

Investigating the Use of Reference in the Essays of EFL learners at the University of Basra

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Abstract:

This study investigates the use of Reference in EFL students' essays. It deals with three types of References along with their subtypes. The results indicate that students tend to rely on the use of references, with some examples of misuse and overuse that have been found in their essays. The most commonly appearing type of Reference is personal Reference, which represents 56% of the total. The second one is demonstrative Reference, representing 33% of the total, and the last one is comparative Reference, which represents 10% of the total.

Key Words: Personal Reference, Demonstrative Reference, Comparative Reference .

تحليل إستعمال أدوات الاشارة في مقالات متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة البصرة

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ملخص البحث:

تبحث هذه الدراسة استخدام أدوات الإشارة في مقالات طلبة متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية. لقد تم البحث عن ثلاثة انواع من أدوات الاشاره مع انواعه الفرعية. تشير النتائج الى إن الطلاب يميلون الى الاعتماد على أدوات الاشارة عند الكتابة مع وجود سوء و الإفراط احياناً في إستخدام هذه الأدوات. اكثر انواع أدوات الاشارة استعمالاً هو الاشارة الشخصية وتمثل نسبة ٥٦% ومن ثم أدوات الاشارة التوضيحية بنسبة ٣٣% ومن ثم أدوات الاشارة المقارنة بنسبة ١٠% .

كلمات مفتاحية: الاشارة الشخصية ، الاشارة التوضيحية ، الاشارة المقارنة .

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1. Introduction

Students must acquire the talent of effective writing in order to be successful in their academic and professional pursuits. Writing is not only a means of communication, but also aids individuals in the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills. However, writing in a second or foreign language presents a significant obstacle for students. Cohesion is a crucial element of effective writing that facilitates the comprehension and transmission of ideas in written texts.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze *Reference* in the essays of EFL learners at the University of Basra, with a particular focus on third-year students at the College of Education for Human Sciences, English Department. The study aims to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of students' essays concerning *Reference*, identify the areas that need improvement, and provide recommendations for enhancing their writing abilities.

In conclusion, this paper will contribute to the literature on EFL writing by shedding light on the writing abilities of third-year students at the University of Basra, College of Education. This study's findings may inform the development of effective instructional strategies and interventions that improve students' writing skills. In addition, the findings may have implications for university-level curriculum development.

2. Problem Statement

The problem is that students at the University of Basra, particularly those in their third year, have difficulties in writing cohesive texts. Many students lack an understanding of the principles of cohesion and coherence, which negatively affect the quality of their writing. This issue is evident in the essays produced by these students, which often contain errors in grammar, cohesive devices, and structure. The main question in this study is, do EFL learners use references in their writing, and do they use them correctly?

3. Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the essays of EFL learners at the University of Basra and identify the challenges they face in producing cohesive texts in terms of Reference. By examining the essays of third-year students at the College of Education, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the issues that students face in their writing.

4. Cohesion

The first standard of textuality is cohesion. Cohesion is about how the parts of the text surface, or "text-syntactic," fit together. The order of words and phrases in a text is not random; it is based on grammatical rules and dependencies. Cohesion is the name for all the functions that are used to make connections between surface elements (Titscher et al., 2000 :22).

Therefore, Cohesion is about how the parts of the surface texts, which are the words we hear or read, fit together in a logical order. The parts on the surface depend on each other based on grammatical forms and rules. This is why cohesion is based on grammatical dependencies. Linguists have said many times that the surface sequences of English can't be changed a lot without causing problems (Beaugrande & Dessler, 1981:3).

5. Reference

According to Halliday and Hassan (1976: 32), reference is a semantic relation that involves the semantic property of definiteness or specificity. It is important to note that reference can be divided into two types: exophoric and endophoric references. Endophora can be further divided into anaphora and cataphora. While exophora depends on the situation, endophora depends on the context. It is worth noting that both types of reference involve presupposition (Halliday & Hassan, 1976: 32-34).

Halliday and Hassan (1976: 31) explained that the interpretation of various reference types is enabled by two kinds of references: internal and external. Internal reference implies that the referred entities are within the text itself, while external reference means that the referred entities are situated outside the text in the context. In both cases, there is a phoric relationship, but they represent distinct phoric relationships. Endophoric references occur within the text, while exophoric references occur outside the text. Furthermore, exophoric reference pertains to entities external to the discourse, its interpretation is not context-dependent, and therefore it cannot be considered as a part of cohesion. Then, Halliday and Hassan (1976: 37) categorized references into three types: personal, demonstrative, and comparative.

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Personal reference is a type of reference in which a word or phrase refers to the reader or the writer of a discourse. Reference is crucial in creating a connection between the speaker and the listener, and it is widely used in spoken and written communication. Personal reference is one of the three types of reference, alongside demonstrative and comparative reference. Personal reference is used to indicate the relationship between the speaker and the listener, and it is often associated with the speaker's perspective and subjective experience (Halliday & Hasan: 37). Demonstrative References involve verbal pointing, whereby the speaker names the referent by establishing its proximity to themselves. Comparative reference is the last type to be mentioned, and it consists of two subtypes: general and specific comparison.

6. Methodology

6.1 Data Collocation

The sample of the study comprises 300 essays from the College of Education. The essays were collected after the students' first semester exam in academic writing, providing a snapshot of their writing abilities at this stage of their academic journey.

6.2 Model of Analysis

The researcher will analyze Reference presents in the essays. Halliday and Hasan's model has been selected to investigate *Reference* in the students' essays. The essay question was assigned by the teacher. The essay question at the College of Education is "Write a well-organized essay about the various career options that are available to graduates in your field of study." Following the students' exams, the researcher obtained their essays prior to the teachers' corrections.

7. Data Analysis in Terms of Reference

Personal references, demonstrative references, and comparative references are displayed in Table1. The subtypes of these classes include personal pronouns, nominal demonstratives, circumstantial demonstratives, general comparison words, and specific comparison words. Additionally, possessive determiners and the article "the" can serve as references. By examining how students employ these types of references in their essays, we can gain insight into their writing abilities.

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Table 1: Reference

Personal Reference	Demonstrative Reference	Comparative Reference
<i>Personal Pronouns</i>	<i>Nominal Demonstratives</i>	<i>General Comparison</i>
As Subject:	This	Different
She	That	Differently
He	These	Other
It	Those	The same
They		Such
As Object:	<i>Circumstantial Demonstratives</i>	<i>Specific Comparison</i>
Her	Here	More
Him	There	Many
It	Now	Less
Them	Then	Better
Possessive Determiners:	<i>The Article "the"</i>	Higher
Her		Identical
His		Likewise
Its		
Their		

7.1 Analysis of Personal Reference

Table 2 represents the frequency of personal pronouns used as subjects in students' essays. The four pronouns analyzed are she, he, it, and they. "*She*" did not appear at all in the essays, while "*he*" was used 10 times, representing 3% of the total. "*It*" was the most commonly used pronoun, appearing 75 times, accounting for 22% of the total. Finally, "*they*" was the most frequently used pronoun, appearing 250 times, representing 75% of the total. Examples are given down below:

Table 2: personal pronouns (As Subjects)

Personal Pronouns (As Subjects)	Item	%
She	0	0%
He	10	3%
It	75	22%
They	250	75%
Total	335	

(a) I want to be a teacher because I want to be like my teacher at school. *He* was a great teacher.

In (a), "*he*" is used as a subject to refer to the teacher. The pronoun "he," has two functions, by which it refers cataphorically and anaphorically to the noun "teacher" in the preceding and the following clause.

(b) The second factor is the student should enter to the department *he* choose by his desire that make him great in this field.

In (b), the pronoun "He" refers anaphorically back to the noun "student."

(c) Actually, a lot of career are useful, but *it* different in the importance of ways"

In (c), the pronoun "It" refers anaphorically back to the many career options that one may have.

(d) Teaching the student of the university. *It* also a hard job it demined a good English language.

In (d), the pronoun "it" refers anaphorically back to the noun "teaching."

(e) Graduated from English department is a great opportunity for you to have a place in a lot of companies in your city that *they* use English language all time to make a chat with people.

In (e), "*they*" is used to refer to the companies in the sentence.

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Table 3 shows the frequency of personal pronouns used as objects in students' essays. The four pronouns analyzed are her, him, it, and them. "*Her*" did not appear at all in the essays, while "*him*" was used 14 times, representing 6% of the total. It was the second most commonly used pronoun. It appeared less frequently than "*it*", which was used 133 times, representing 57% of the total. Finally, "*them*" was used 88 times, representing 37% of the total. Examples are down below:

Table 3: personal pronouns (As object)

Personal Pronouns (As Object)	Item	%
Her	0	0%
Him	14	6%
It	133	57%
Them	88	37%
Total	235	

(a) The second factor is that the student should enter the department he choose by his desire that make *him* great in this field.

In (a) , "*him*" is used as an object to refer cataphorically to the noun "student."

(b) Too many students consider big halls as one of the best choices. They prefer *it* because it makes for a comfortable environment.

In (b), "*it*" is used twice to refer to the big halls. However, the first use of "*it*" can be considered as a personal pronoun usage, as an object.

(c) Teachers spend time teaching students. They help *them* in their studies.

In (c), "*them*" is used to refer anaphorically back to the students in the sentence.

In the end, personal pronouns are an important part of English grammar and play a big role in figuring out what a sentence means. As the examples show, the way personal pronouns are used depends on the situation and the subject.

Table 4: Possessive Determiners

Possessive Determiners	Item	%
Her	0	0%
His	27	12%
Its	5	2%
Their	198	86%
Total	230	

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Table 4 presents the frequency of possessive determiners used by students in their essays. The students used "their" the most frequently, with a total of 198 instances, which accounted for 86% of all possessive determiners used. The second most commonly used possessive determiner was "his," with a total of 27 instances, accounting for 12% of all possessive determiners used. "Its" was used only 5 times, which accounts for just 2% of all possessive determiners used. Finally, "her" was not used at all in the essays, which implies that the students did not refer to female individuals' possession. In general, the use of possessive determiners can reveal how students viewed ownership and possession in their writing. Examples are down below:

(a) The second factor is that the student should enter the department he choose by *his* desire that make him great in this field.

In (a), the possessive determiner "his" is used to show ownership of the noun *desire*. Then, the pronoun "his" refers anaphorically back to the noun "student" in the preceding clause.

(b) Most thing that students do after *their* graduation is search about the best career.

In (b), the possessive determiner "their" refers anaphorically back to the noun "students" in the preceding clause creating cohesion between the two clauses.

Table 5: Personal Reference

Grammatical Cohesion/ Reference/Personal Reference	Item	%
Personal Pronouns	570	71%
Possessive Determiners	230	29%
Total	800	

Table 5 provides insight into the different types of personal reference used in students' essays. Specifically, the table details the frequency of personal pronouns and possessive determiners, two common types of grammatical cohesion. The results show that personal pronouns were used far more frequently than possessive determiners, accounting for 71% and 29% of the instances of grammatical cohesion. This indicates that the students preferred to explicitly refer to individuals and objects, rather than to signify ownership or possession. The chart will show this clearly:

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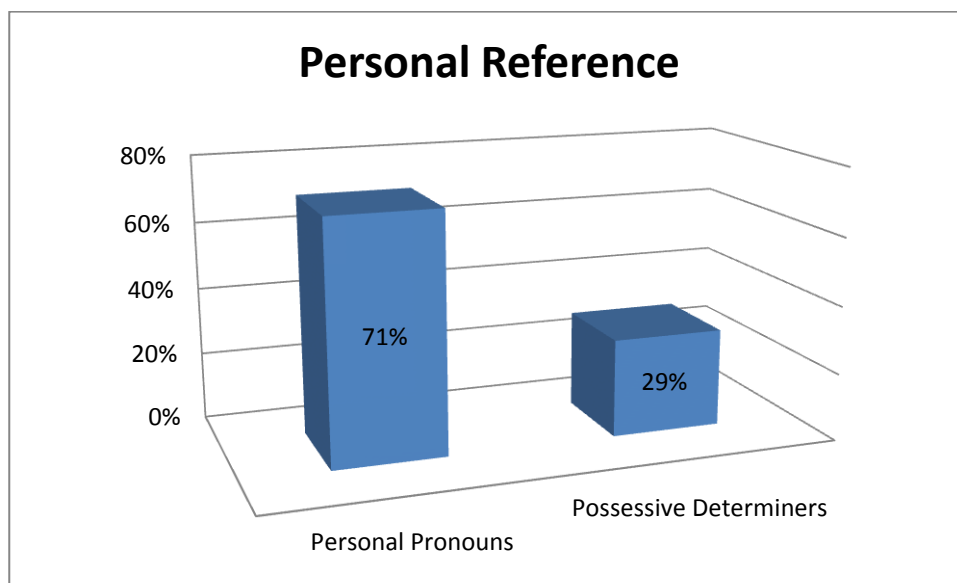


Chart 1: Personal Reference

7.2 Analysis of Demonstrative Reference

In this section we will be talking about the different types of demonstrative reference, the start off will be within nominal demonstrative and will end with article "the."

Table 6, presents the frequency of four nominal demonstratives: "this," "that," "these," and "those." According to the table, "this" and "that" are the most commonly used with frequencies of 112 (43%) and 111 (42%), respectively. However, "these" and "those" are used less frequently, with frequencies of 30 (11%) and 9 (3%):

Table 6 :Nominal Demonstratives

Nominal Demonstrative	Item	%
This	112	43%
That	111	42%
These	30	11%
Those	9	3%
Total	262	

(a) A lot student study and work at the same time, *this* is very good way to planning their future job after graduation.

In (a), "this" serves as an anaphoric reference, referring back to the idea of studying and working simultaneously.

(b) The student should enter *this* department by their desire

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In (b), "this" functions as a cataphoric reference, pointing ahead to the noun "department" that follows.

Another important nominal demonstrative is "that," which can be used to create grammatical cohesion. For example:

(c) When you try to be successful in your study, you should have a different way to achieve *that*.

In (c), "that" refers back anaphorically to the idea of being successful in one's study. Similarly, in the sentence:

(d) A lot of good chances to get jobs here the English language is the basic language *that* use in that job"

In (d), "that" is used twice. The first instance refers anaphorically to the noun "language," while the second instance serves as a cataphoric reference to "job."

Finally, the use of "these" can also create cohesion, as in the sentence:

(e) To sum up, there are various career options provides to the graduate students jobs in different places, *these* jobs are useful for them.

In (e), "these" refers back to the previously mentioned "career options" and helps tie the sentence together. Another example of the use of these would be:

(f) It is necessary to understand how *these* two factors effect on the life of the students."

In (f), "these" refers cataphorically to the factors.

(g) *Those* three jobs are the most I like to work.

In (g), "those" refers cataphorically to the jobs creating a cohesion.

The examples provided demonstrate the importance of nominal demonstratives in creating cohesive writing that have been found in students' essays. By using "this," "that," "these," and "those" appropriately, students can create clear and effective essays that is easy for readers to follow.

Table 7: Circumstantial Demonstratives

Circumstantial Demonstrative	Item	%
Here	10	15%
There	45	69%
Now	6	9%
Then	4	6%
Total	64	

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Table 7 displays the frequency of usage for different circumstantial demonstrative items. The table reveals that out of a total of 65 instances, the circumstantial "there" was used the most frequently, accounting for 69% of the total usage. In comparison, "here" was used much less often, with only 10 instances, representing 15% of the total usage. The circumstantial "now" was used in 9% of cases, with a total of 6 instances, while "then" had the lowest frequency, accounting for just 6% with only 4 instances.

An instance of the demonstrative 'there' being used as an anaphor is the sentence:

- (a) There are many companies that want translators and graduate can work *there*.

In (a), "there" refers back to the companies mentioned earlier, creating cohesion in the text.

In another example, the word "now" serves as a cohesive tie in the sentence;

- (b) English teaching career is available *now*.

In (b), "now" acts as a circumstantial demonstrative, functioning as an adverb of time that links the availability of the career to the present moment, indicating that one can pursue it now.

Similarly, the word 'then' serves as a circumstantial demonstrative in the sentence:

- (c) They can be English teachers, *then* they can be translators.

In (c), "then" links the two actions in a sequential order, creating a cohesive connection between the ideas.

Table 8: Article 'the'

The Article "the"	Number
The	148

Table 8 reveals that the definite article "the" has been used 148 times in the students' essays. It is vital to note that a high frequency of "the" does not necessarily imply advanced writing skills, as it is a commonly used word in English.

An example of the article "the" found in students' essays is:

- (a) Students after *the* online study start to be a little lazy in their study.

In (a), "the" refers back to "online" in a cataphoric manner. Another example of the can be:

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(b) There are many private schools available to graduate, *the* private schools are the best choice.

In (b), as we can see, "the" in "the private schools" refers anaphorically to the previously mentioned school.

Table 9: Demonstrative Reference

Cohesive Relation/ Reference/ Demonstrative Reference	Item	%
Nominal Demonstrative	262	55%
Article/ the	148	31%
Circumstantial Demonstrative	65	14%
Total	475	

Table 9 shows the different types of demonstrative references found in students' essays, along with their frequencies. The first type of demonstrative reference listed is the "Nominal Demonstrative," which was found 262 times and accounts for 55% of all demonstrative references. The second type of reference listed is the "Article/ the," which was found 148 times and accounts for 31% of all demonstrative references. The third and final type of demonstrative reference listed is the "Circumstantial Demonstrative," which was found 65 times and accounts for 14% of all demonstrative references. The chart down below would illustrate:

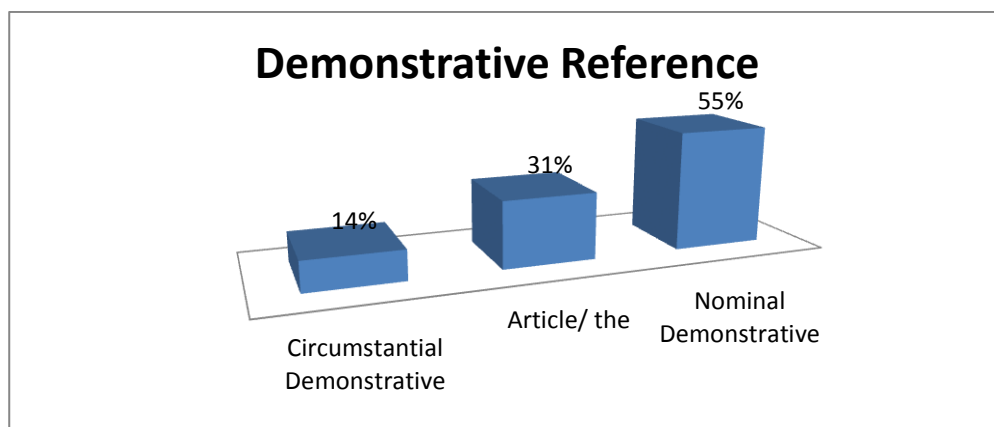


Chart 2: Demonstrative Reference

7.3 Analysis of Comparative Reference

In this section general and specific comparison will be illustrated.

Table 10: General Comparison

General Comparison (Adjectives & Adverbs)	Item	%
Different	38	68%
Differently	5	9%
Other	2	4%
The same	4	7%
Such	1	2%
Similarly	1	2%
Identical	1	2%
Likewise	4	7%
Total	56	

As shown in Table 10, the adjective "Different" is the most frequently used comparison word in student essays, accounting for 68% of all general comparisons. This suggests that students frequently use this term to highlight distinctions between ideas. "Differently" is the second most common comparison word, accounting for 9% of all comparison words. Although it is also used to emphasise similarities, it is primarily employed to compare how two things differ in their approach, method, or perspective. The third category, "Other," is represented twice and accounts for 4% of comparison objects. "The same" accounts for 7% of all comparison words and is used to highlight similarities between two concepts. "Such" only appears once and accounts for 2% of all comparison words; it serves to introduce a similar example to the concept being discussed. "Similarly" and "Likewise" are the sixth and seventh categories, appearing four times each and accounting for 7% of all comparison terms. These terms are used to describe parallels between two concepts.

An example of 'different' that has been found in students' essays is:

- (a) There are *different* career options that are available to students after graduation.

In (a), this sentence, "different" is being used as a comparative reference to suggest that there are multiple career options available and that these options vary from one student to another. It implies that there is more than one option available and that a comparison is being made between these options.

- (b) Most students choose to be English teachers, but others choose *differently* they choose to be translators or interpreters.

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In (b), "differently" can be considered a comparative reference, by which it compares the choices of students. That is to say, the comparison is when most students would choose the English career, while others would prefer to be translators or interpreters.

An example of "similarly," or the only example that has been found in students' essays of this type of comparative reference is:

(c) The best way to choose your job is choosing what you like more, *similarly* to the graduate. They should choose the interesting job for them.

In (c), "similarly" is a general comparison; it compares in terms of similarity between how anyone would choose an interesting job for themselves and how new graduates would choose them.

(d) My father is an interpreter. He work with American and British people, *likewise* my father translates for them in the company and I wanna be like my father.

In (e), "likewise" is a general comparison. It compares similarities. It refers cataphorically to the noun phrase " my father."

(f) I want to be an English teacher, *the same* thing as my sister.

In (f), "the same" is a general comparison. The general comparison here is that the student wants to be an English teacher just like her sister. An example of other would be " my choice will differ from the other one", so here is a general comparison.

Table 11: Specific Comparison

Specific Comparison (Adjectives & Adverbs)	Item	%
More	34	38%
Many	30	33%
Less	1	1%
Better	24	17%
higher	1	1%
Total	90	

As can be seen in Table 11, various categories of specific comparison and their frequencies are presented. The table shows that out of a total of 90 instances, "more" is used the most, accounting for 38%. Comparatively, " less" and "higher" were used much less frequently, accounting for only 1% of all instances, "many" is the second most frequent word in this category, accounting for 33% of the total. The word 'better' occurs 17% of the time in the specific comparison, making it the third most frequent word.

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(a) There is *more than* one job for graduates in my field of study.

In (a), This sentence suggests that the comparative adjective "more than" is being used to refer to the massive opportunities that graduates of the English department have, compared to other graduates from other fields, so here "more than" refers back cataphorically to the following noun "job."

(b) I don't prefer be an English teacher because it gives me *less* chances to develop my language.

In (b) there is a particular comparison in the previously mentioned sentence, in which it refers to the fewer chances in developing one's language if they became English teachers. As a result, "less" here refers cataphorically to fewer opportunities.

(c) Teaching students at school is much *better* than teaching students at university.

In (c), The comparative adjective "better" is being used to compare between teaching at a university and at a school. We can conclude then that "better" is being used cataphorically and anaphorically here.

(d) There are *many* options available in my field of study."

Table 12: Comparative Reference

Cohesive Relation/ Reference/Comparative Reference	Item	Frequency
General Comparison	56	38%
Specific Comparison	90	62%
Total	146	

Table 12 illustrates the occurrence of comparative reference in students' essays, particularly focusing on general and specific comparisons. So ,specific comparisons were more commonly used compared to general comparisons, accounting for 62% of total instances of comparative reference, whereas general comparisons constituted 38% of the total instances. The findings highlight the importance of using comparative references in writing to establish cohesion. Furthermore, the findings indicate that students prefer specific comparisons to general comparisons, indicating a preference for detailed and specific contrasts.

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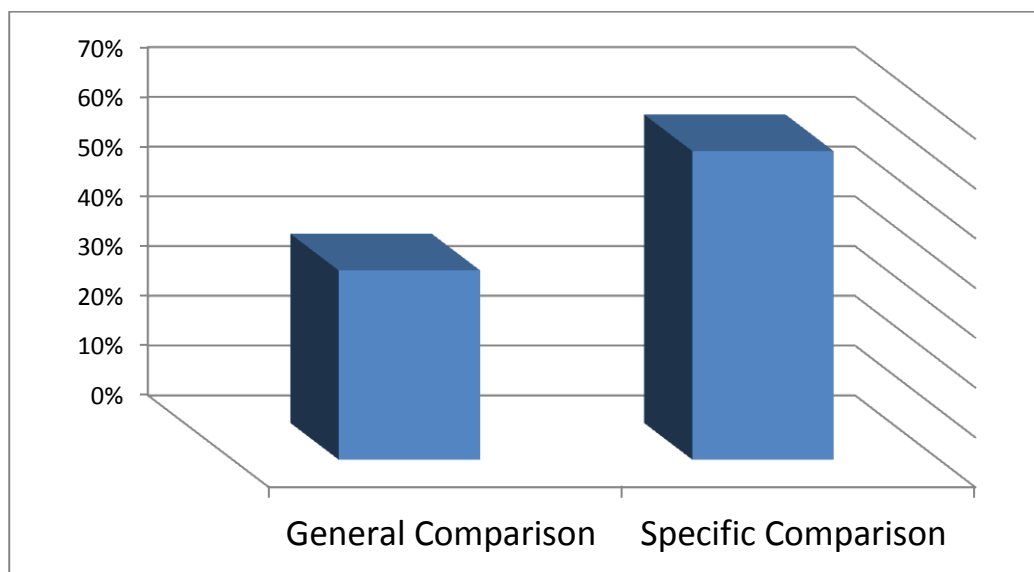


Chart 3: Comparative Reference

6.4 Misuse and overuse of Reference in EFL learners' Essays

We have encountered many instances of misuse and overuse of Reference. For instance, the pronoun "it" is often used excessively, as demonstrated in the sentence:

(a) "finally, our department, the department of English has a many job to work in *it*, and the person has to chose the job that he love *it* because if the person does not love *it* the job the job that he works in *it*." Here, "it" is used repeatedly, and that would create redundancy. Similarly, in the sentence:

(b) " choosing to work as an English teacher is a good career that people admire becoming *it*," the personal pronoun "it" is used incorrectly.

(c) student options the career that *them* desire. The first reason, may *them* was dreams of *it*.

In (c), it can be seen that there is a misuse of personal pronouns with the word "them" being used twice and the pronoun "it" being used incorrectly. The personal pronoun "they" should be used instead.

(d) And the career I can work in *it*. In (d) there is an overuse of the pronoun "it."

(e) The student must see *his* ability and show *his* skills and decide to discuss *his* career with the person who has a lot of thought about *his* future job.

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In (e), we can see that there is an overuse of the possessive pronoun "his." In this case, the student has used "his" multiple times, which makes the writing sound repetitive and awkward.

(f) Teaching is the best career, *it* should be the first choice, students like *it* and prefer *it*.

In (f), while it is true that some students may prefer teaching as a career, using "it" in this context can be misleading and imprecise.

(g) " *This* study of *this* department it still very important in *this* different place."

(h) I want to work in teaching English. *This* job introduce helps for people and *this* job is best.

EFL students frequently contend with the improper and excessive use of references in their writing, especially with the pronoun "it." This can cause their essays to contain redundancy, ambiguity, and a lack of clarity. While there are still instances of correct reference use, the overall quality of the writing of EFL students is frequently hampered by improper sentence structure and grammar

The overall structure of Reference is:

Table 13: Reference

Reference	Item	%
Personal Reference	800	56%
Demonstrative Reference	475	33%
Comparative Reference	146	10%
Total	1421	

Table

13 displays the frequencies of three different types of references: personal reference, demonstrative reference, and comparative reference. Personal reference was used the most frequently, approximately 56% of the total references. Demonstrative reference represents 33%. Comparative reference was the least used, accounting only 10%. Therefore, reference is frequently used in students' writing, with personal reference being the most commonly used at 56%, followed by demonstrative reference at 33%, and comparative reference at 10%. However, it is important to note that around 30% of Reference is either misused or overused. It can be observed that personal reference occurs most frequently in students' writing. They extensively employ personal reference during essay writing, and in fact, they frequently use both second and first-person reference. This means that they use "I," "you," and "your" multiple times in their writing. However, these cannot be considered cohesive ties because they refer to something outside the context. Nevertheless, students use third-person pronouns frequently while writing, which indicates that they are aware of the importance of referring back to entities that have been mentioned earlier.

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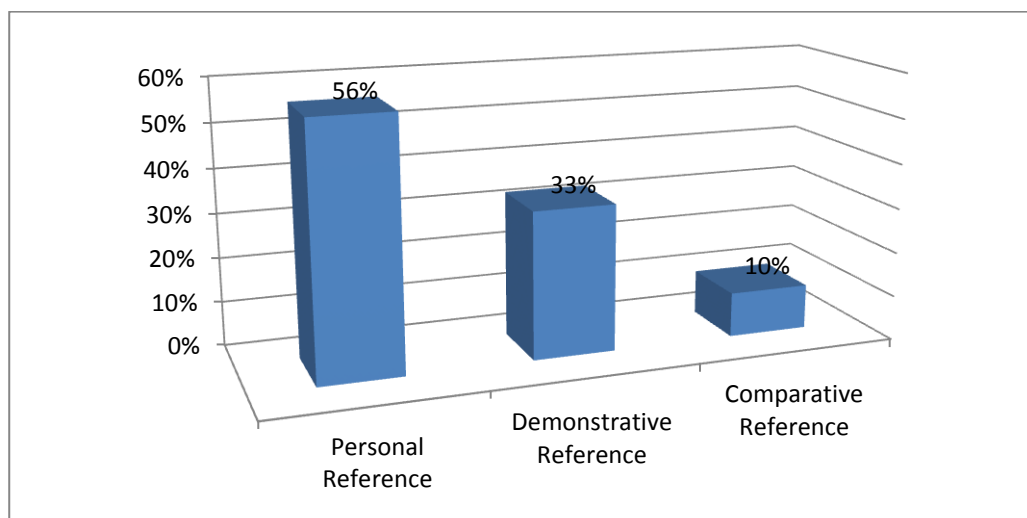


Chart 4: Reference

8. Conclusions

Third-year students at the University of Basra, College of Education for Human Sciences, use all types of references in their essays. Some of these uses are incorrect, as they may misuse or overuse these types of references. Additionally, even when they use references in their essays, the way they structure these clauses can be messy. In other words, the way they structure their sentences is not correct, as evidenced by the examples we provide. We recommend that students be taught references explicitly, with a focus on how to produce grammatically correct sentences.

9. Recommendations

We should provide explicit instructions on different types of references: Organize classes specifically dedicated to teaching students about the various types of references. Ensure that students understand when and how to use each type correctly. Offer guidance on sentence structure and cohesion: Devote time to teaching students how to structure sentences effectively. We should focus on teaching them the correct use of cohesive devices to enhance the coherence of their writing. Provide examples and exercises to practice constructing well-structured and logically connected sentences.

*Investigating the Use of Reference in the Essays of EFL learners
at the University of Basra*

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