



Reference as a Grammatical Cohesive Device in EFL Students' Business Writing

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-07-14 Revised: 2026-10-23 Accepted: 2026-10-23 Keywords: Grammatical Cohesion; Reference; Business Writing; Job Application Letter; EFL students DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.11801 Corresponding Author: Hanif Nurcholish Adiantika hanifadiantika@umc.ac.id English Education Department, Universitas Muhammadiyah Cirebon, West Java	<i>Cohesion is an essential aspect of effective business writing because it enables ideas to be connected logically and understood clearly. Among grammatical cohesive devices, the analysis showed that reference expressions contributed to textual cohesion by maintaining participant continuity, reducing unnecessary repetition, and directing readers' attention to relevant information. However, studies examining the use and contribution of reference in EFL students' business writing, particularly job application letters, remain limited. This study aimed to identify the types of reference used in EFL students' job application letters and explain how these references contribute to textual cohesion. A descriptive qualitative design was employed to analyze six job application letters written by twelfth-grade EFL students at a vocational high school in Cirebon Regency. The data were collected through document analysis and analyzed using Halliday and Hasan (1976) framework of grammatical cohesion. The findings identified 141 reference expressions, consisting of 100 personal references, 32 demonstrative references, and 9 comparative references. Personal reference was the most frequently identified type, followed by demonstrative and comparative reference. The analysis also examined how reference expressions were used in the opening, body, and closing sections of the letters to maintain participant continuity, reduce unnecessary repetition, and direct readers' attention to relevant information. The findings indicate that reference contributes to textual connectedness and information continuity in students' business writing. The study provides insight into reference use in job application letters and its implications for teaching cohesion in EFL writing.</i>

1. Introduction

Writing is an important form of communication in academic and professional contexts. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, effective writing requires not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to connect information and organize ideas clearly. This is particularly relevant to business writing, which requires information

to be presented in a clear and purposeful manner. One aspect that supports the connection among linguistic elements in a text is cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976) explain that grammatical cohesion consists of reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction. Among these devices, reference establishes a relationship between a linguistic expression and its referent. Adiantika (2015) explains that references can help guide readers, reduce repetition and information overload, strengthen logical relationships between sections of a text, and engage readers with the main argument. However, reference should not automatically be treated as a cohesive relation. A reference expression may be exophoric when its interpretation depends on information outside the text or endophoric when its interpretation depends on information within the text. Endophoric reference can further be classified as anaphoric or cataphoric depending on the position of the referent. Therefore, analyzing reference requires attention not only to its grammatical form but also to how the referential expression relates to the text.

Previous studies have examined reference and cohesion in various types of discourse. Salsabila and Simatupang (2022) analyzed reference in the dialogue of Thor: Ragnarok and identified exophoric, anaphoric, and cataphoric references. Their findings showed that reference can operate in relation to contextual information in discourse. Similarly, Mareta and Widyahening (2021) examined discourse features in Justin Bieber's song "Ghost" and identified reference and conjunction as grammatical aspects of discourse, along with lexical aspects such as repetition and collocation. These studies demonstrate that reference and other cohesive devices can be used to examine relationships among linguistic elements in different forms of discourse.

Reference has also been examined as a grammatical cohesive device in written discourse. Marfu'ah and Khristianto (2023) analyzed reference in Christine Lindop's *The Bridge and Other Love Stories* and identified personal, demonstrative, definite article, and comparative references. Their study also discussed the functions of reference in avoiding repetition and expressing relationships among entities and situations. Sabrina et al. (2023) examined cohesion in a news text using Halliday and Hasan's framework and identified reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction as grammatical cohesive devices. Meanwhile, Dashela and Mustika (2021) analyzed cohesion and coherence in a news text and found that a text could contain cohesive devices but still have weaknesses in the organization and logical development of ideas. These studies indicate that reference is an important component of grammatical cohesion, while cohesion and coherence should be distinguished as related but different aspects of discourse.

Although previous studies have examined reference and cohesion in movie dialogue, song lyrics, literary texts, and news discourse, limited attention has been given to reference in EFL students' business writing. In particular, job application letters written by vocational high school students have not been the main focus of these studies. Previous studies have also not specifically examined how reference is used across the opening, body, and closing sections of students' job application letters. This is important because these sections serve different communicative purposes in presenting the applicant, qualifications and experiences, and closing information. Therefore, examining reference across these sections can provide a more contextual understanding of how referential expressions are used in students' business writing and how they contribute to textual cohesion.

Based on this gap, this study addresses two research questions: (1) What types of reference are used in EFL students' job application letters? and (2) How do reference expressions contribute to textual cohesion in EFL students' business writing? Accordingly, this study aims to identify the types of reference used in EFL students' job application letters and examine their contribution to textual cohesion. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on reference in EFL students' business writing, specifically job application letters written by vocational high school students, while examining reference across the opening, body, and closing sections of the letters. By focusing on these aspects, the study provides further insight into the use of reference as a grammatical cohesive device in students' business writing.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to describe and analyze the use of reference in EFL students' business writing. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the data consisted of textual documents that required contextual interpretation rather than statistical measurement. The study used qualitative document analysis to identify, classify, and interpret reference expressions in students' job application letters based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) framework of grammatical cohesion. This design allowed the researcher to examine not only the forms of reference but also their use within the texts.

The study was conducted at a vocational high school (SMK) in Cirebon Regency during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were twelfth-grade students who studied English as a foreign language and produced job application letters during English learning activities. The documents were selected purposively based on students' writing scores, resulting in six job application letters representing two higher-scoring, two middle-scoring, and two lower-scoring documents. The six letters served as the primary data for analysis.

The data consisted of six business writing prototypes in the form of job application letters written by twelfth-grade EFL students at a vocational high school in Cirebon Regency. The letters were produced during English learning activities and selected purposively based on the students' writing scores, consisting of two higher-scoring, two middle-scoring, and two lower-scoring letters. The selected texts were analyzed to identify the types of reference and examine their use in the texts.

Table 2. Research Instrument

Type	Code	Sentences	Type of Reference	Reference Form
D1\Higher	D1\Opening			
	D1\Body			
	D1\Closing			
Code =	D	: Document		

The data collection was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher coordinated with the English teacher to obtain permission and access to students' writing produced during English learning activities. Second, the researcher collected the students' job application letter prototypes. Third, the collected letters were reviewed and six documents were selected purposively based on the students' writing scores, consisting of

two higher-scoring, two middle-scoring, and two lower-scoring letters. Finally, the selected documents were documented and prepared for analysis.

Data validation was conducted through repeated analytical checking, expert review, and a data audit. First, the researcher repeatedly checked the six job application letters and the coding sheet to ensure consistency in identifying and classifying reference expressions. Second, the identification, classification, and interpretation of the data were reviewed by a linguistics expert to reduce potential subjectivity in the analysis. Third, the researcher conducted a data audit by reviewing the source documents, coding sheet, and analysis results to ensure that the analytical process was systematic and consistent. These procedures were used to enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings.

The data were analyzed using qualitative document analysis. First, the six job application letters were read repeatedly to develop an overall understanding of the texts. Second, reference expressions were identified and recorded in the coding sheet. Third, the identified expressions were classified into personal, demonstrative, and comparative reference based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) framework. Fourth, the researcher examined the referents and the textual or contextual direction of the identified references. Fifth, the frequency of each reference type was calculated to describe its occurrence across the six texts. Finally, the findings were interpreted to explain how the identified reference expressions functioned within the texts and contributed to textual connectedness and information continuity.

3. Results

Type of Reference

The analysis of six job application letters written by EFL students identified three types of grammatical references based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) classification: personal reference, demonstrative reference, and comparative reference. A total of 141 reference items were found throughout the texts. Personal reference was the most frequently used type with 100 occurrences, followed by demonstrative reference with 32 occurrences, while comparative reference appeared least frequently with only 9 occurrences. These findings indicate that students relied predominantly on personal reference to establish relationships among textual elements in their job application letters.

Table 3. Frequency of Reference Types

Reference Type	References occurrence
Personal Reference	100
Demonstrative Reference	32
Comparative Reference	9
Total	141

The distribution of reference types varied across the rhetorical sections of the job application letters. Personal references occurred in the opening, body, and closing sections, with the highest frequency found in the body section. Demonstrative references were identified in all sections but appeared most frequently in the closing section. Comparative references were found only in the body and closing sections and did not occur in the opening section.

Personal Reference

Among the three reference types, personal reference was the most dominant, with 100 occurrences. Various forms of personal reference were identified in the students' job application letters. The distribution of these forms is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency of Personal Reference

Type	Name	Number of Occurrence in Opening	Number of Occurrence in Body	Number of Occurrence in Closing
Personal Reference	I	1	17	13
	Your	7	5	9
	Me	1	5	-
	My	13	14	14
	Myself	1	-	-
Total		23	41	36
		= 100		

As shown in Table 4, first-person references, particularly I and my, occurred more frequently than the other forms. These references appeared predominantly in the body section, where students introduced themselves, explained their educational background, described their work experience, and expressed their qualifications. Meanwhile, references such as you and it occurred less frequently because they mainly referred to the employer or previously mentioned information. The following example illustrates the use of personal reference.

I am writing to apply for the position of Administrative Staff advertised on your company website. I believe my educational background and internship experience have prepared me for this position.

In this excerpt, the pronoun I refers to the applicant. While, my refers to the applicant's educational background and internship experience. These reference items connect information across consecutive sentences and maintain the continuity of the participant throughout the text.

Demonstrative Reference

A total of 32 demonstrative references were identified in the six job application letters. The demonstrative forms found in the corpus are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency of Demonstrative Reference

Type	Name	Number of Occurrence in Opening	Number of Occurrence in Body	Number of Occurrence in Closing
Demonstrative Reference	The	9	4	11
	That	-	6	1
	This	1	1	-
		10	11	12
Total		= 32		

Table 5 indicates that “*the*” was the most frequently used demonstrative reference, followed by *this* and *that*. These references were commonly employed when students referred to documents, positions, companies, or information previously introduced in the text.

The following excerpt illustrates the use of demonstrative reference.

Excerpt 1

I have attached my curriculum vitae and supporting documents. I hope this application will receive your consideration.

In Excerpt 1, the demonstrative reference *this* refers to the job application mentioned in the preceding sentence. The reference establishes a connection between the current statement and the previously introduced information.

Comparative Reference

Comparative reference was identified as the least frequently used reference type, with only nine occurrences. The comparative forms identified in the corpus are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequency of Comparative Reference

Type	Name	Number of Occurrence in Opening	Number of Occurrence in Body	Number of Occurrence in Closing
Comparative Reference	Other	-	-	1
	Further	-	-	4
	Both	-	4	-
		-	4	5
Total		= 9		

As shown in Table 5, the comparative references consisted of *other*, *both*, and *further*. Compared with personal and demonstrative references, comparative references occurred only occasionally and were found mainly in the body and closing sections of the letters. The following excerpt illustrates the use of comparative reference.

Please let me know if you require any other information.

In Excerpt 3, the comparative reference *other* refers to additional information beyond what has already been presented in the application letter, establishing a relationship between the previous and subsequent information.

Contribution of Reference in EFL Students Business Writing

The analysis showed that references contributed to textual cohesion in three main ways. First, references maintained participant continuity throughout the job application letters by enabling readers to identify the applicant consistently across sentences. This contribution was evident in all six documents regardless of students' writing proficiency.

Second, references reduced unnecessary repetition by allowing students to refer back to previously mentioned participants, objects, and information without repeating the same lexical items. This pattern appeared most frequently in the body section, where students described their educational background, work experience, and professional qualifications.

Third, references directed readers to important information presented in the letters. Demonstrative and comparative references were frequently used to connect supporting documents, previous statements, and additional information, helping readers follow the progression of ideas across different sections of the texts.

Overall, the findings indicate that all three reference types there are personal, demonstrative, and comparative references were employed to establish cohesive relationships within students' job application letters. Although personal reference occurred most frequently, demonstrative and comparative references also contributed to maintaining textual connections across sentences and paragraphs.

4. Discussion

Types of References Used in EFL Students' Business Writing.

The findings revealed that personal reference was the most frequently used type of reference in the students' job application letters, followed by demonstrative reference and comparative reference. This pattern suggests that EFL students relied predominantly on personal reference to maintain continuity throughout their business writing. Since a job application letter is written from the applicant's perspective, the frequent use of first-person references, such as I and my, is expected because these forms allow applicants to introduce themselves, describe their educational background, explain their qualifications, and express their interest in a position.

Consequently, personal reference becomes the primary cohesive resource for maintaining the applicant as the central participant across different sections of the letter. This tendency is also associated with the communicative purpose of a job application letter. Warsidi (2022) explains that the body of the letter primarily serves to promote the applicant by presenting qualifications, experiences, and competencies relevant to the position. Because this rhetorical move continuously focuses on the applicant, the frequent use of personal references becomes linguistically necessary to maintain participant continuity throughout the text.

This finding supports the theory proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who argue that personal reference functions as a grammatical cohesive device by linking participants throughout a text. Rather than repeating the same noun repeatedly, writers employ personal pronouns to establish semantic continuity between clauses and sentences. In the present study, personal references consistently referred to the applicant, enabling readers to follow the development of information without unnecessary lexical repetition. Therefore, the predominance of personal reference demonstrates its important role in maintaining textual cohesion within job application letters.

The dominance of personal reference is also consistent with previous studies on EFL writing. For example, Wijayanti (2017), reported that personal reference was the most frequently used cohesive device in students' job application letters because it effectively maintained participant continuity throughout the text. Similar findings were reported by Saputra and Hakim (2020), who found that personal reference occurred more frequently than other grammatical cohesive devices in students' writing. These similarities indicate that regardless of the writing context, EFL students tend to rely primarily on personal reference when constructing cohesive texts.

Demonstrative reference was identified as the second most frequently used reference type. The findings indicate that students employed demonstrative references, particularly this, that, and the, to refer to previously introduced information, such as the

job position, supporting documents, or the application itself. Their occurrence throughout the opening, body, and closing sections suggests that demonstrative reference helped establish textual connections by directing readers to specific entities already introduced in the discourse.

This finding is in agreement with Halliday and Hasan (1976), who explain that demonstrative reference enables writers to identify entities according to their proximity within the discourse or situational context. The present study further shows that demonstrative reference contributes to the organization of professional writing by helping readers identify specific information without repeating complete noun phrases. Similar observations were reported by Marfu'ah and Khristianto (2023), who found that demonstrative reference supports textual cohesion by avoiding redundancy and maintaining continuity in written discourse.

Comparative reference occurred least frequently in the students' job application letters. Only a limited number of comparative forms, including other, both, and further, were identified throughout the corpus. This relatively low frequency may be explained by the communicative purpose of job application letters, which primarily require applicants to present personal qualifications rather than compare people, objects, or situations. Consequently, opportunities to express comparison are naturally limited within this genre.

Although comparative reference appeared infrequently, its function remains consistent with Halliday and Hasan (1976) description of comparative reference as a cohesive device expressing similarity, difference, or comparison between textual elements. The present finding, therefore, does not contradict the theory but rather reflects the communicative characteristics of business writing. Similar patterns have also been reported in previous EFL writing studies, which found comparative reference to be the least frequently employed grammatical cohesive device because comparison is not the primary rhetorical purpose of students' written texts. This finding is also supported by Ajam et al. (2023), who reported that comparative references tend to occur less frequently than other reference types because students generally prefer presenting information directly rather than expressing relationships through comparison.

The Contribution of Reference to Cohesion in Students' Business Writing

The present study identified three major contributions of reference to textual cohesion in students' job application letters: maintaining participant continuity, reducing unnecessary repetition, and directing readers' attention to important information. These contributions were consistently observed across all six documents, regardless of students' achievement levels. However, high-achieving students demonstrated greater variation in their use of reference types than middle- and low-achieving students.

The first contribution concerns maintaining participant continuity throughout the text. Personal references enabled students to keep the applicant as the central participant across consecutive sentences, allowing readers to follow the progression of information without losing track of the subject. This finding strongly supports Halliday and Hasan (1976), view that reference establishes semantic relationships between textual elements, thereby creating cohesion. It is also consistent with Saputra and Hakim (2020), who argue that reference plays an important role in maintaining participant continuity and helping readers identify the main participant throughout a discourse.

The second contribution relates to reducing unnecessary repetition. Instead of repeatedly mentioning the applicant's name or the same lexical items, students employed references to replace previously introduced information. As a result, the texts became more concise and efficient while maintaining semantic continuity. This finding supports Halliday and Hasan (1976) argument that reference functions as a cohesive mechanism for avoiding excessive repetition. It also extends the findings of Azhari et al. (2026), who reported that the effective use of cohesive devices contributes to more coherent and efficient EFL writing. In the context of business writing, reducing repetition is particularly important because professional communication values clarity, conciseness, and readability.

The third contribution concerns directing readers' attention to important information. Demonstrative and comparative references guided readers toward key information, including applicants' qualifications, work experience, and supporting documents. Rather than functioning solely as grammatical elements, these references helped organize information according to the communicative purpose of the job application letter. This finding supports Putri et al. (2025), who emphasize that coherent writing depends on the logical relationship between ideas across sentences. It also reinforces Halliday and Hasan (1976) proposition that reference enables readers to interpret textual meaning by connecting related information throughout the discourse.

Overall, the findings confirm that reference functions not only as a grammatical cohesive device but also as an important discourse strategy for improving clarity, coherence, and communicative effectiveness in EFL business writing. The findings support Halliday and Hasan (1976) theory regarding the cohesive function of reference while extending previous studies by demonstrating how personal, demonstrative, and comparative references operate specifically within the professional genre of job application letters.

Furthermore, unlike previous studies that mainly reported the frequency of reference types, the present study highlights their functional contribution to maintaining cohesion across different levels of students' writing performance, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of reference use in EFL business writing.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the use of reference as a cohesive device in students' EFL business writing, particularly in job application letters. The findings showed that all students, regardless of their achievement levels, used reference to perform three main functions: maintaining participant continuity, reducing unnecessary repetition, and directing readers' attention to important information. Although students with higher writing achievement demonstrated a greater variety of reference types, the same cohesive functions were evident across all categories of writing.

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of reference is reflected not only in its frequency but also in its contribution to creating cohesive and coherent business texts. In job application letters, reference helps writers maintain a clear focus on the applicant, connect ideas smoothly across sentences, and present qualifications in a logical and effective manner. These findings contribute to the understanding of how grammatical cohesion operates in EFL business writing by providing evidence that reference supports both textual organization and the communicative purpose of professional writing.

In suggestion, this study has several limitations. The analysis was conducted on only six students' job application letters representing three levels of writing achievement, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study focused solely on reference as a cohesive device and did not examine the interaction between reference and other cohesive devices that may also influence the overall quality of business writing.

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