

Journal of Research and Multidisciplinary

ISSN: 2622-9536 Print

ISSN: 2622-9544 Online

<http://journal.alhikam.net/index.php/jrm>

Volume 9, Issue 2, September 2026, Pages 1211-1218



Beyond Vocabulary: Syntactic And Punctuation Barriers In Efl Students' Use Of Time Order Signals In Process Paragraph Writing

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Abstract

Sequencing steps coherently is a core requirement of process-paragraph writing in English as a foreign language (EFL), and time order signals – first, next, then, after that, finally – are the principal linguistic resources learners rely on to mark that sequence. Even so, many Indonesian EFL students continue to apply these signals inconsistently. This study describes the specific difficulties encountered by students of the English Education Department, Universitas Islam Makassar, when using time order signals to write process paragraphs. A descriptive qualitative design was applied to 21 students, who completed a 30-minute gap-filling writing test built around a process paragraph, “How to Make Instant Noodles,” from which all time order signals had been deleted. Responses were examined for accuracy of signal choice, fit with the step sequence, variety of signals used, and error type. Results show that 12 students (57.14%) applied the signals correctly, whereas 9 (42.86%) still struggled, with difficulties falling into four categories: incorrect usage, repetition, omission, and misplacement. Closer analysis revealed that the primary obstacle was not vocabulary but syntactic positioning and punctuation, suggesting that instruction on time order signals needs to move past word lists toward explicit teaching of placement, punctuation, and variation.

Keywords: *cohesion, EFL writing, process paragraph writing, time order signals, writing difficulties*

Introduction

Writing is one of the central productive competencies in learning English as a foreign language, since it enables learners to put ideas, thoughts, and information into a form others can read and evaluate (Hyland, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Within academic settings specifically, students must be able to produce different text types clearly and in an organized manner, and a crucial part of that competence is arranging ideas so that a message remains understandable to the reader.

Among the genres EFL learners are introduced to, the process paragraph asks students to describe how something is done, or how something happens, by laying out a sequence of ordered steps (Oshima & Hogue, 2021; Zemach & Rumisek, 2021). What holds that

sequence together is the time order signal – also called a sequence word or transitional signal – such as first, next, then, after that, and finally (Suharto & Lestari, 2021; Wijaya & Rahmawati, 2024). These signals mark the order in which steps occur and let a reader trace a process without confusion; when they are missing, an explanation of steps quickly becomes difficult to follow. This function belongs to a wider family of discourse markers, and Mursidin, Nurjannah, Indahyanti, and Hasanah (2020) found that Indonesian EFL students under-use and misapply discourse markers of this kind in argumentative writing as well – evidence that difficulty with cohesive devices is not limited to a single genre of student writing.

Nevertheless, many Indonesian EFL students still find time order signals difficult to use correctly in process paragraphs (Saragih & Purnomo, 2023; Yunita & Pratama, 2022). Some misuse a sequence word, overuse one signal at the expense of others, or leave steps unconnected altogether, leaving their paragraphs short on coherence and logical flow. Suharto and Lestari (2021) observed a related pattern: students generally recognize the basic transition words but often fail to place them correctly within a sentence, while Sari and Putri (2022) found that students tend to draw on a narrow set of signals, repeating words such as then or after that across an entire paragraph. Problems with cohesion recur in other genres of student writing too: examining undergraduate academic writing through Toulmin's model of argumentation, Mursidin and Nurjannah (2026) likewise found that Indonesian EFL students struggle to connect evidence to claims in a coherent way, pointing to a gap between what students know about a text feature and what they can actually produce. Research published in *Jo-ELT* tells a similar story: Setyaningrum and Fatmawaty (2020) found that undergraduates continue to misuse basic cohesive elements such as prepositions even when they understand their function, and Yelliza (2025) reported that students still struggle with the structural and linguistic conventions of academic writing even at the point of producing scientific texts – together suggesting that Indonesian EFL writing difficulties tend to be mechanical rather than conceptual.

This concern with how language and communication function – or falter – in educational settings extends beyond EFL writing research alone. Recent multidisciplinary scholarship, including work published in the *Journal of Research and Multidisciplinary*, shows sustained interest in the mechanics of learner language and communicative performance. At the psycholinguistic level, Saleh and Sarjit Singh (2025) showed how viral, emotionally loaded language shapes young social-media users' engagement and comprehension, underlining that processing and deploying language cues is a learnable, mechanical skill rather than a purely intuitive one. A parallel gap between communicative knowledge and communicative performance appears in Zainuddin, Hasriani, and Nengsi's (2026) survey of junior high school students in Makassar, where a habitual behavior – phone snubbing during conversation – significantly eroded interpersonal communication satisfaction even though participants' underlying communicative competence was not itself in question. In a comparable vein, Nurdiansyah, Arismunandar, and Upu (2025) documented an unmet need to align instructional models with the specific competencies required of student-teachers at an Islamic university in Makassar, again pointing to a mismatch between what a learning model offers and what learners actually need in order to perform well. Read together, this evidence base helps situate the present study: it treats one narrow but consequential EFL competence – time order signals – as a case study of a broader difficulty

Indonesian students face in translating linguistic or communicative knowledge into accurate, real-time performance.

Given these recurring problems, a study focusing specifically on students' difficulties in using time order signals in process paragraph writing is warranted (Zhang, 2023). Such a study can offer a clearer picture of the difficulties students encounter and can inform efforts to improve the teaching of process paragraph writing.

Research Questions and Objectives

Building on this background, the study addresses two questions: (1) What difficulties do students face in using time order signals when writing process paragraphs? (2) How do students actually use time order signals in their process paragraph writing? Accordingly, the study aims to identify students' difficulties in using time order signals in process paragraph writing and to describe how students use these signals in their writing.

Method And Data

Research Design

This study used a descriptive qualitative design, chosen because the aim was to describe and analyze students' difficulties in using time order signals without introducing any treatment or experimental intervention (Hyland, 2022; Zhang, 2023). This approach allowed the researchers to gather detailed information about the kinds of difficulties students faced, based directly on their written responses.

Population and Sample

Participants were 21 students of the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Islam Makassar, all of whom had completed coursework covering process paragraphs (Oshima & Hogue, 2021; Zemach & Rumisek, 2021). They were selected through convenience sampling from a single class considered representative of students who had received instruction on process paragraph writing. Because the sample was drawn from one class, the findings are discussed as indicative of this group rather than generalizable to the broader student population, a limitation addressed further in the Discussion and Conclusions.

Instruments

Data were gathered using a written completion test targeting time order signals (Brown, 2021; Richards & Schmidt, 2022). Students received an incomplete process paragraph, "How to Make Instant Noodles," with the time order signals (first, next, then, after that, finally) removed, and were asked to complete it within 30 minutes by inserting the signals they judged most suitable. Because the instrument was built around the defining features of process paragraphs and focused specifically on time order signals, it let the researchers observe directly how students select and place these signals. Completed paragraphs were analyzed on four dimensions: accuracy of signal selection, fit between signal and step sequence, variety of signals used, and type of error produced.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively (Suharto & Lestari, 2021; Wijaya & Rahmawati, 2024), through four steps: (1) collecting students' completed paragraphs; (2)

identifying correct and incorrect uses of time order signals; (3) classifying the kinds of difficulties observed – incorrect selection, repetition, omission, and misplacement; and (4) interpreting the results in relation to the research objectives. Results are reported descriptively to characterize students' difficulties in using time order signals in process paragraph writing.

Results

Among the 21 students sampled, 12 (57.14%) used time order signals correctly, while 9 (42.86%) still encountered various difficulties, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of Students' Ability in Using Time Order Signals (N = 21)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Correct	12	57.14
Incorrect	9	42.86
Total	21	100.00

Guided by the study's conceptual framework, the difficulties observed among the 9 students fell into four categories. Incorrect usage occurred where a transition word did not match its logical function – for instance, placing finally partway through the steps, or using first for a sentence that actually continued an earlier step – pointing to limited understanding of what each signal specifically does. Repetition of the same signal was the most frequent error, with students relying heavily on a single word, usually then, at the start of nearly every sentence, reflecting narrow vocabulary variation. Omission occurred when steps were written one after another with no transitional word linking them, leaving the relationship between steps unclear. Misplacement occurred when a transition word appeared in an unusual sentence position or lacked the punctuation – typically a comma – that formal English requires, producing awkward, harder-to-follow sentences.

Table 2

Categories of Students' Difficulties in Using Time Order Signals

Category of Difficulty	Observed Pattern
Incorrect Usage	Transition word does not match its logical function (e.g., finally placed mid-process, or first used for a continuing step).
Repetition of the Same Signal	A single signal, usually then, is reused at the start of nearly every sentence, showing limited vocabulary variation.
Omission of Necessary Signals	Process steps are written consecutively with no transitional word linking them, breaking the step-to-step connection.
Misplacement of Signals	Signal is placed in an unusual sentence position, or used without the comma conventionally required in formal English.

A closer look at the incorrect responses indicates that students' central difficulty was not a lack of vocabulary but the placement of signals they already knew. Three recurring patterns emerged: syntactic positioning errors, where transition words sat mid-sentence without the punctuation needed to set them off, disrupting sentence flow; logical sequencing mistakes,

chiefly confusion among next, then, and after that, which made the steps of the process feel less systematic; and punctuation issues, where a signal opened a sentence but the comma formal English requires was left out.

Table 3

Recurring Error Patterns in Students' Incorrect Responses

Error Pattern	Description
Syntactic Positioning Errors	Transition words placed in the middle of a sentence without proper punctuation, disrupting sentence flow.
Logical Sequencing Mistakes	Confusion in the use of next, then, and after that, making the stages of the process less systematic.
Punctuation Issues	Time order signal placed at the start of a sentence without the comma required by formal English writing convention.

Discussion And Conclusions

These findings suggest that mastering time order signals is not simply a matter of memorizing a set of words; it depends heavily on understanding how academic writing works mechanically. This is consistent with Oshima and Hogue's (2021) observation that time order signals follow specific rules of placement and punctuation for separating steps, and that errors in these areas disrupt the flow of information. It also echoes Setyaningrum and Fatmawaty's (2020) Jo-ELT finding that Indonesian EFL students continue to misuse structurally simple cohesive elements even once they understand what those elements are for, which points to a gap in applied grammatical control rather than in conceptual knowledge.

Students' tendency to repeat then throughout a paragraph, meanwhile, reflects a narrow range of transition-word use, in line with Oshima and Hogue's (2021) concern about sustaining reader interest and professionalism in academic writing. The same pattern appears in Mursidin, Nurjannah, Indahyanti, and Hasanah's (2020) study of discourse markers in EFL argumentative writing, which likewise found that students draw on a narrow set of cohesive devices rather than the fuller range available to them – suggesting that limited variation in transition and discourse-marker use may be a persistent feature of Indonesian EFL writing across genres, not something specific to process paragraphs. The misplacement errors that caused steps to overlap in meaning similarly point to a broader issue of paragraph unity: students' inability to place time order signals correctly disrupted the logical sequencing central to process writing (Zemach & Rumisek, 2021).

This pattern of mechanical rather than conceptual difficulty is not unique to written cohesion. Quantitative evidence from Zainuddin, Hasriani, and Nengsi (2026) similarly found that a surface-level behavioral habit – rather than a deficit in communicative knowledge – undermined interpersonal communication satisfaction among Makassar adolescents, which suggests that performance-level breakdowns, distinct from knowledge deficits, are a recurring feature of language- and communication-related research in this region regardless of whether the medium is spoken or written.

Overall, the difficulties experienced by 42.86% of the students in this study appear to stem from weak integration between transition vocabulary and the rules of syntax and punctuation that govern its use, rather than from unfamiliarity with the vocabulary itself. This fits the broader picture emerging from Indonesian EFL writing research: Mursidin and Nurjannah (2026) found a comparable gap between what students know and what they can execute in coherent, connected writing, while Yelliza (2025) found that structural and linguistic control remains an obstacle for Indonesian EFL students even in more advanced academic writing tasks. Taken together, these findings indicate that difficulty in deploying cohesive devices accurately recurs across Indonesian EFL writing development and is not confined to process paragraphs alone.

In conclusion, while most students (57.14%) in this study used time order signals correctly in a process-paragraph writing task, a substantial minority (42.86%) still struggled. These struggles were rooted less in vocabulary knowledge than in the accurate placement of signals within sentence structures and in correct punctuation, both of which affected the coherence and unity of students' process paragraphs. A recurring reliance on a single signal, particularly then, further indicated limited mastery of transition-vocabulary variation even at the higher-education level. These findings suggest that teaching time order signals should move beyond vocabulary lists toward explicit instruction in placement, punctuation, and variation.

This study is limited by its sample of 21 students drawn from a single class at one institution, which constrains how far the findings can be generalized. Future research could replicate this design with a larger and more varied sample – for example, around 50 students across several classes or institutions – to test whether the error patterns identified here hold at scale, and could pair the completion test with interviews or classroom observation to explore why placement specifically remains difficult for students.

Funding

This research did not receive a specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Informed Consent Statement

Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and their responses to the completion writing test were used solely for academic research purposes, with confidentiality maintained throughout data collection and analysis.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings – students' written responses to the completion test – are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant confidentiality.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank the students of the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Islam Makassar, who took part in this study.

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