Cohesion in the Narrative Writing of Young EFL Learners: Correct and Incorrect Use of Local Cohesive Ties

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This study examines the correct and incorrect use of local cohesive ties and local cohesion errors in the written narratives of eleven- to twelve-year-old Spanish learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at different proficiency levels. The study was carried out with pairs who collaboratively wrote a narrative text in response to a picture prompt. The young learners' written texts were examined to identify their correct and incorrect use of four categories: lexical, referential, conjunctive and temporal cohesion. The results show that higher and lower proficiency learners are significantly different in their use of the causal conjunction *because*, personal pronouns and noun phrases containing possessive, definite, indefinite and zero determiners. The two groups also differ in their incorrect use of pronouns, simple verb forms and noun phrases containing definite, indefinite and zero determiners. Attention is drawn to the need to explore the diversity in young learners' use of cohesion and some pedagogical implications are drawn.

Keywords: cohesion; primary school learners; narrative writing; proficiency; cohesive ties; English as a Foreign Language

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La cohesión de textos narrativos escritos en inglés por alumnado de primaria: uso correcto e incorrecto de mecanismos cohesivos locales

Este estudio analiza el uso correcto e incorrecto de mecanismos cohesivos de carácter local por parte de estudiantes españoles de inglés como lengua extranjera con edades comprendidas entre los once y doce años y con distintos niveles de competencia. Dichos estudiantes trabajaron en parejas en la redacción de un texto narrativo a partir de un estímulo visual en forma de viñetas. Los textos fueron examinados con el fin de identificar el uso correcto e incorrecto de cuatro categorías: cohesión léxica, referencial, conjuntiva y temporal. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes con niveles más altos y más bajos de desempeño son estadísticamente diferentes en el uso de la conjunción causal *because*, de pronombres personales y de sintagmas nominales sin artículo o introducidos por determinantes definidos, indefinidos o posesivos. El artículo concluye señalando la importancia de atender a la variabilidad en el uso de la cohesión por parte de estos estudiantes y estableciendo implicaciones pedagógicas.

Palabras clave: cohesión; alumnado de primaria; escritura narrativa; nivel; mecanismos cohesivos; inglés como lengua extranjera

1. Introduction

Narrative skills are of utmost importance in the development of young learners' writing throughout their school years whether in their first language (L1), their second language (L2) or a foreign language (FL). Gaining a proper command of narrative writing implies more than knowledge of lexical units or morphosyntactic forms. Proficient use of the narrative genre also requires the ability to deal with language as a meaningful, textual whole beyond words and sentences (Bachman 1990). To that end, cohesion—the grammatical and lexical devices that bind together the ideas that form a text across sentences and clauses—is indispensable. M. A K. Halliday's and Ruqaiya Hasan's taxonomy of cohesive ties (1976), which includes lexical and referential ties, conjunction, ellipsis and substitution, has been widely used in analyses of oral and written narratives. The model was later adapted to include two features of temporality—aspect deployment and tense consistency—which, as Anetta Pavlenko points out, need to be considered from the perspective of cohesion, since their random use severely hinders the comprehension and consistency of written texts (2005).

Substantial research in L1 contexts has been devoted to examining cohesion in the writing of adults (Crossley and McNamara 2011) and children (Rutter and Raban 1982; Yde and Spoelders 1985; Cameron et al. 1995; Sénéchal et al. 2018). These studies focus on either providing descriptive accounts of the cohesive ties used by learners of different ages and with diverse language backgrounds or on analyzing relationships between textual cohesion and overall writing quality. In L2/FL contexts, however, studies of younger learners have paid almost exclusive attention to oral discourse development (Álvarez 2006; Butler et al. 2017), while research on cohesion in writing remains scarce. The present study aims to contribute to research on cohesion in the writing of young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by addressing issues that have been neglected in the literature to date. Specifically, it aims to examine the correct and incorrect use of cohesive devices in the narrative writing of young EFL learners at different proficiency levels within the same grade level. By doing so we attempt to shed light on how students with diverse linguistic needs might be helped to improve their EFL writing in instructed contexts.

1.1. Cohesion in Children's Writing

In the case of younger learners, empirical attention has mainly focused on describing native speakers' use of cohesive devices in their L1. In this respect, while lexical, referential and conjunctive ties are commonly found in children's narrative writing, use of ellipsis and substitution is negligible in their texts (Struthers et al. 2013). With regard to lexical cohesion, Michael Crowhurst found that noun repetition followed by synonyms, near synonyms and collocations were the ties most frequently used by young learners in their L1 English literacy classes across different writing genres and grades (1987). This early study also revealed that the typical reference devices used

by children included pronouns, demonstratives and the definite article. Conjunctive cohesion and coordinating, adversative, temporal and causal linkers have also been identified as occurring, in descending order of frequency, in the writing of English L1 children (Cameron et al. 1995), as well as those of other language backgrounds, including Dutch (Yde and Spoelders 1985).

Differences in the frequency of use of cohesive ties have not only been reported within categories, as argued above, but also between categories. Referring to the latter, Jill Fitzgerald and Dixie Lee Spiegel for children aged eight to nine and eleven to twelve (1986) and Catherine Cameron et al. for children aged nine to ten (1995) reported a similar use of cohesive categories in English L1 literacy classes, with lexical cohesion constituting the commonest category, followed by reference and conjunction. In contrast, Michael Zarnowski revealed that in their English L1 written texts learners aged nine to ten, eleven to twelve and thirteen to fourteen used mostly conjunctions followed by lexical cohesion and reference (1983). However, the diverse methods adopted for measuring cohesion—including raw frequency counts and measures of distance between ties and referents or of cohesive density—might account for these conflicting findings (Struthers et al. 2013).

Cohesion in children's writing has been found to improve with age with an increasing variety of ties being employed (Hickman 2003). Age also seems to determine the types of cohesive devices used. For instance, the older and more proficient the learners are, the fewer connectors they tend to use as the transmission of the message relies more on text structure and less on linking (Yde and Spoelders 1985). Similarly, Maya Hickman establishes that discourse internal functions—for example, the use of noun and pronoun systems—appear at later developmental stages, as does the deployment of temporal-aspectual differences (2003).

1.2. Cohesion in Young Learners' L2/FL Oral Narratives

Very few studies have examined narrative cohesion in young learners' written output. However, research into oral discourse is plentiful and can provide some initial insights into young L2/FL learners' narrative ability. In a study examining the relationship between young learners' narrative and linguistic skills, Jennifer Kang reported that the storytelling performance of six- to seven-year-old Korean EFL learners was influenced by their L1 competence (2012). The crosslinguistic transfer of their L1 language skills facilitated the children's appropriate use of referencing and conjunctions in the foreign language.

As with L1 research findings, young learners' use of cohesive devices in EFL oral performance has been found to evolve gradually over time in accordance with their general language development. On examining the EFL oral narratives of young Spanish/Catalan learners aged eight to eleven, Esther Álvarez found that their output proceeded through nine developmental stages: initial use of word-level syntax occurred

at stages one and two, while phrase- and clause-level syntax appeared at stages three, four, five and six. Syntax for discourse organization, of which cohesion is an integral part, was the last dimension to emerge, at stages seven to nine (2006). A similar developmental tendency was reported by Yuko Goto Butler et al. with Chinese EFL learners aged nine to ten, ten to eleven and eleven to twelve, who increased their use of connectives and temporal adverbs as they progressed to a higher level, both in Chinese and EFL (2017). Similar results have been described for German EFL learners aged nine to ten, who used more local cohesive ties—lexical, referential, conjunctive, ellipsis and substitution—than first graders (Möller 2015).

A second group of studies has focused on cohesion in young learners' oral narratives in bilingual settings. Masashiko Minami revealed that although Japanese-English students living in the US and aged six to seven and eight to nine displayed a balanced use of connectives in the L1—with a preference for adversative and temporal linkers over coordinate and causal ties, especially in the higher grade—in the L2 they tended to scaffold their narratives with recourse to coordinate conjunctions (2011). Developmental trends have also been found in the cohesive devices used by French-Turkish bilingual students aged five, seven and ten, since both conjunctive and referential ties were used less frequently as the learners' age increased (Akinci et al. 2001).

The cross-fertilization between L1 and L2 temporality spectrums has also received attention in other multilingual contexts, such as English-Norwegian (Lanza 2001), Spanish-Hebrew (Kupersmitt and Berman 2001), Turkish-Dutch (Aarssen 2001) and Moroccan-Dutch (Bos 2001). These studies all concluded that features of L1 temporality are transferred into the L2. This was apparent, for instance, in English-Norwegian bilingual young learners who added the progressive morpheme *-ing* to Norwegian verbs, a language that, unlike English, does not have aspectual differentiation (Lanza 2001). Whether the same phenomenon might be true of cohesion in L2/FL writing remains unexplored to date.

1.3. Cohesion in Young Learners' L2/FL Written Narratives

Despite the popularity of instructed L2/FL learning at increasingly younger ages, there is still a shortage of research on L2/FL writing in general and on the use of cohesion in particular. Preliminary results from studies of young Korean immersion and EFL learners confirm findings from L1 research in that they highlight the prominence of lexical, referential and conjunctive cohesion in young learners' L2 narrative (Bae 2001) and argumentative writing (Back 2018). Jungok Bae also draws attention to the difficulties experienced by the participants in the use of reference cohesion (2001).

Although their focus was not specifically on cohesion, studies from two projects on age-related differences and FL learning at the University of the Basque Country and the University of Barcelona (Pérez-Vidal et al. 2000; Celaya et al. 2001; Cenoz 2002; Lasagabaster and Doiz 2003; Torras et al. 2006) examined the development of

syntactic patterns in Basque/Spanish and Catalan/Spanish young learners' EFL written output. Measures of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) were identified in the texts written by young learners who had begun EFL instruction at the age of eight—early starters—and those who had begun at the age of eleven—late starters. These comparisons performed were both intragroup and intergroup; from short-, middle- and long-term stances; or a combination of the two. The results showed an initial advantage for the older, later starters in all CAF measures, although younger learners seemed to catch up in fluency over time. However, the variability reported in these studies suggests that certain dimensions of writing were age related.

One such dimension, the use of linking, is important for its obvious connection with cohesion. Specifically, Rosa María Torras et al. revealed that at around age twelve, regardless of whether learners began EFL at age eight or eleven, subordination first emerged and coordination was used more extensively in students' written texts (2006). Similar findings were reported by María Luz Celaya, who examined the developmental performance of sixteen low-proficiency Catalan/Spanish EFL learners at three different points in time—at ages ten, twelve and sixteen. While coordination was present in their writing at all three test points, subordination was minimally evidenced at age twelve, although its use matched that of coordination by age sixteen (2019).

While age seems to have some influence on EFL learners' writing performance, little is known about the impact of other learner-internal variables, including proficiency, on young learners' use of cohesion in EFL writing. To the best of our knowledge, the only exception is the study by Celaya, in which two of the sixteen participants did not conform to the behavior of the cohort despite sharing a homogenous context in terms of EFL proficiency, age, sociolinguistic features and socioeconomic status (2019). Celaya's results follow in the wake of Cecilia Gunnarson (2012) and Nina Vyatkina (2012), who had previously reported high variability as regards the use of CAF features by adult learners in, respectively, FL French and FL German. These three studies highlight the fact that, although individual variation within groups might have instrumental pedagogical implications, there is hardly any research to this effect and, therefore, such implications remain undefined.

Empirical interest in both oral and written cohesion has primarily focused on providing descriptive accounts of the use of specific cohesive devices and tracing the development of cohesion across different age groups. Very little attention, if any, has been paid to the ecological diversity within a single classroom or a number of same-grade classrooms. That is, research to date has addressed cohesion either cross-sectionally or in one-shot studies where proficiency-level breakdowns are not offered. With the exception of Bae (2001), young learners' incorrect use of cohesive devices has not been considered in any detail either. However, it is highly likely that young EFL learners at low proficiency levels will experience difficulties in using appropriately cohesive features that they are still in the process of acquiring.

It seems important, therefore, to explore cohesion in young learners' EFL narrative writing in mixed-ability contexts where individual differences in proficiency are

the norm. Identifying how students of the same age but with dissimilar linguistic competence manage cohesion, or fail to do so, has important implications for EFL writing instruction in educational settings. Given these observations, the aim that guides this study is to examine the correct and incorrect use of cohesive devices in the narrative writing of young EFL learners at different proficiency levels.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants
The participants in the study were 30 pairs of Spanish-speaking EFL learners aged eleven and twelve from three grade-six classes in an elementary school in Spain. All participants were born in Spain although 5 of them had parents whose L1 was Arabic. At the time of the study, the participants had been learning English for eight years and had received, on average, two hours of instruction per week. In their EFL classes, they followed a textbook with a strong grammatical orientation and had few opportunities to engage in oral interaction. Reading and writing was addressed through a limited number of text types, including actual texts, emails and cartoons, and writing was largely a mechanical activity involving sentence completion and transformation, responses to questions or text production following models. The learners were placed in proficiency-matched pairs—15 high-proficiency (HP) and 15 low-proficiency (LP) pairs—based on the marks they obtained on monthly class tests that assessed their listening, reading and writing skills, as well as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Learners were considered HP when they always passed their exams, usually with good marks. In contrast, LP students were those who systematically failed tests. Although standardized tests have often been used to place learners, previous research has also acknowledged that, in ordinary classrooms, it is the teacher's ratings that are generally used to pair pupils (Swain and Lapkin 2002; Yang and Zhang 2010; Coyle and Roca de Larios 2014). For this reason, the test results and the teacher's in-depth knowledge of the participants, including their degree of familiarity with each other and willingness to communicate, provided reliable information when pairing learners.

The motivation to examine different levels of competence within the same grade is based on a long-held concern expressed by many of the primary EFL specialists with whom we maintain a professional relationship. This concern emerges from the difficulties of coping with the disparate proficiency levels of young learners in mixed-ability classes. In fact, in our informal conversations with the English teacher in this study, he expressed his recurring frustration at the fact that the large differences in the young learners' EFL proficiency made it extremely difficult to develop a form of instruction that would prove reasonably effective for the majority of individuals in his classes. This insight encouraged the researchers to explore these allegations by attempting to map out the use of cohesive ties in the learners' written output.

It is possible, of course, that the diversity reported by the teacher may have been due to a number of personal and/or external factors, including out-of-class private tuition. However, an exploration of such issues is beyond the scope of the present study, which aims to examine not why, but whether and how students' EFL writing performance differs within the same grade level.

2.2. Data Collection

As part of the research design, the learners were asked to write a brief narrative text collaboratively. This decision was based on available research with adults (Storch and Wigglesworth 2010; Yang and Zhang 2010), adolescents (Swain and Lapkin 2002) and young learners (Coyle and Roca de Larios 2014; Cánovas et al. 2015), which suggests that knowledge sharing and joint reflection on language in the context of writing tasks may help to alleviate the complex information processing demands made on individual writers and improve the quality of learners' written texts. Consequently, the pairs jointly composed a narrative text based on a six-frame picture prompt created by the participants' teacher. The picture story depicted a scientist who turns into a cat and is chased by his dog after drinking one of his own potions (for the original illustration, see García Hernández et al. 2017, 222). Narrative writing was chosen over other text types since we considered that learners' familiarity with this genre in both their L1 and EFL was likely to be facilitative of the writing process and encourage the use of cohesive devices (Álvarez 2006; Butler et al. 2017).[1] Besides, the development of the narrative genre is a priority target in the national and regional primary education curriculum both for the subjects of Spanish and EFL (Real Decreto 126/2014; Decreto 198/2014). When performing the task, no time limits were set and no constraints were placed on text length nor on the use of specific vocabulary or verb tenses. The participants were simply instructed to work together to write the story to the best of their ability. The pairs took on average thirteen minutes to complete the task.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data for the study consists of thirty written narratives, fifteen produced by the HP pairs and fifteen by the LP pairs. Three experienced EFL teachers—two of them native Spanish speakers and the other a native speaker of English—each coded all thirty narrative texts following Halliday and Hasan's model of local cohesive ties (1976), both within a sentence and between adjacent sentences. Interrater agreement was found to be 96% and disagreements were resolved by discussion among the three researchers. Although recent research has suggested that writing quality tends to be associated with

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[1] In the specific case of the 5 learners from an Arabic origin, they had a similar level of proficiency in Spanish and in Arabic, especially for the oral skill. This is the reason why in the present study these learners will be considered to have two L1s.

global and textual cohesion rather than with local ties (Crossley et al. 2016), for the younger age group targeted in the present study, global and textual cohesion were not examined because these emerge at later stages of L2 development (Haswell 2000). The five cohesive ties defined by Halliday and Hassan—lexical, reference, conjunction, ellipsis and substitution—were thus taken into consideration, together with two features of temporality—aspect deployment and tense consistency—both of which are considered important for the comprehension and consistency of written texts (Pavlenko 2005).

After an initial reading of the data, the category of ellipsis and substitution was disregarded as no examples were found in the written narratives of any of the pairs. Consequently, the identification of local cohesive ties finally included four categories: lexical cohesion, reference, conjunction and temporality. Lexical cohesion implies the reiteration of a lexical item that regularly co-occurs with another. Common lexical cohesive ties are collocation, repetition, synonymy, antonymy and superordination. Reference comprises demonstratives, comparatives, definite articles and pronouns. Conjunction includes the semantic links—causal, adversative, copulative, contrastive, etc.—used by the writer to form coherent intrasentential or intersentential semantic units. Finally, temporality comprises tense consistency and features of perfectivity and imperfectivity. Referring to the latter, incomplete progressive forms, written either as a bare gerund—*The sciences teacher Ø drinking the magic juice*—or as *to be* followed by a bare infinitive or the present simple—*The doctor is <u>work</u> in the potion*—were not considered errors since the cohesive nuance—the discrimination between perfective or imperfective contexts—was clear even though the students did not yet have control over the forms in morphosyntactic terms.[2]

Given our interest in identifying not only which cohesive ties the learners used but also whether or not they were used correctly, the narrative texts were also coded for cohesive errors. These were defined as the incorrect use and inappropriate omission or addition of cohesive elements that impeded the coherence of the text (Fitzgerald and Spiegel 1986). Table 1 presents examples of the coding of the above-mentioned cohesion categories and ties both for accurate and inaccurate use.

TABLE 1. Coding of cohesive ties

Cohesion category and tie	Correct use (description and examples)	Incorrect use (description and examples)
Lexical cohesion (noun repetition)	Sentences are linked together by means of a noun, normally complemented by an article: "*The doctor* takes the product"	No occurrences reported

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2   Throughout the article, all examples are provided as originally written by the children.

Cohesion category and tie	Correct use (description and examples)	Incorrect use (description and examples)
Reference cohesion (definite article NP)	Definite article NPs are used once the first reference to a specific entity has been undertaken through an indefinite article: "There are a scientific and a dog. *The* scientific has a potion"	Definite article NPs are used to mention an entity the first time it is introduced in the narrative: "*The doctor* is sleeping" (first sentence in the narrative)
Reference cohesion (indefinite article NP)	Indefinite article NPs are used to mention an entity the first time it appears in the narrative: "In *a* house there is *a* crazy man" (first sentence in the narrative)	Indefinite article NPs are used to refer to an entity that has already been introduced: "The boy is a cat. The dog jump on *a* cat"
Reference cohesion (possessive determiner NP)	Possessive determiner NPs agree in number and gender with the noun it complements: "The crazy man is sick and *his* face is green"	No occurrences reported
Reference cohesion (zero article NP)	No occurrences reported	Definite or indefinite articles are not added to uncountable or plural concrete nouns: "The witch become in Ø cat"
Reference cohesion (pronominal reference)	Pronouns are used to refer unambiguously to an entity that has been mentioned previously: "The boy drink one potion. *He* can't talk"	Personal pronouns are used the first time an entity is mentioned in the narrative: "He drinks a pocion" (first sentence in the narrative) Personal pronouns are used in an ambiguous manner (it is unclear which previous referent the pronoun is denoting): "The dog open the eyes and look the child. *He* is angry"
Temporality cohesion (simple verb forms)	Present simple forms are used to express non-progressive actions: "There is a explosion and the dog *watch* the boy"	Present simple forms are used to refer to an action in progress: "The cat sleep when the doctor drinks the drink"
Temporality cohesion (compound verb forms)	Compound verb forms are used to refer to an action in progress: "The doctor has a possion and the dog *is sleeping*"	Compound verb forms are used to refer to a non-progressive action: "The dog is ataking the boy"
Conjunction cohesion (*and*)	The linker expresses addition: "The dog see the boycat *and* he jump to the boycat"	No occurrences reported
Conjunction cohesion (*but*)	The linker expresses contrast: "The boy makes a pocion *but* is bad"	No occurrences reported
Conjunction cohesion (*because*)	The linker expresses reason: "The boycat try to scape *because* the dog go to him"	No occurrences reported

Cohesion category and tie	Correct use (description and examples)	Incorrect use (description and examples)
Conjunction cohesion (*when*)	The linker expresses time: "*When* the wizzar drinks the possion, he change"	No occurrences reported

The number of pairs who produced cohesive devices, whether correctly or incorrectly, for each major category and its specific ties were recorded for each proficiency level. To control for differences in the length of the narratives, frequencies were adjusted by dividing the number of ties by the total number of words in the text and multiplying that number by 10 to produce a frequency of cohesive devices per 10 words. Next, the means (M), the standard deviations (SD) and the effect sizes and confidence intervals at 90% (ES ±IC) for each type of cohesive tie were calculated. Finally, the texts were statistically compared for the correct and incorrect use of cohesive ties using Mann-Whitney tests for data with nonnormal distribution.

3. Results and Discussion

As stated earlier, the aim of this study is to examine the correct and incorrect use of cohesive devices in the narrative writing of young EFL learners at different proficiency levels. The results are reported below in two main sections: first, the correct and incorrect use of categories of cohesive ties, and second, the use and misuse of specific lexical, referential, conjunctive and temporal ties.

3.1. Correct and Incorrect Use of Categories of Cohesive Ties across Proficiency Levels
The results show that HP and LP pairs used cohesive devices in their narrative texts to similar extents (table 2). Pairs from both proficiency levels used mostly lexical ties—for HP: M = 2.41, SD = 0.34; for LP: M = 2.37, SD = 0.54—followed by temporality—M = 0.87, SD = 0.11; M = 0.76, SD = 0.10—reference—M = 0.47, SD = 0.05; M = 0.49, SD = 0.09—and conjunction—M = 0.12, SD = 0.06; M = 0.09, SD = 0.07. With the exception of temporality, which has not been analyzed as a cohesive variable in existing research, the above-mentioned frequency pattern has similarly been reported for the written narrative performance of young learners in various L1s, including English (Fitzgerald and Spiegel 1986; Cameron et al. 1995) and Dutch (Yde and Spoelders 1985). It has also been reported in ESL/EFL contexts for learners of languages including German, Chinese and Korean for both speaking (Möller 2015; Butler et al. 2017) and writing skills (Bae 2001; Back 2018).

Significant differences, with a large effect size—d = -1.20—were found in the use of temporality cohesion—z = -3.367, p = 0.001—with HP pairs using temporal cohesive ties significantly more frequently than their LP counterparts. This finding seems to

suggest that, in term of cohesion, the difference between HP and LP performance for learners of this age lies in the use of temporality. However, in the absence of other studies that have looked into cohesion from an intragrade perspective, this result cannot be generalized.

TABLE 2. Frequency of cohesion categories in learners' narratives across proficiency levels

Cohesion category	HP	LP			
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	*p* value	ES ±IC (90%)	*z*
Lexical	2.41 (0.34)	2.37 (0.54)	0.922	-0.22±.61	–
Reference	0.47 (0.05)	0.49 (0.09)	0.158	0.32 ±0.61	–
Temporality	0.87 (0.11)	0.76 (0.10)	0.001**	-1.20±0.49	-3.367
Conjunction	0.12 (0.06)	0.09 (0.07)	0.139	0.01±0.41	–

**p < .010.

Since the use of cohesive ties does not necessarily imply correct usage, the frequency of cohesive error types in the texts was also accounted for. The results showed that although lexical and conjunction cohesion were error-free for both proficiency levels, HP and LP pairs differed in the number of cohesive errors they made in other categories (table 3). While HP pairs made fewer reference—M = 0.03, SD = 0.05—than temporality errors—M = 0.10, SD = 0.12—this trend was reversed for the LP pairs, whose incorrect use of reference—M = 0.23, SD = 0.10—was more common than errors of temporality—M = 0.21, SD = 0.17. The only study to date that has looked at cohesion errors in young learners' writing reveals a similar high incidence of referential infelicities, followed by problems in the use of connectives (Bae 2001). The absence of linking errors in our study might be attributable to the age of the learners—ten to eleven—in contrast to the population in Bae's research—six to seven and seven to eight. These younger learners, therefore, might not have had the necessary maturity to use connectives beyond the expression of addition and adversativity, a capacity that as pointed out by Álvarez, develops in the later stages of the primary school years (2006). The error rate obtained for temporality cannot be compared with previous research since this category has never before been focused on in studies that have examined cohesion in young writers.

Intergroup comparisons revealed significant difference for the incorrect use of reference—*z* = -6.178, *p* = 0.001—and temporality—*z* = -2.186; *p* = 0.029— with LP pairs producing significantly more errors in both these categories than HP pairs. The effect sizes were very large for referential cohesion—*d* = 2.03—and large for temporality—*d* = 1.48. This suggests that proficiency has an effect on how well young learners manage to refer to people and objects in their writing as well as on the consistency with which they use tenses and aspectual differences. As regards the

prominence of temporality errors, the present study seems to highlight the necessity for future research on cohesion in young writers to look into this dimension, since both accurate and inaccurate use of verbal aspects and tenses seems to determine the transition from low- to high-proficiency performance.

TABLE 3. Frequency of cohesion error types in learners' narratives across proficiency levels

Cohesion category	HP	LP			
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	*p* value	ES ±IC (90%)	z
Lexical	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–
Reference	0.03 (0.05)	0.23 (0.10)	0.001**	2.03 ±0.50	-6.178
Temporality	0.10 (0.12)	0.21 (0.17)	0.029*	1.48±0.44	-2.186
Conjunction	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–

*p < .025; **p < .010.

3.2. Correct and Incorrect Use of Specific Lexical, Referential, Temporal and Conjunctive Ties across Proficiency Levels

3.2.1. Lexical Cohesion
Texts were analyzed for typical lexical cohesive devices including repetition, synonyms, antonyms and collocations. However, noun repetition was the only lexical tie used frequently by both HP and LP pairs, and always correctly. No statistically significant difference was reported between the two groups for the deployment of this specific tie (tables 4 and 5). A similar high recurrence of lexical repetition was reported by Crowhurst in the writing of L1 English children (1987). In contrast to our results, where noun repetition was the only lexical tie supplied, Crowhurst's study reported a wider variety of lexical ties including, apart from noun repetition, synonyms, near synonyms and collocations.

3.2.2. Reference Cohesion

Reference cohesion involves the use of linguistic features to refer to persons or objects—entity reference—places—spatial reference—and time—temporal reference.

3.2.2.1. Entity Reference

Cohesive ties referring to persons or objects include the use of articles, possessive determiners and pronouns. Within this subcategory, the definite article NP was the most frequently used cohesive tie in both proficiency levels, with mean values of 1.53—SD = 0.61—for HP pairs and 2.01—0.60—for LP participants. For HP pairs this was followed by the indefinite article —M = 0.62, SD = 0.32—pronominal referencing—M = 0.29, SD = 0.26—possessive determiners —M = 0.25, SD = 0.30—and zero article NPs— M = 0.02, SD = 0.11. For LP pairs, after the definite article, the most frequently used categories were, in descending order, zero article NPs—M = 0.37, SD = 0.46—indefinite article NPs—M = 0.33, SD = 0.29—pronominal referencing—M = 0.20, SD = 0.30—and possessive determiner NPs—M = 0.03, SD = 0.07. The order pattern in the use of referential ties reported in the present study is partially in line with existing research. On the one hand, the prominent use of definite article NPs seems to confirm that, in general terms, the definite article is acquired before other entity referential ties and, therefore, is used to a greater extent (Álvarez 2006; Zdorenko and Paradis 2008). On the other hand, however, our results are not congruent with those obtained by Bae, whose learners aged five to six and six to seven used pronouns more frequently than definite articles (2001). The transfer of the specific ways of expressing reference from the mother tongues of the participants—Spanish in our study and Korean in Bae's—to EFL/ESL might explain the prevalence of certain forms over others in the two studies.

As can be seen in table 4, significant differences between HP and LP pairs were found for the use of definite article NPs—z = -2.592, p = 0.010—indefinite article NPs—z = -3.384, p = 0.001—possessive determiner NPs—z = -3.817, p = 0.001—zero article NPs—z = -4.176, p = 0.001—and pronominal referencing—z = -1.990, p=0.047. The effect size for these variables was large for definite article NPs—d = 0.60—indefinite article NPs—d = -0.65—possessive determiner NPs—d = -0.69—and pronominal referencing—d = 0.68. For zero article NPs, the effect size was very large—d = 2.84. With the exception of definite article NPs, which is the reference tie both groups used most frequently, the previously reported data suggest that proficiency appears to influence the frequency with which specific local cohesive ties are used by young learners to establish reference in their written narratives.

The influence of proficiency on the frequency of deployment of entity reference ties has been demonstrated in English as an L1, with young learners using increasingly more referential ties as they progress through school grades (Fitzgerald and Spiegel 1986; Cameron et al. 1995). However, the greater variability between the HP and LP

pairs reported in the present study suggests that the deployment of reference cohesion is also remarkably different within the same grade. This points to a task for future research, namely, the study of entity reference cohesion not only from an intergrade perspective but also within the same grade level. The differences reported here suggest that instruction in textual cohesion might have to be more specifically tailored to the distinct proficiency levels in a single class. The influence of individual variation on learners' FL written output is an aspect that, as noted by Gunnarson (2012), Vyatkina (2012) and Celaya (2019), is raising critical, if still peripheral, interest in light of the pedagogical implications it might have.

TABLE 4. Frequencies of the use of specific lexical, referential, temporal and conjunctive ties across proficiency levels

Cohesion category	Cohesion tie	HP	LP			
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	p p value	ES±IC (90%)	z
Lexical	Noun repetition	2.41 (0.34)	2.37 (0.54)	0.922	-0.22±0.61	–
Reference	Definite article NP	1.53 (0.61)	2.01 (0.60)	0.010*	0.60±0.37	-2.592
	Indefinite article NP	0.62 (0.32)	0.33 (0.29)	0.001**	-0.65±0.46	-3.384
	Possessive determiner NP	0.25 (0.30)	0.03 (0.07)	0.001**	-0.69±0.49	-3.817
	Zero article NP	0.02 (0.11)	0.37 (0.46)	0.001**	2.84±1.15	-4.176
	Pronominal reference	0.29 (0.26)	0.20 (0.30)	0.047*	0.68±0.54	-1.990
Temporality	Simple verb forms	1.37 (0.38)	1.31 (0.34)	0.389	-0.14±0.42	–
	Progressive verb forms	0.37 (0.31)	0.22 (0.33)	0.064	0.68±0.49	–
Conjunction	*and*	0.34 (0.22)	0.35 (0.26)	0.761	0.46±0.44	–
	but	0.04 (0.10)	0.00 (0.00)	0.025*	-0.62±0.31	-2.237
	because	0.03 (0.06)	0.01 (0.04)	0.039*	-0.60±0.37	-2.062
	when	0.07 (0.13)	0.00 (0.00)	0.004**	-0.65±0.31	-2.910

*p < .025; **p < .010.

The results relating to the incorrect use of entity referential ties also need to be considered (table 5). For both proficiency groups, the category that involved most errors was the use of definite articles—HP: M = 0.18, SD = 0.22; LP: M = 0.73, SD = 0.30—which reveals an inadequate command of the distinction between the definite and the indefinite article. This finding is congruent with previous research in which the highest rates of reference errors also corresponded to definite articles (Bae 2001; Back 2018). Empirical studies of young learners' L1 and L2 acquisition have shown that the distinction between *a/the* is rather inconsistent, with a clear tendency to overuse the definite article (Brown 1973; Zdorenko and Paradis 2008, 2012). This may be due to the greater difficulty learners experience in gaining control of the indefinite article in comparison to the definite article or personal pronouns, neither of which are affected by count/mass distinctions.

As can be seen in table 5, the intragroup comparison shows that HP pairs made significantly fewer errors than LP pairs for definite article NPs—z = -5.451, p = 0.0001—indefinite article NPs—z = -2.675, p = 0.008—zero article NPs—z = -4.155, p=0.001—and pronominal reference—z = -2.719, p = 0.0007. Size effects were very large for zero article NPs—d = 2.49—large for definite article NPs—d = 1.50—and pronominal reference—d = 1.51—and small for indefinite article NPs—d = 0.49. Therefore, the results reveal that although LP pairs used definite articles and pronouns significantly more often than their HP peers (table 4), they also did so more inaccurately. In fact, LP pairs provided incorrect forms in all the cohesive reference types, specifically definite article NP—M = 0.73, SD = 0.30—zero article NP—M = 0.36, SD = 0.45—pronominal reference—M = 0.18, SD = 0.30—and indefinite article NP—M = 0.12, SD = 0.25. Only possessive determiner NPs were not produced incorrectly. In the absence of research that offers an itemized breakdown of error ratio for entity referential ties with young learners, it is not possible to determine if the variability the present study reports can be extended to other instructional contexts.

TABLE 5. Frequency of specific cohesion error types in learners' narratives across proficiency levels

Cohesion category	Cohesion tie	HP	LP			
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	*p* p value	ES±IC (90%)	z
Lexical	Noun repetition	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–
Reference	Definite article NP	1.18 (0.22)	0.73 (0.30)	0.001**	1.50±0.0.50	-5.451
	Indefinite article NP	0.00 (0.00)	0.12 (0.25)	0.008**	0.49±0.32	-2.675
	Possessive determiner NP	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–
	Zero article NP	0.02 (0.11)	0.36 (0.45)	0.001**	2.49±1.09	-4.155
	Pronominal reference	0.01 (0.05)	0.18 (0.30)	0.077**	1.51±0.94	-2.719
Temporality	Simple verb forms	0.06 (0.11)	0.24 (0.30)	0.037*	1.92±0.69	-2.086
	Progressive verb forms	0.14 (0.17)	0.17 (0.32)	0.159	2.00±0.49	–
Conjunction	*and*	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–
	but	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–
	because	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–
	when	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	1	–	–

*p < .025; **p < .010.

3.2.2.2. Temporal Reference

Cohesive ties for temporal reference allude to the writers' ability to sequence events in a logical manner by means of temporal markers—e.g., *first*, *finally*—or temporal adverbial phrases—e.g., *in the morning*, *at nine o'clock*. No occurrences were reported

in any of the groups. The fact that our learners did not supply such basic narrative cohesive ties is surprising since, in fact, existing research has documented high recourse to them on the part of learners of similar ages in their oral and written L1 and L2 output (Bae 2001; Hickman 2003; Möller 2015; Butler et al. 2017; Back 2018). This underdevelopment might stem from the fact that our learners were not explicitly told by the teacher that they had to connect the different pictures, and hence they recounted them as isolated episodes.

3.2.2.3. Spatial Reference

Spatial reference—expressed through verbs and prepositions of movement and adverbs of contextual reference such as *here* or *there*—has been signaled as a commonality in young writers both in L1 and L2/FL (Hickman 2003; Möller 2015). However, it is worth noting that this cohesive device was not present in any of the texts examined here. A plausible explanation for this absence might lie in the fact that the events in the picture story all happened in the same room, a science laboratory. Furthermore, most of the characters were static. These two aspects made it impossible for children to convey movement in their compositions.

3.2.3. Temporality

The results relating to temporality were similar for both groups (table 4). Pairs at both proficiency levels used the present simple—HP: M = 1.37, SD = 0.38; LP: M = 1.32, SD = 0.34—to a greater extent than continuous forms—HP: M = 0.37, SD = 0.31; LP: M = 0.22, SD = 0.33. In terms of the frequency of cohesive errors, statistically significant differences were found for simple verb tense—z = -2.086, p = 0.037—with HP pairs making significantly fewer errors than LP pairs (table 5). However, failing to produce the third person *-s* for the present simple, which affected most pairs in both groups, and incomplete progressive forms—written either as a bare gerund or as *to be* followed by a bare infinitive or the present simple—were not considered errors, as previously argued.

The majority of temporality errors were due to an inconsistent awareness of aspectual difference—progressive versus nonprogressive—or of the distinction between foreground and background actions—those moving the plot and those describing the events of the plot, respectively. This means that solely simple or progressive forms were used in all verbal contexts. As the error rates confirm, none of the groups succeeded in distinguishing between foregrounding and backgrounding verbal forms, which, therefore, were used rather inconsistently. The fact that the participants had Spanish or Spanish/Arabic as their mother tongue might have been crucial in the lack of systematicity reported. The complex tense network available for aspectual differences in Spanish, where imperfectivity can be expressed with the same meaning by means

of simple or compound verb forms—*el perro dormía* versus *el perro estaba durmiendo* in the past; *el perro duerme* versus *el perro está durmiendo* in the present—might have led students to incorrectly use the same form throughout their English narrative by direct translation from Spanish. The acquisition of aspectual differences is a rather complicated endeavor that, in EFL contexts, tends to be better controlled in the later grades of primary education, as Álvarez has demonstrated for the oral skill (2006).

Apart from aspect, additional temporality-related errors stemmed from inconsistency in tense deployment. Whereas LP narratives were written in the present tense, in HP narratives some shifts from the present to the past were identified in a small number of texts. Narratives told in the present tense tend to be typical of very young bilingual children both in their L1 and their L2 (Aarsen 2001; Lanza 2001). As infants get older, they seem to go through two more developmental stages: the inconsistent use of present and past, which tends to evolve towards the sole use of the past (Aarsen 2001). If we interpret our findings in light of these developmental stages, always bearing in mind that Jeroen Aarsen (2001) and Elizabeth Lanza (2001) explored L2 contexts while we are dealing with EFL, it is clear that the performance of the LP group, which included only the present, was well behind what is expected for learners of their age and in line with that of very young L1/L2 learners. In contrast, the incongruent coexistence of the present and the past reported for some HP pairs reveals performance more fitting for individuals of the same age in L1/L2 contexts.

3.2.4. Conjunction

As shown in table 4, the additive conjunction *and* was the most commonly used tie by both groups—HP: M = 0.34, SD = 0.22; LP: M = 0.35, SD = 0.26. Previous research has reported a similarly high frequency in the use of copulative conjunctions, which is to be expected given the fact that this type of connective is one of the first to be used by young learners (Torras et al. 2006; Lázaro and García Mayo 2012; Celaya 2019).

After *and*, the order pattern for HP pairs was *when*—M = 0.07, SD = 0.13—*but*—M = 0.04, SD = 0.10—and, finally, *because*—M = 0.03, SD = 0.06—while for LP pairs, only one *because* token was documented—M = 0.01, SD = 0.04. In a study conducted by Butler et al. the oral narratives of eleven- to twelve-year-old Chinese students of English presented an order pattern in the deployment of connectives similar to that reported here for HP pairs (2017), with the only exception that for the Chinese learners, adversative linkers were the second most used tie, while for our learners the second most used tie was *when*. This difference in the use of *but* might be due to a higher reliance on adversative linkers in Chinese than in Spanish.

The dissimilarities in the use of connectives between HP and LP pairs were remarkable to the extent that significant differences were found for the use of the adversative connective *but*—z = -.2.237, *p* = 0.025—the causal connective *because*—z = -.2.062, *p* = 0.039—and the temporal connective *when*—z = -2.910, *p* = 0.004.

Effect sizes were moderate for these three ties with *d*-values of -0.62, -0.60 and -0.65, respectively (table 4). In LP narratives, no occurrences were reported for *but* and *when*. These differences in the deployment of connectives seem to indicate that their use, or lack thereof, by LP pairs might be more fitting of younger individuals whose EFL is at an earlier developmental stage. Given the considerable difference in the knowledge and use of connectives between HP and LP pairs, who were all part of the same class, instruction on this grammatical aspect might prove a rather daunting task for teachers. To check whether such variability is common in instructional settings, more studies that also adopt an intragroup perspective seem to be necessary.

As for errors in the deployment of connectors, no inaccurate forms were reported for either group (table 5). This is not congruent with the only study to date that has approached the conceptualization of these forms in young writers (Bae 2001). In Bae's study, over ten percent of all the cohesion errors reported for the cohort of Korean-English participants were caused by poor linking, although an itemized account per category was not provided. A possible explanation for this might be that these students had a higher level of proficiency and, therefore, were prone to making more errors, since they attempted to produce more sophisticated forms.

4. Conclusions

The findings of the present study show that lower- and higher-proficiency EFL learners aged eleven to twelve are significantly different regarding their use of cohesive ties—specifically the causal conjunction *because*, pronouns and NPs with definite, indefinite, possessive and zero determiners. HP pairs also made significantly fewer cohesive errors for NPs involving the definite, indefinite and zero article, pronouns and simple verb forms, and deployed a greater variety of ties overall for most cohesion categories.

These differences are relevant for two main reasons. Firstly, the results stem from an itemized analysis of young learners' correct and incorrect use of cohesive devices in relation to the quality of the narrative texts produced. As made evident in section 3, for a good number of the variables explored, no empirical data appear to be available as yet against which these findings might be contrasted. This clearly opens up a new research agenda and calls for future empirical studies that might dispute or support our findings with young EFL learners in the same grade level. Secondly, the differences reported here highlight the importance of proficiency as a variable and suggest that HP and LP students incorporated cohesion categories at a remarkably different rate: while HP pairs could successfully deal with all categories of cohesion with the exception of temporality, LP pairs were in line with HP pairs only for lexical cohesion, thus offering poorer performances for the rest of categories.

The pedagogical implications of these findings suggest the need for a teaching of cohesion in young L2 learner classrooms that contemplates ecological variability within a given grade, without overlooking the learners' diverse levels of proficiency.

One of the motives driving such a pedagogy rests on the assumption that knowing what to expect of learners' linguistic performances, in terms of cohesion deployment at a higher and lower level of proficiency, might avoid frustration for teachers and increase motivation for learners (Lee 2008; Dörnyei 2009) while, at the same time, facilitating the design of tailor-made tasks and more finely grained assessment systems (Celaya 2019). Along these lines, future research might also explore the routes whereby the acquisition of cohesion in narrative writing might occur for HP and LP learners, as well as children's use of cohesion in their L1, in order to establish how far results might be determined by a lack of L2/FL knowledge or a lack of maturity in L1 narration. Finally, young learners' deployment of cohesive devices in genres other than storytelling —recounting, instructions, reports, explanations— should be explored bearing in mind the increase in content-based instruction, which requires the production of a variety of text types.

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