohesive inappropriacy rather than just grammar and

vocabulary errors is another way towards learners' improvement in line with the requirements of B2 First. Last but not least, the study findings can be shared with fellow colleagues who teach similar grades and levels to work together on devising more fitting textbooks, developing targeted tasks and consecrating more time to practice the specific genre of argumentation which has proven to be among the most challenging text types for L2 learners.

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