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The Effectiveness of Synonymy as a Cohesive Device in Improving Students' Essay Writing

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Abstract: English writing, particularly essay writing, is one of the most challenging skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Producing cohesive and coherent texts has become increasingly important. This study focuses on the role of synonymy as a lexical cohesive device in the essay writing of EFL students, specifically examining how frequently Albanian university students use synonyms in their essays. Additionally, the study explores how synonymy contributes to creating a well-structured and cohesive essay. Fifty-six first-year students (male and female) from the Faculty of Foreign Languages, English Department, were purposefully selected to write 56 descriptive essays. A qualitative research design was employed, with writing tasks serving as the primary data collection instrument. The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis procedures. The findings showed that synonyms were used more frequently than near-synonyms in the students' essays. It was also found that the students used various synonyms and near-synonyms to achieve logical cohesion in their writing, despite having limited knowledge of synonymy as a lexical cohesive device. Furthermore, the students had difficulty selecting the appropriate synonyms due to their insufficient vocabulary.

Keywords: *EFL students, essay writing, lexical cohesion, synonymy.*

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Introduction

Writing is a crucial skill for academic success and effective global communication, particularly in English, which serves as a lingua franca in education, business, and research. Effective writing requires not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to construct coherent and cohesive texts that facilitate comprehension and engagement (Crossley et al., 2016). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), students often struggle to employ lexical cohesion, especially when it comes to synonymy. Cohesion and coherence thus remain central concerns in EFL pedagogy, as they directly affect the clarity and persuasiveness of student writing (Férez Mora et al., 2021). Synonymy and near-synonymy, while vital for avoiding repetition and enriching lexical variety, are underutilized compared to grammatical devices (Férez Mora et al., 2021). Lexical cohesion, as a concept, has been thoroughly explored. Danglli and Abazaj (2014) emphasize the semantic and stylistic awareness required for accurate synonymy use, highlighting its role in enhancing coherence and stylistic variety. Férez Mora et al. demonstrate that repetition is the dominant factor in lexical cohesion in student essays, with synonyms being used less frequently, indicating an area for pedagogical improvement. In line with the influence of synonymy on language learning, Higa (1965) found that acquiring pairs of synonymous words requires significantly more time and effort compared to learning pairs of words that are unrelated in meaning. These studies frame the current investigation into Albanian EFL students' use of synonymy as a cohesive device.

Study Purpose

This study addresses that gap by investigating the use of synonymy in the essay writing of Albanian university students. Specifically, it shows how frequently students employ synonyms and near-synonyms, and how these lexical choices contribute to textual cohesion. By focusing on an underexplored cohesive strategy, this research aims to contribute to both the theoretical understanding of lexical cohesion and the practical improvement of EFL writing instruction in Albania. The findings of this study could be valuable for Albanian university students in improving their ability to write well-structured English essays. Moreover, the study helps English learners better understand cohesive devices and their essential role in constructing coherent English texts.

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Literature Review

This section presents the main theoretical stances and ideas pertinent to the current investigation. Clarifying the key ideas of this research is crucial since it examines synonymy as a lexical coherent device in writing well-structured English essays. These include the numerous ways that different scholars have classified synonymy as a device to attain coherence in written texts and synonymy as a lexical cohesive strategy.

Cohesion in Written Texts

Cohesion is fundamental to the construction of written discourse, ensuring that sentences and ideas connect meaningfully to form a coherent text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Cohesive ties are generally classified into grammatical devices (e.g., reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions) and lexical devices (e.g., repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, collocation) (Halliday et al., 2004). Recent studies have emphasized that cohesion significantly influences text readability and comprehension in EFL contexts, where learners often lack explicit instruction on how to use cohesive devices effectively (Fitriani & Rosdiana, 2025; Somaili & Alhamami, 2024).

Synonymy as a Lexical Cohesive Device

Among lexical ties, synonymy is particularly important for avoiding repetition and enriching vocabulary. Synonymy occurs when two or more lexical items share closely related meanings, allowing writers to maintain reference while varying expression (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Near-synonymy, on the other hand, involves items that share similar but not identical meanings and may differ in connotation, register, or usage (Palmer, 1981). Studies confirm that synonyms are essential for building lexical cohesion in student writing. On the other hand, learners often struggle with near synonyms due to subtle meaning differences. Near-synonymy is the most complex notion, as near-synonyms serve to denote the same concept, yet they do not allow substitution in the same contextual use (D. A. Cruse, 1986). Studies indicate that near-synonymous words often differ slightly in meaning, contextual use, and level of appropriateness, which necessitates that learners cultivate a refined awareness of these distinctions (Daskalovska & Gudeva, 2013).

In EFL writing research, synonyms have been related to higher lexical sophistication and better cohesion. For example, Fitriani and Rosdiana (2025) found that Indonesian learners who used synonyms strategically produced essays with stronger coherence and reader engagement. Similarly, Somaili and Alhamami (2024) reported that Saudi EFL students benefited from explicit instruction on synonymy, which improved their ability to write cohesive academic texts. Despite these findings, synonymy remains underexplored compared to other cohesive devices such as conjunctions or reference.

Classification of Synonyms

Linguists have proposed various classifications of synonymy. Halliday and Hasan (1976) distinguish between synonymy (identity of reference) and near-synonymy (semantic similarity without identity of reference). Other scholars categorize synonyms based on stylistic, contextual, or functional equivalence (A. Cruse, 2006; Glynn, 2014). From a pedagogical perspective, Newmark (1988) emphasized that synonyms help learners avoid redundancy, expand vocabulary, and achieve stylistic variety in writing. Recent corpus-based studies say that synonyms contribute to fluency and lexical diversity in academic writing. However, studies highlight that L2 learners need scaffolding to use them appropriately.

Gap in the Literature

Although studies in Asia and the Middle East have examined synonymy in EFL contexts (e.g., Fitriani & Rosdiana, 2025; Somaili & Alhamami, 2024), research in European contexts, particularly in Albania, is limited. To our knowledge, no study has specifically investigated how Albanian university students employ synonymy and near-synonymy to construct cohesive essays. This study addresses that gap by analysing the frequency and function of synonymy in student writing, thereby contributing to both theoretical discussions of lexical cohesion and practical implications for EFL writing pedagogy.

Methodology

This section provides an overview of the primary methods employed in the present research. It details the key procedures and approaches used to collect and analyse data, ensuring the study's objectives are met. Additionally, the section highlights the rationale behind selecting these methods, offering insight into how they align with the research goals.

Study Questions

While conducting research concerning the topic, some study questions were aimed to be answered by the end of the study. The study questions are:

1. What is the frequency of synonymy and near-synonymy in Albanian university students' written essays?
2. How does synonymy contribute to the cohesion and coherence of these essays?

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using student essays as the primary source of data (Creswell, 2012). A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables in-depth exploration of how learners use language resources—in this case, synonymy and near-synonymy—to construct cohesive texts

Participants

A total of 56 students participated in this study. They were second-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. They were all Albanian nationals, originating from various regions of Albania, which provided some diversity in their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The participants were drawn from two intact classes within the English Department, namely class IIE and class IIF. As second-year students, they had already completed introductory writing courses and possessed a basic foundation in academic English writing; however, their exposure to advanced concepts, such as lexical cohesion and synonymy, had been limited. This ensured that the participants were at a comparable stage of academic development while still reflecting variation in individual writing experiences.

Instrument and Data Collection

The data for this study were collected during the second semester of the academic year as part of an Academic Writing course. The data collection instrument consisted of a written task assignment. Students were asked to write a descriptive essay on one of two prompts: (1) *"Describe a personal event you will never forget"* or (2) *"Describe a lesson that taught you something valuable."* The task was administered under exam-like conditions. Students were given 60 minutes and were instructed to write a minimum of 250 words. No dictionaries or digital tools were permitted. Before beginning, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and their participation was voluntary. The writing tasks were administered by the researcher, who is also the author of this study and an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, ensuring consistency in the procedure across both classes.

Operationalization of Synonymy and Near-Synonymy

Synonymy and near-synonymy were identified following Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework.

In this study:

- *Synonymy* was defined as the use of lexical items that share an identity of reference (e.g., "begin – start").
- *Near-synonymy* referred to items that share similar meanings but lack complete referential identity, differing in nuance or context (e.g., "walking – activity").

Coding and Analysis

The essays were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019). The analysis involved three stages:

1. Initial coding: All instances of synonymy and near-synonymy were identified and underlined in the texts.
2. Categorization: Synonymy instances were classified by word class (noun, verb, adjective, adverb). Near-synonyms were recorded separately.
3. Validation: The coding was repeated twice to ensure consistency. Examples of both synonymy and near-synonymy were extracted to illustrate how they functioned cohesively in context.

An excerpt from the coding scheme is provided below:

Table 1. Synonymy Coding Scheme

Category	Example from student essay	Type	Function in context
Synonymy (verb)	He began to speak / He started talking	Synonymy	Avoids repetition; maintains flow
Near-synonymy (noun)	"Walking is my hobby / This activity relaxes me."	Near-synonymy	Adds variety; links ideas loosely

Reliability

To ensure reliability, the researcher carefully reviewed all student essays several times during the coding process. After the first round of coding, the essays were rechecked twice more over two weeks to ensure consistency in the identification and classification of synonymy and near-synonymy. Any unclear cases were revisited and coded according to the study's definitions. Because the researcher carried out all the coding alone, inter-rater reliability with a second coder was not possible. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the study, and future research should involve multiple coders to strengthen reliability.

Findings/Results

This study uses a qualitative content analysis process. The cohesion model proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) served as the foundation for this investigation.

The study's data were gathered through a writing task completed by the study participants. According to the analysis method described earlier, the results indicate that students were more familiar with synonyms than near-synonyms. Table 2 presents the frequency of synonymy and near-synonymy in the students' writing tasks.

Table 2. The Frequency of Synonymy and Near-Synonymy Occurrence

Synonymy Type	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage	Number of Essays
Synonymy	203	75.2%	56
Near-Synonymy	67	24.8%	56
Total	270	100%	56

The study results, presented in the table above, found that the students employed all types of synonyms in their writing. More examples from students' essays are explained in the following table.

Table 3. Examples of Synonymy in Descriptive Essays

Category	Examples	Type	Function in context
Verb Synonymy	I remember that day clearly as if it were yesterday. / What I recall from that day is that it was very cold and I was not feeling well.	Synonymy	Avoids repetition; enriches narrative flow
Noun Synonymy	That event is a memory that I will never forget. / ... because that incident changed my life forever.	Near-Synonymy	Keeps cohesion while varying word choice
Adjective Synonymy	It was the first time I ever went to the sea. The view was beautiful. That amazing view inspired me to think about what I wanted to do with my life.	Synonymy	Reinforces description; avoids monotony
Verb Synonymy	Every time I read that book, I started crying because it reminded me of my dad. / After so many years, I was touching that book again. Unexpectedly, I began to weep, just as I did when I was young. It felt like nothing had changed.	Synonymy	Enhances emotional tone; avoids repetition
Adverb Synonymy	I remember my teacher always spoke softly, which made me feel relaxed. / That day, she spoke more quietly than usual. I knew something was wrong.	Synonymy	Adds fluency; maintains consistency in description
Noun Synonymy	The countryside was quiet and peaceful. / Life in such rural areas always seemed slower and calmer."	Synonymy	Keeps cohesion while varying word choice and avoiding repetition.
Verb Synonymy	He began to explain his ideas, but soon he started to hesitate.	Synonymy	Demonstrates the students' ability to vary expression while preserving meaning.
Adjective Synonymy	The city is very dynamic, with a fast-paced lifestyle that never stops,	Synonymy	Enrich the description and reinforce cohesion.
Adverb Synonymy	She answered the question quickly, as if she wanted me to stop asking any more questions. I could understand this when she responded even more rapidly to the next question. Then I stopped.	Synonymy	Maintains fluency in expression.
Noun Synonymy	Walking on the beach is my favourite thing to do. This activity usually makes me feel relaxed.	Near-Synonymy	Maintains cohesion and consistency in description.

Some other examples of synonyms presented shortly are:

- Cities- urban areas,
- Dynamic- fast-paced
- Quite- tranquillity
- Pace- rhythm
- Searching- seeking
- Countryside- rural areas
- Furthermore- in addition to
- However- despite that

The results suggest that students are more familiar and comfortable with using direct synonyms, indicating an awareness of how these lexical items contribute to the coherence and flow of a text. This also suggests that students consciously attempt to avoid word repetition in their writing by substituting words with closely related synonyms.

Students frequently used direct synonyms to avoid repetition and maintain cohesion. For example: "The city was crowded with people. In such *urban areas*, life is always dynamic.", "city" and "urban areas" are used interchangeably to maintain lexical variety while preserving reference.

Students were less accurate when using near synonyms, often leading to semantic drift. For example: "Walking on the beach is my favourite thing to do. These kinds of *activities* usually make me feel relaxed."

Although "walking" and "activities" are related, they are not precise equivalents. The substitution creates a weaker cohesive link.

Some students effectively used synonyms to unify ideas across sentences and paragraphs. For example: "He was *searching* for answers to his problems. The more he *sought*, the more confused he became."

This excerpt illustrates how synonymy facilitates continuity of meaning, thereby contributing to sentence cohesion.

Several essays revealed uncertainty in synonym choice, particularly with near synonyms, leading to awkward phrasing. For example: "My sister ran fast and came first. Girls do not usually do that."

The absence of an accurate lexical substitute weakened cohesion and highlighted the students' limited vocabulary range. The results taken from the study are further discussed in the next section.

Discussion

This section interprets the study's results in light of the research objectives and relevant literature, aiming to explain the implications of the findings, identify patterns, and situate the outcomes within the broader context of EFL writing research.

The findings revealed that synonymy was far more frequently employed than near-synonymy in students' essays, with 75.2% of cohesive ties formed through direct synonyms and only 24.8% through near-synonyms (Table 2). This suggests that students demonstrate stronger awareness of words with identical or very similar meanings, while struggling with items that differ subtly in nuance or contextual appropriateness. It is noteworthy that students utilized various word classes, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, with nouns and adjectives being the most frequent.

Examples from student writing support this pattern. Synonyms were often used successfully across different word classes to avoid repetition and maintain cohesion. For instance, substituting '*memory*' with '*incident*' or '*countryside*' with '*rural areas*' illustrates students' ability to vary lexical choices while preserving reference (Table 3). Similarly, verbs such as "*began*" and "*started*," as well as adjectives like "*dynamic*" and "*fast-paced*," were employed effectively, enhancing essay fluency and readability. These examples indicate that students intuitively recognize synonymy as a tool for enriching expression and reinforcing textual cohesion.

In contrast, near-synonyms were less frequent and often problematic. Examples such as *walking* and *activity*, or *living alone* and *lifestyle*, demonstrate that while students attempted to expand their lexical variety, they sometimes selected words that were loosely related. Such substitutions resulted in weaker or less precise cohesion, reflecting difficulties in distinguishing subtle semantic differences. This finding aligns with other studies that emphasize the need for extensive vocabulary knowledge and contextual sensitivity, which learners often lack, to achieve near synonymy. Similarly, Somaili and Alhamami (2024) reported that Saudi EFL students tended to avoid near-synonyms unless explicitly instructed, while Fitriani and Rosdiana (2025) found that Indonesian learners who received targeted instruction in synonymy produced essays with greater cohesion and lexical sophistication.

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence by demonstrating that Albanian EFL students face similar challenges, with near synonymy. Unlike contexts where synonymy is explicitly taught, the participants here relied on intuitive strategies, favouring direct synonyms with which they were more familiar. This suggests that synonymy is recognized instinctively as a cohesive device, whereas near synonymy requires explicit teaching and practice.

Two main factors explain these difficulties. First, near-synonyms differ in terms of collocational and register constraints, so learners may lack exposure to authentic usage to judge their appropriateness. For example, *explain* and *describe* differ subtly in function, but without explicit instruction, students may treat them as equivalent. Second, limited emphasis on lexical cohesion in Albanian EFL instruction leaves learners without the necessary metalinguistic awareness to use near-synonyms effectively.

By integrating frequency data with qualitative examples, this study offers a more comprehensive picture of how synonymy functions in learner writing. While students can successfully use synonyms to improve cohesion, their limited ability to handle near-synonyms restricts lexical variety and occasionally undermines textual clarity. These findings fill an important research gap by documenting the use of synonymy in an under-researched European context, thereby extending the focus of cohesion studies beyond Asian and Middle Eastern settings. Moreover, the results highlight the need for pedagogical interventions that explicitly address synonymy and near-synonymy in academic writing instruction. Given that the Albanian learners in this study were first-year students, they relied heavily on intuitive synonym choices. However, they struggled with near synonyms, which demand a higher level of metalinguistic awareness.

Conclusions

Communication plays a central role in many aspects of life, and writing is a particularly influential form of communication. It allows individuals to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas in any language. Research indicates that for a writer to engage readers effectively in a foreign language, they must possess knowledge of the subject matter, lexical resources, grammar, and structural variety (Hyland, 2019).

By documenting the use of synonyms and near-synonyms in student writing, this study contributes to filling a gap in cohesion research, which has largely overlooked the Albanian EFL context. Compared to studies in Asian and Middle Eastern settings (e.g., Fitriani & Rosdiana, 2025; Somaili & Alhamami, 2024), this research reveals that Albanian learners face similar challenges, albeit with near synonyms, yet their difficulties are exacerbated by the limited explicit instruction on lexical cohesion in early university courses. These findings provide new insights into how synonymy is understood and applied in under-researched European contexts.

Pedagogically, the results suggest that EFL instruction should move beyond treating synonyms as mere vocabulary enrichment and instead emphasize their role in achieving textual cohesion. Curriculum designers and instructors could integrate explicit lessons on synonymy and near-synonymy, using authentic texts and student essays to highlight differences in meaning and register. Such interventions would strengthen students' lexical knowledge and improve their ability to produce coherent, cohesive essays.

In conclusion, synonymy is a valuable yet underutilized tool for improving cohesion in EFL writing. While students demonstrate competence with direct synonyms, they require targeted support for near-synonyms. Addressing this instructional gap can enhance lexical awareness, improve writing competence, and better prepare learners for academic and professional communication in English.

Recommendations

The study provides insight into the role of synonyms in student writing and how their strategic use can enhance writing quality. The findings point to several pedagogical implications:

For teachers:

Explicit instruction on synonymy and near-synonymy should be incorporated into writing lessons. Teachers can design activities where students identify repetitive words in their writing and replace them with appropriate synonyms, followed by a reflection on whether meaning and register are preserved (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Such practices not only encourage vocabulary variation but also raise awareness of semantic, collocational, and register differences among near synonyms, thereby improving cohesion and contextual accuracy.

For students:

Learners should develop a deeper awareness of lexical relationships. Expanding the repertoire of synonyms through extensive reading and deliberate practice allows students to observe authentic usage and subtle distinctions in meaning, register, and collocation. By revising essays with a focus on the use of synonyms, learners can reduce unnecessary repetition and enhance textual coherence. Peer-review activities can further facilitate reflection on how lexical cohesion is applied in different texts (Hyland, 2019).

For researchers:

Future research could investigate the use of synonymy across various genres, including argumentative, descriptive, and academic essays, and explore instructional interventions that target the use of synonyms and near-synonyms in EFL classrooms. Expanding participant samples, incorporating inter-rater reliability in coding, and conducting longitudinal studies would offer more profound insights into how synonymy supports writing skill development over time. In his study on the use of synonyms, Khazaal (2019) also emphasized that employing synonyms helps avoid excessive repetition of the same word, thereby making speech more engaging and effective. These directions could advance both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practices in lexical cohesion, particularly in under-researched European EFL contexts.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 56 first-year students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana. Consequently, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all Albanian university students or English language learners in other contexts. Future studies could expand the participant pool to enhance generalizability and statistical power.

Second, the study focused exclusively on descriptive essays, which may have shaped the types and frequency of synonym and near-synonym usage observed. Investigating multiple genres could provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' lexical cohesion across different academic writing tasks.

Third, the research relied on qualitative content analysis, which, while rich in interpretive value, is inherently subjective. The identification and classification of synonyms and near-synonyms may vary between researchers. Although repeated rounds of coding were conducted to enhance consistency, inter-rater reliability was not formally measured. Future studies should incorporate multiple coders and calculate inter-rater agreement to ensure analytic consistency and strengthen methodological rigor.

Fourth, students' limited use of near synonyms may have been influenced by their vocabulary proficiency or lack of exposure to synonym distinctions. However, this study did not include a diagnostic vocabulary assessment to confirm such influences. Including standardized vocabulary measures in future studies could clarify the relationship between lexical knowledge and cohesive device use.

Finally, the research was conducted during the first semester of students' studies, a period when exposure to academic writing practices and cohesive strategies is still developing. As a result, students' lexical choices may not fully reflect their potential for cohesive writing. Longitudinal designs that track students' progress over multiple semesters could provide deeper insights into the development of synonym use and overall lexical cohesion.

By addressing these limitations, future studies can enhance the reliability, validity, and generalizability of their findings, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of how EFL learners employ lexical cohesion across different genres and proficiency levels.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Students were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of the tasks, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. No identifying information was collected, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. The study posed no risk of harm to participants and adhered to the ethical standards set by the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana.

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Generative AI Statement

This research was conducted and written primarily by the author. Generative AI tools, including OpenAI's ChatGPT, were used solely to assist with language refinement and grammar correction during the writing and editing stages of the project. The intellectual content, analysis, interpretation of data, and all research findings presented in this study are entirely the work of the author. The use of AI did not involve data generation, content fabrication, or the

replacement of critical academic judgment. All AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed and modified to ensure academic integrity and alignment with research objectives.

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