

The Use of Reference Markers (*it*, *this*, and *that*) and Their Relation to the Pedagogical Context

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the purposes and ramifications of reference markers (*it*, *this*, and *that*) for teaching English in educational situations by analyzing their usage in 10 articles from Newsweek and Tempo News. The study examined the ways in which these indicators support textual coherence in professional writing using a qualitative research approach and content analysis. The information came from eleven pieces that were published for Tempo News and Newsweek. According to the results, reference markers had a less substantial role in the texts under analysis than anticipated; Newsweek had more occurrences of reference markers than Tempo News. This disparity shows that reference markers may be used differently based on target audience, writing style, and cultural norms. The study also raises the possibility of a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and real-world text application. In order to fill these gaps, teachers should enhance their understanding of successful teaching and learning reference marker tactics by incorporating real materials into their lessons and assessing students' competency levels.

I. Introduction

Reference markers such as '*it*', '*this*', and '*that*' play a crucial role in creating coherence and cohesion in written and spoken discourse. These linguistic devices help English learners connect ideas, reduce redundancy, and guide readers through texts by referring to previously mentioned entities or forward to upcoming ones (1). In language teaching, understanding how reference marker's function is fundamental for developing students' speaking, reading comprehension, and writing skills. These markers, encompassing the demonstrative pronouns '*this*' and '*that*' and the pronoun '*it*', are essential elements of English discourse, playing a key role in cohesion, coherence, and information flow (2). However, their simple forms often pose significant challenges for English learners to facilitate their language acquisition in pedagogical contexts. The reference marker '*it*' functions as a personal pronoun, an anticipatory subject, and a dummy subject, each with distinct semantic and syntactic implications. As a personal pronoun, this marker refers to an entity or concept, ensuring the smooth progression of ideas.

For instance, in the sentence '*The book was fascinating. It captivated me.*' '*It*' refers directly to 'the book.' Conversely, *it* as an anticipatory subject that introduces a delayed subject, as in '*It is important to study regularly.*' Finally, *it* as a dummy subject that fills a syntactic slot without carrying semantic content, as in '*It is raining.*' (3). Demonstrative pronouns '*this*' and '*that*' indicate physically and conceptual distance. '*This*' typically refers to concepts closer to the speaker, while '*that*' indicates distance. However, these markers extend beyond the spatial deixis, encompassing temporal and discoursal domains (4). '*This*' can refer to recently introduced information, while '*that*' can indicate shared knowledge or information further back in the discourse. Moreover, they can signal the speaker's attitude and focus, with '*this*' often conveying immediacy and emphasis, and '*that*' distancing or generalization (5).

The use of these reference markers plays a key role in English language teaching, particularly when addressing grammatical rules. Grammar is an important point of language that shows how it works, a study of the whole system and structure that defines the basic skeletal structure of the English language. Therefore, in grammar teaching, the focus is often on the comprehension of grammatically correct sentences using these markers and on form rather than function. By focusing on form, learners gain insight into the precise ways ‘*this*’ and ‘*that*’ contribute to sentence clarity and coherence. A study by Hyland (6) has pointed out the importance of these markers in creating textual cohesion and coherence. For example, *it* often refers to a singular noun or an entire clause that precedes it, helping clarify the subject or object being discussed. Similarly, Hinkel (7) highlighted that ‘*this*’ and ‘*that*’ function as demonstratives, pointing to specific items, ideas, or events. Understanding these markers allows learners to construct grammatically correct sentences in their communication, making them necessary tools in both spoken and written English. These markers not only demonstrate the grammatical relationships between different parts of a sentence but also highlight how these elements interact to form a unified whole. Through consistent practice and exposure, as recommended by Nation (8) in his work on language learning tasks, learners can master these markers and enhance their overall communicative competence.

Related to the rules of sentence structure, grammar is an inseparable part of language. The use of grammar is important in supporting the accuracy of the language delivered to the recipients. However, language is not always communicated in static situations. In fact, language is usually produced based on different contexts or situations. In this situation, the language produced may simply create different interpretations due to the differing analyses from different speakers/readers. The attempt to analyze the relationship between the language and the context where the language is used is called discourse analysis (9). Brown and Yule (10) previously confirmed that the analysis of discourse is basically the analysis of the language in use, thus it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms. Thus, it depends on the purpose or function which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.

The use of these reference markers also applies in discourse analysis. Discourse analysis has long been recognized as an integral part of language teaching and learning. It focuses on how language is used in real-world contexts to convey meaning and achieve communicative purposes. Reference markers, as a key component of discourse, contribute to textual cohesion by linking ideas and maintaining continuity. In language classrooms, teaching reference markers can help learners improve their ability to comprehend complex texts and produce coherent writing. However, studies have shown that students at various proficiency levels often struggle with the appropriate use of reference markers, particularly in academic writing (11)(12). This difficulty may stem from differences in how reference markers are used across languages, cultural variations in discourse patterns, or insufficient exposure to authentic materials in language instruction.

The primary purpose of language is to communicate; therefore, any attempt to teach the process of language learning should be geared toward students’ natural capacity to communicate. The concept of being natural in the process of language learning was offered by Brown (13), who suggested that learners will likely achieve greater retention through contextual or meaningful learning processes rather than rote memorization. Furthermore, the natural use of language is also tied to its role as an integral part of human behavior, a notion supported by Halliday (11), who emphasized that language constitutes the primary means of conveying thoughts, feelings, intentions, and desires within social contexts.

In terms of the role of grammar, McCarthy (9) confirms that there are communicative instances that grammar cannot cover. Specifically, he exemplifies the use of ‘*it*,’ ‘*this*,’ and ‘*that*,’ which cannot always be discussed by the grammatical aspects, such as in the following example:

“It rained day and night for two weeks. The basement flooded and everything was underwater. It spoiled all our calculations.” (p. 35-38)

McCarthy elaborated that the use of *it* in the above sentence may be confused with “*The events of two weeks*” or “*The fact that it rained and flooded*”. English Grammar Today elaborates that the use

of 'it,' 'this,' and 'that' is to introduce further information about topics that are already mentioned. The above words, however, have different uses. In English, it is common to use *it* to refer to the topic that has been written or spoken about previously. For example, "*The heart is the central organ in our bodies. It is used to pump oxygen around the body through the bloodstream.*" In this case, the use of *it* refers to the heart. Unlike, the word *it*, *this* is used to give information about a certain topic for the first time, for example, "*Green Application Form: This must be signed by all applicants and returned immediately.*" The word *that*, on the other hand, is commonly used when the speaker wishes to distance themselves from the topic or the aspects of the topic, for example, "*For many traditional football supporters, it is a problem that so many young girls and women attend football matches these days, that is a sexist attitude, of course.*"

The present study highlights the use of these reference makers, which are commonly known in English as pronouns, in the articles from Newsweek and Tempo News. The study seeks to find out differences in the use of the above references in both English articles written in an American magazine and Indonesian English newspaper and in terms of their frequency and functions. The first five (5) articles were published in Newsweek, while the other five (5) appeared in Tempo News. By examining these texts, the study aimed to shed light on the frequency and functions of reference markers, as well as their implications for language teaching.

To guide the investigation, the following research questions were formulated:

- a. How frequently and in what contexts are reference markers (*it*, *this*, and *that*) used in opinion/insight articles from Newsweek and Tempo News?
- b. What implications do the findings have for teaching reference markers in English language classrooms?

II. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically content analysis, to examine the use of reference markers (*it*, *this*, and *that*) in ten opinion/insight articles. Qualitative concepts are related to research that does not focus on generalization, but instead on in-depth and contextual understanding (14). Frankel, Wallen, and Hyun confirmed that content analysis is the method that analyzes the content of the materials to be studied. The content analyzed can vary, ranging from solid materials and objects to written materials (15). Although the analysis of reference markers was conducted quantitatively, the study drew qualitative conclusions based on a simplistic interpretation of the quantitative results.

The data sources were randomly selected from reputable publications, such as *Newsweek* and *Tempo News*. All ten articles were published on the same date and mostly shared a similar theme, genre, and length, ensuring comparability in the analysis. The analysis focused on identifying instances of reference markers and categorizing their functions based on Halliday and Hasan's (11) framework of cohesive devices.

The methodology involved two main steps:

1. Data Collection: Ten articles were chosen based on their relevance to the study's objectives. The texts were carefully read and annotated to identify occurrences of *it*, *this*, and *that*.
2. Data Analysis: Each instance of a reference marker was analyzed for its function (e.g., anaphoric, cataphoric, or exophoric reference) and its contribution to textual cohesion. The frequency and types of reference markers in the ten articles were compared to determine any significant differences.

Although the study was limited in scope, its qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the data and provided valuable insights into the use of reference markers in professional writing.

Data Collection

There were ten sources of data taken for the present study, all chosen at random on the same date:

Table 1. Collected Data

No	Title	Source
1	US Had 'Compelling' Putin Meeting on 'Five Territories' in Ukraine: Witkoff – <i>Newsweek</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://www.newsweek.com/steve-witkoff-ukraine-ceasefire-vladimir-putin-five-territories-2059919
2	Chinese Fleet Sails into Contested Waters as US Aircraft Carrier Approaches – <i>Newsweek</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://www.newsweek.com/china-news-navy-western-pacific-us-aircraft-carrier-nimitz-2059920
3	Seniors Flood Platform with Questions About Social Security – <i>Newsweek</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://www.newsweek.com/seniors-flood-justanswer-platform-questions-about-social-security-cuts-2060001
4	Brain Tumors Reported Among 6 Staff Members at Boston Hospital – <i>Newsweek</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://www.newsweek.com/brain-tumors-staff-boston-hospital-2059811
5	Azealia Banks Peddles Conspiracy Theory About Celebrity Blue Origin Flight – <i>Newsweek</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://www.newsweek.com/azealia-banks-celebrity-blue-origin-conspiracy-theory-2059839
6	Russia Sets Five Priority Export Sectors to Indonesia – <i>Tempo News</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://en.tempo.co/read/1996840/russia-sets-five-priority-export-sectors-to-indonesia
7	Indonesian Student Arrested by US Immigration for BLM Protest, Supporting Palestine – <i>Tempo News</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://en.tempo.co/read/1996934/indonesian-student-arrested-by-us-immigration-for-blm-protest-supporting-palestine
8	BMKG Says Indonesia Expects Shorter Dry Season in 2025 – <i>Tempo News</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://en.tempo.co/read/1996380/bmkg-says-indonesia-expects-shorter-dry-season-in-2025
9	Prabowo Interested in Learning Jordanian Agricultural Technology – <i>Tempo News</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://en.tempo.co/read/1996861/prabowo-interested-in-learning-jordanian-agricultural-technology
10	Beyond the Hype: Here Are 10 Most Disappointing Tourist Attractions in the World – <i>Tempo News</i> , April 15, 2025.	https://en.tempo.co/read/1997166/beyond-the-hype-here-are-10-most-disappointing-tourist-attractions-in-the-world

The research data included the three reference markers (*it*, *this*, and *that*), which were found in the above articles. The data were further analyzed based on the concept of McCarthy (9). Since there is no text which will be similar, the texts used as sources of data were selected based on the theme/topic. The topic used for the present study was the relationship between America and China. With the same use of topics/theme, it was expected that both articles could possibly produce relatively the same words/phrases/sentences, thus resulting in relatively the same use of references.

Data Analysis

Once the data has been gathered in a Microsoft Word document, the instances of reference markers were analyzed for their functions, which are categorized into three: anaphoric, cataphoric, and exophoric references, which refer to how words or phrases are related to other elements within a specific text.

An anaphoric reference (or known as anaphora) refers to a word or phrase (usually repeated several times in different forms) that has already been mentioned in the text that gives the necessary information to interpret the lines (16,17). For instance, in the sentence “*Indonesians who study*

overseas are more likely to group with people with a similar background to themselves and they tend to merge with the local culture.”, ‘Indonesians who study overseas are referred to as ‘themselves’ and ‘they’, which are anaphoric references to ‘Indonesians who study overseas’.

A cataphoric reference (cataphora), meanwhile, refers to a word or phrase that occurs later in the text (16). For example, in the sentence “*When she arrived at the hospital, my grandmother was billed for the fees of my uncle’s foot surgery.*” Unlike with anaphora, the necessary information here is given later (my grandmother), and ‘she’ here is a cataphoric reference to ‘my grandmother.’

An exophoric reference (exophora), unlike anaphora and cataphora, refers to something that is not referenced in the text but can be gleamed from the context through common sense or shared knowledge (18). For example, in the famous poster of Uncle Sam for World Wars I and II, Uncle Sam says, “*I want you for U.S. Army.*” Here, we do not know who the word *you* are, but if the word come from the context, we know that it likely refers to Americans, and if we do not, we might be confused about who the word *you* here might refer to.

It should be noted that for something to be considered as reference markers, they do not necessarily need to be in the same sentence; they just must be within the same text. **Exophora** requires the interlocutors to share the same environment or the same background to share the same understanding of what the reference markers refer to.

III. Results and Discussion

Table 2: *Newsweek*

No	Marker	<i>This</i>	<i>That</i>	<i>It</i>
1	Anaphora	3	0	25
2	Cataphora	12	0	0
3	Exophora	0	0	0

Table 3: *Tempo News*

No	Marker	<i>This</i>	<i>That</i>	<i>It</i>
1	Anaphora	3	0	9
2	Cataphora	13	0	1
3	Exophora	0	0	0

Based on the analysis of reference markers in ten different articles (five from Newsweek and the other five from Tempo News) the findings were as follows:

Firstly, a total of 66 reference markers were identified in the analyzed texts. Of these, Newsweek contributed the majority with 40 reference markers, while Tempo News contained only 26. This significant difference suggests that Newsweek utilizes referential cohesion devices more frequently than Tempo News. Secondly, in terms of specific types of reference markers, the most commonly used in Newsweek was the anaphoric pronoun ‘it’, which appeared 25 times. This indicates a strong tendency to refer back to previously mentioned ideas, thereby maintaining textual coherence. Following this, Newsweek employed the cataphoric ‘this’ 12 times, signaling upcoming information, and the anaphoric ‘this’ only 3 times. In contrast, Tempo News showed a different pattern. The most frequent reference marker in Tempo News was the cataphoric ‘this’, which occurred 13 times, suggesting a preference for introducing forthcoming content. The anaphoric ‘it’ appeared 9 times, and the anaphoric ‘this’ was found in 3 instances. Additionally, the cataphoric ‘it’ was used only once in Tempo News. This comparison highlights that while both texts employ similar cohesive devices, their distribution and function vary, reflecting possible differences in writing style, audience engagement strategies, or textual structure between English and Indonesian journalistic conventions.

It can be inferred that the anaphoric reference marker “it” is significantly more frequent in *Newsweek*, whereas the cataphoric reference marker “this” appears as the most prominent in *Tempo News*. This pattern of reference use may reflect the stylistic and structural differences between English-language and Indonesian-language journalistic texts. The use of “it” in *Newsweek* suggests a preference for referring back to previously mentioned ideas, contributing to textual cohesion through backward referencing. On the other hand, the frequent use of “this” in *Tempo News* indicates a tendency to introduce or highlight upcoming information, which serves a forward-pointing, cataphoric function. These findings align with previous research by Virdaus and Rifa’i (17), which reported that anaphoric references were the most common overall in journalistic writing. Even though “it” does not occur as frequently in *Tempo News* as it does in *Newsweek*, it still ranks as the second most frequent reference marker in the Indonesian dataset. This suggests a cross-linguistic relevance of anaphora, even if the dominant marker type varies. The contrast in dominant reference markers between the two publications may also reflect differing narrative strategies, rhetorical styles, or discourse conventions shaped by language structure and journalistic practice in each cultural context.

Nugroho (19) discussed that writers who come from different backgrounds may use discourse markers differently. Considering that *Newsweek* is based in New York City and *Tempo News* is based in Jakarta, it can be interpreted that the differing usages of reference markers in these two publications may involve the varied backgrounds of the writers and editors who comprise in the creation and publication of the articles. It would be presumptuous, however, to conclude that simply because more reference markers were found in *Newsweek*, that means native English speakers produce more reference markers. Indeed, even Nugroho (19) stated that the usage of reference markers simply varies by background, and some types of reference markers are just more common with writers of certain backgrounds.

No instances of exophora or the referential use of the word were found in any of the articles examined. The only occurrences of *that* functioned conjunctively, linking clauses rather than serving as reference markers. This absence of exophoric references can be interpreted as a reflection of the writers’ commitment to clarity and precision. Exophoric reference—where pronouns or demonstratives refer to entities outside the text—can introduce ambiguity, especially when it is unclear to whom or what the marker refers. In academic writing, such ambiguity may hinder comprehension, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the assumed external context. Therefore, avoiding exophora can contribute to a more self-contained and reader-friendly text. However, it is worth noting that some scholars, such as Sazonova (20), argue that the use of pronouns as exophoric references can, in certain contexts, enhance engagement and reader connection by invoking shared knowledge or experiences. Despite this, in the context of the current study, no such instances were present. This suggests that the nature of the articles—likely formal and informational in tone—did not lend themselves to the use of exophoric elements, and instead favored clarity, cohesion, and text-internal referencing strategies.

It is interesting to consider that, despite having relatively the same lengths—and with most of them relating to global news—the articles did not appear to have the same number or variety of references. This observation suggests that length alone does not determine the richness or complexity of discourse features in a text. Some articles may employ numerous references, while others may rely on implicit context or assume prior reader knowledge. Therefore, further studies on the use of various discourse aspects, such as discourse markers, references, cohesion devices, and lexical choices, are essential to better understand how writers construct meaning. For example, is there a significant relationship between the types of articles (e.g., opinion, report, feature) and the frequency or types of discourse markers used? Additionally, the level of language mastery could influence the choice and frequency of these discourse elements. Writers with higher proficiency may use a wider range of markers more appropriately to create coherence. Moreover, national or cultural contexts—both of the websites and the writers—might play a role in shaping discourse preferences. Exploring whether different writing cultures emphasize certain markers or cohesion strategies could reveal valuable insights into the intersection of language, genre, and discourse competence.

The findings revealed notable differences in the use of reference markers between the ten articles. Despite sharing a similar theme and genre, the *Newsweek* articles contained significantly more reference markers than the *Tempo News* article. This discrepancy suggests that the use of reference markers may vary depending on factors such as the writer's style, target audience, or cultural conventions. Additionally, the relatively low frequency of reference markers in the *Tempo News* article challenges the assumption that these devices are consistently used to enhance textual cohesion in professional writing. These findings have important implications for language teaching. Teachers should be aware that the use of reference markers is not uniform across texts and genres. The use of authentic materials in teaching English is important for the development of the students' skills (21), but teachers need to know beforehand about the nature of the resources. For example, if the previous study's articles were used in a classroom, it would be easy for an inexperienced student to assume that reference markers occur more often in articles written by native speakers of English, when this is, of course, a simplistic and assumptive view of the topic.

To help students master these devices, educators could incorporate authentic materials into their lessons and explicitly teach the functions of reference markers in different contexts. The use of non-authentic materials (e.g., ones that are not created and utilized for native speakers) might even be useful for less advanced students, since they close the gap between the English gleaned from the authentic materials and the English known and exposed to the student's daily basis (22). Future research involving a wider range of texts and examining students' proficiency levels would provide further insights into how reference markers can be effectively integrated into language instruction. The findings of the present study were expected to cast light on the use of these reference markers in some English articles, particularly in the use of 'it', 'this', and 'that' so that the use of them in written texts can address the gap between theoretical understandings of reference markers and their practical application in pedagogical contexts.

IV. Conclusion

Based on the data collected, the findings revealed notable differences in the use of reference markers among the ten articles analyzed. Although all articles shared a similar theme and genre, the *Newsweek* articles demonstrated a significantly higher frequency of reference markers compared to those in *Tempo News*. This discrepancy is particularly striking considering that both publications are professional news outlets expected to adhere to cohesive writing standards. The higher usage in *Newsweek* suggests a deliberate effort to maintain textual cohesion and guide the reader through complex information, possibly reflecting a greater emphasis on reader orientation and clarity. In contrast, the relatively low occurrence of reference markers in the *Tempo News* articles challenges the common assumption that such linguistic devices are consistently employed in professional writing to enhance coherence. This variation may be influenced by different editorial styles, audience expectations, or cultural approaches to journalistic writing. The findings underscore the importance of context in understanding how cohesion is achieved and suggest that reliance on reference markers may not be as universal as often assumed. These results open up new avenues for exploring cross-cultural differences in writing conventions and the functional role of cohesive devices in media texts.

While reference markers are widely considered important for maintaining coherence in academic and professional writing, their actual usage in the analyzed texts appeared less significant than initially expected. This discrepancy raises concerns about how effectively students are being taught to employ these cohesive devices in their writing. It suggests a potential gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, highlighting the need for further investigation into instructional strategies and students' understanding of cohesion. The use of reference words such as "it," "this," and "that" often varies depending on the nature of the article, the structure of the argument, and the writer's level of insight. Writers must use these references precisely to guide readers through the logical flow of ideas. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that discourse analysis emphasizes meaning as a functional unit, rather than isolating individual sentences. Analyzing texts at the level of meaning units—such as clauses or extended noun phrases—provides deeper insight into how coherence is achieved throughout the discourse. By focusing on these meaning-based structures, analysts can better understand the effectiveness of reference markers in maintaining

textual cohesion and guiding reader comprehension. Consequently, further research should explore how instruction can better align with these discourse-level considerations.

Further studies regarding the use of reference markers and other discourse markers are essential for understanding the intricate relationship between these linguistic features and overall text coherence. Although the findings of this study suggest that the use of reference markers does not always align with established theoretical frameworks, they highlight the complexity of language use in real communicative contexts. Such discrepancies underscore the importance of adopting more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to teaching cohesion devices in English language instruction. Instead of relying solely on prescriptive rules, educators should integrate insights from discourse analysis into pedagogical strategies. This would enable learners to develop a more intuitive and effective use of cohesive devices, particularly reference markers, in both written and spoken texts. Moreover, a deeper understanding of how these markers function in authentic discourse can assist learners in producing texts that are not only grammatically correct but also pragmatically appropriate and coherent. As this study demonstrates, reference markers play a crucial role in guiding readers through the flow of ideas, maintaining clarity, and achieving cohesion. Therefore, their pedagogical importance should not be underestimated, and further empirical investigation is warranted to refine teaching practices and improve learning outcomes in English language education.

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