

ESL/EFL STUDENTS' USE OF CONJUNCTIONS TO MAINTAIN COHESION IN ACADEMIC WRITING



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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore students' use of conjunctions to maintain cohesion in writing descriptive academic paragraphs. It particularly investigates whether the students' uses of four types of conjunctions, additive, adversative, causal, and temporal, are adult-like and whether any of these conjunctions are under-used or over used. The participants were Arabic learners of English and sophomore at university level in the Department of English. A sample of twenty was taken from two different affiliated colleges. The students were required to write a narrative descriptive paragraph in class time to introduce their country to foreigners. Based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) categorization of conjunctions, all uses of conjunctions were tagged and analyzed qualitatively. The findings showed that students' uses of conjunctions were fairly good. However, about half of the students' uses are non-adult like. The uses of additive conjunctions predominantly characterized their writing, while other categories were under-used. The students over used certain conjunctions such as 'and- but- because'. Implications are discussed at the end of the paper.

Key words: cohesive devices, cohesion, conjunctions, ESL/EFL writing.

Introduction:

As one of the basic literacy skills, writing is a complex cognitive skill. It shows learners' ability to use the language and express ideas accurately. Writing in a second or foreign language poses immense challenges not only for beginners, but also for advanced



learners who are competent speakers. It requires thorough knowledge of grammar as well as discourse competence as a main construct in communicative competence (Chiang, 2003). Thus, mastery of L2 writing entails huge effort and time (Djigunovic & Vickov, 2010; Yang & Sun, 2012; Liu & Braine, 2005; Hinkel, 2001). Empirical studies illustrated that cohesive writing is one of the basic criteria for effective communication in writing (Chiang, 2003; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hinkel, 2001; Yang & Sun, 2012).

Cohesion refers to the smooth flow of ideas, their unity, and organization (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Hinkel, 2001). Halliday and Hasan (1976) define cohesion as, “relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as a text (p. 4).” A text is said to have texture if it expresses a unified whole of ideas. A piece of writing is perceived as a text when it functions as a unit of organized ideas in a certain environment. Proficient readers are inclined to distinguish a text as a unified or a collection of unrelated sentences. Cohesion refers to the relationship of meaning that exists within a text. It shows how sentences are structurally independent on one another for propositions to be interpreted. Cohesion is the several possibilities that exist for a text to be linked with what has gone before in a particular text. This linkage is achieved through relationship in meaning. Cohesion, then, expresses the relationship between sentences using cohesive devices (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, pp. 1-28). There are certain cohesive devices that distinguish a text from a group of scattered sentences. These devices give a composition texture and unity. Cohesive devices fall into five basic devices through which a texture is supported: references, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion. Under each of these five basic categories, there are several subcategories of cohesive devices.

Conjunctions are categorized into a scheme of four types to show semantic relation: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. They are indirect cohesive devices because they do not refer to one presupposed entity. Instead, they express meanings which presuppose other components. They are used to show different semantic relationships amongst propositions in a piece of writing. The use of conjunctions shows that what follow is semantically related to what has been introduced earlier. Thus, effective composition is



highly contingent on the correct use of conjunctions as one of the basic components to maintain cohesion (Halliday & Hasan 1976; Yang and Sun, 2012). Conjunctions are words or phrases to express, add, elaborate, modify ideas and move from known to unknown information.

Several studies investigated the effect of the employment of conjunctions and addressed ESL/EFL students' uses of conjunctions to build cohesion. For instance, Chiang (2003) investigated the effect of grammatical and discourse features on native raters' perception of writing quality in assessing EFL writing. Pertinent to the current study is the effect of conjunctions on the raters' perception of the writing proficiency. The findings revealed that an average of 92% of the raters perceived the transitions between sentences and the presence of conjunction words to be the best predictor of the overall writing quality. Several studies explored ESL/EFL students' use of conjunctions at different proficiency level and in different contexts. Doushaq's (1986) and Mohamed-Sayidina (2010) investigated sources of error in using conjunctions when writing in L2 academic writing at college level. Doushaq's study found that participants over used restricted number of connectors such as 'and, but, because'. Mohamed-Sayidina's (2010) study found that the participants used additive conjunctions the most. Additive conjunctions '*and*' was over used followed by '*also for example, such as*' respectively. '*But*' was overused amongst the adversative conjunctions; and '*because*' was overused among causal conjunctions. Both studies attributed the over use of these conjunctions to L1 interference.

In addition, Alkhresheh's (2011) investigated the sources of error in the use of coordinating 'and' by Jordanian high school students. This study revealed that 85.8% of the participants misuse the coordinating conjunction '*and*' as a result of L1 interference. Khalil (1989) investigates cohesion and coherence in Arab students' writing. He found that the participants used conjunctions comparatively high as the second highest cohesive device after reiteration. The conjunctive coordinator '*and*' and '*also*' are the most commonly used among the conjunctions.

Liu and Braine (2005) examine the use of conjunctions in argumentative compositions by



undergraduate Chinese students. The findings showed that conjunctions were ranked the third most commonly used cohesive device after lexical cohesion and references respectively. Additive conjunctions were the most widely used followed by casual, temporal and adversative conjunctions respectively. *'And, also, or'* were the most widely used additive conjunctions, the adversative conjunction *'but'*, and the causal conjunction *'so'* were the most commonly used among their categories. Also, Yang and Sun (2012) explored the use of cohesive devices in argumentative writing of undergraduate Chinese. The results showed that the participants employed conjunctions the least compared with other cohesive devices excluding substitution and ellipsis. The participants overused certain limited number of their favorite conjunctions such as *'so, and 'but'*.

Djigunovic and Vickov (2010) investigated the use of English discourse markers, conjunctions in particular, in the EFL Croatian students' writing at school level. The findings showed that additive followed by causal conjunctions were the most commonly used. *'And, also, because of, and but'* were the most commonly used conjunctions.

Hinkel, (2001) investigated similarities and differences in the use of conjunctions between native speakers (NSs) of English and non-native speakers (NNSs) of different L1. The results showed that speakers of Japanese and Korean used coordinating conjunctions in a similar rate to the NSs whereas speakers of Indonesian used fewer coordinating conjunctions and speakers of Arabic over used coordinating conjunctions compared with the NSs. The findings of the study also showed that NNSs regardless of their L1 background employed significantly more transitions than NSs.

The current exploratory study attempted to investigate and account for exclusively the use of conjunctions to maintain cohesion in writing of EFL college-level students. Traditionally, the type of writing is categorized as narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative. As these categories determine the type of conjunctions to a large extent, this study is confined to a descriptive text. The reason for selecting a descriptive text is due to the students' intermediate level of proficiency. This semester is their second semester to be trained in writing skills.



Research questions:

1. Do pre-service student teachers' compositions have instances of the use of conjunctions?
2. Are the uses of conjunctions in the pre-service student teachers' compositions adult like?
3. Are there differences in the frequencies in the use of the four types of conjunctions by pre-service student teachers?
4. What are the most frequently occurring additive, adversative, causal, and temporal conjunctions in the composition of the pre-service student teachers?

Methodology:

The present study followed a quantitative research design. Administration and teachers at both College of Education and Women College were contacted to explain the goal of the research to administer a writing task. The task for data collection was designed, validated by a professor of testing and assessment in the EFL University, and modified accordingly. During the semester of conducting the current study, the students in were taught how to write short essays: narrative, descriptive, opinion, comparative and contrast, cause and effect essays. No specific input was given to focus on the use of cohesion while writing this paragraph. They were asked to write a paragraph of 200-250 words to introduce their country to native speakers of English. Some written directions along with the writing task were given to help the students to organize the content. The task was carefully administered during the class time under the supervision of the teachers and students' compositions were used for data collection and data analysis.

Participants:

The participants were twenty female, and 49 male sophomore students at Women College and College of Education respectively at Hadhramout University in Yemen. They were required by their teachers to do the task explained above as an assignment. All assignments were collected and twenty anonymous compositions were randomly selected for data collection and analysis (10 females and 10 males). The participants were



pre-service student teachers at the department of English and they were learning English towards attainment of Bachelor of Arts in teaching English. They began learning English as an EFL in the seventh grade at about the age of 14 years old. Their ages were about 22 years old. Thus, they studied English for about eight years: three years at the intermediate school, three years at high school in general education and two years at the college. Second semester of 2014 was the second semester where the participants were to be trained professionally in English writing; they were taught short essay writing in this semester and paragraph writing in the first semester of 2014. According to the education background and the context although at college level, the participants' proficiency level was presumed to be B2 based on the Common European Framework (CEFR). It was worth noting that the teachers at the college were mostly native speakers of Arabic with qualification ranging from assistant professors to instructors of English with BA.

Data analysis:

Based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) model of cohesion, conjunctions were maliciously tagged, counted, categorized in terms of being either additive, adversative, casual and temporal and analyzed qualitatively into adult and non-adult like uses. Also, the most dominant individual conjunction words in the paragraphs were painstakingly tagged and counted manually. Microsoft Excel was used to compute the mean, standard deviation, and frequencies of the total use of conjunctions.

Findings and discussion of the study

Answer to research question one: *Do pre-service student teachers' compositions have instances of the use of conjunctions?*

	Total use of conjunctions	Correct use of conjunctions	Incorrect use of conjunctions	Additive	Adversative	Causal	Temporal
Percentage	7.72%	53.59%	46.40%	72.37%	11.32%	11.87%	5.80%



Mean.	18.05	9.7000	8.4000	13.1	2.05	2.15	1.05
Standard Deviation	-	2.45164	3.97889	1.07606	1.07606	1.07606	1.07606

Table: (1) Percentage, mean and standard deviation of the conjunctions used

To answer research question one, the frequency mean of the conjunctions used was calculated. The findings showed that the four types of conjunctions made up to 7.72% of the entire compositions with an average of 18.05 conjunctions every 250 word paragraph. This means that the participants used conjunctions fairly well. The four different types of conjunctions were employed with different frequencies. However, certain conjunctions were used very often. Therefore, the students' uses seemed to be superficial and monotonous. Regardless of the grammatical error that are not the focus of this study and the errors in the use of conjunctions that will be explained in the other research questions, the following were some examples of the students' use of conjunctions.

Example (1): "*Also*, it has a good weather in summer *and* winter. *Actually* in summer is hot *and* in winter is cold. *In fact* people in Yemen are speaking Arabic language. *Moreover*, all people are Muslims. *In addition* it has an old culture *and* it is an Islamic culture....."

Example (2): "*First* you can visit Seon palace *and* it is a beautiful place to many pictures for memory. *Second* houses of Shibam, they are an awesome houses which make you surprised when you look for them. They have the same size *and* color..."

Example (3): "*Finally* I know I am not good speaker *or* good writer *but* I will do all my best". These examples showed that the participants tried to use different kinds of conjunctions. Bearing in mind that they were in EFL context where they had limited exposure to English language in schools, the uses of conjunctions were satisfactory.

Answer to research question two:

Are the uses of conjunctions in the pre-service student teachers' compositions adult like?

To answer this question, the frequencies, the mean and the standard deviation of the

correct and the incorrect uses of conjunctions were calculated. The following pie chart visually represents the findings of this question.

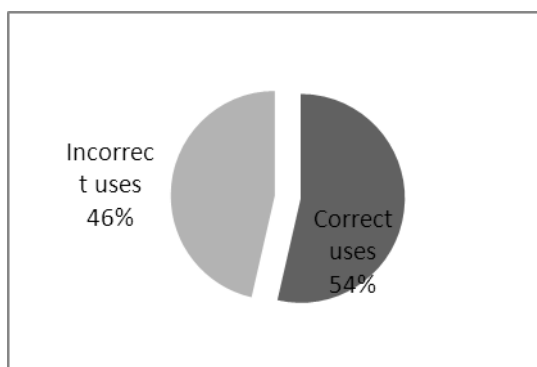


Chart (1): Correct and incorrect uses of conjunctions

The findings showed that 54% of the students' uses of conjunctions were adult like. The participants used conjunctions correctly with an average of 9.70 conjunctions every 250 word paragraph with a standard deviation of 2.45. Although the uses of conjunctions were correct they were limited to certain simple conjunctions. This finding is congruent with Yang and Sun's study (2012) and Liu and Braine's study (2005). They revealed that undergraduate Chinese used restricted number of their favorite conjunctions. In addition, the findings showed that 46% of the participants' uses of conjunctions were none adult like. They used various kinds of conjunctions incorrectly with an average of 8.40 conjunctions every 250 word paragraph and a standard deviation of 3.97. These findings demonstrated that a little below half of the students' uses of conjunctions were incorrect. The incorrect uses of conjunctions were overuse, which was the most common, misuse or under use. The following instances showed that many errors of the overuse of conjunctions stemmed from the unnecessary coordinating 'and' between phrases and clauses. Besides, while students sometimes had to use a conjunction to connect propositions, they failed to do so. Also, they misused the correct conjunctions. The following were instances of incorrect uses: overuse, misuse, and underuse of different conjunctions.

Example (1): "The population wear special dress for the very important selebration *and* for wedding"

Example (2): "*Also* it has a lot of nature places *and* areas to spend very nice *and* funny time"



Example (3): “All people are kind *and* helpful”.

In these examples the students used unnecessary coordination. As a result, there was overuse of ‘and’.

Example (4): “The natural resources that Yemen have dome articulation is the *first* resource to depend on it *and* the fishs’ wealth *and* tourism *and* petroleum wealth.”

The overuse of ‘*and*’ in this example resulted from the mistake that student did not know the rule that ‘*and*’ is used only before the last item in a list while enumerating.

Example (5): “Yemen is so different from other countries such as the natural *and* the culture *and* the government *because* it is unique”.

Example (6): “yemen richest of the patrol, *and* it send it to other countrys, *but* now the man don’t found paattrol for his cars...”.

Example (7): “*because* some of them don’t have any job so they did any thing *because* they need a money”. The students in these three examples misused the conjunctions because they did not express the correct relationship amongst ideas in the sentences

Example (8): “I think that Yemen is unique from other Arab countries it has a lot of people *and* it has a lot of famous places.”

This example showed that the student underused the conjunction ‘*because*’. These findings are congruent with previous studies. Hinkel’s study (2001) found that Arabs over used coordinating conjunctions ‘*and*’; Khalil (1989) pointed out that coordinating ‘*and*’ was the most commonly used by Arabs; Alkhreshah (2011) found that 85.85 of the Jordanian Arab learners misused the coordinating conjunction ‘*and*’.

Answer to research question three:

Are there differences in the frequencies in the use of the four types of conjunctions by pre-service student teachers?

To answer this research question, the frequencies, the mean, and the standard deviation of the additive, adversative, causal, and temporal conjunctions were calculated. The following pie chart visually represents the findings.

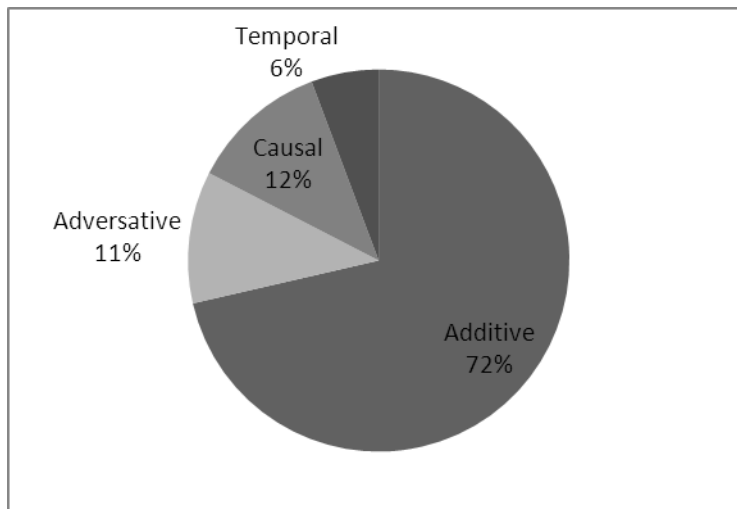


Chart (2): The frequencies of the different types of conjunctions

The findings revealed that the participants employed the additive conjunctions the most and temporal the least. Additive conjunctions made up 72.37% of the total use of conjunctions with an average of 13.1 additive conjunctions of every 250 word paragraph and a standard deviation of 1.07. The uses of adversative conjunctions made up 11.32% of the total uses of conjunctions with an average of 2.05 adversative conjunctions every 250 word paragraph and a standard deviation of 1.07. The uses of casual conjunctions made up 11.87% of the entire uses of conjunctions with an average of 2.15 casual conjunctions every 250 word paragraph and a standard deviation of 1.07. In other words, participants used additive, followed by causal, adversative and temporal respectively. It is evident that there was almost no significant difference between the uses of adversative and causal conjunctions. The temporal conjunctions were employed the least. They made up 5.82% of the total uses of conjunctions with an average use of 1.05 temporal conjunctions every 250 word paragraph and a standard deviation of 1.07. These findings showed the order of using additive, causal, adversative and temporal were generally congruent with previous studies.

Liu and Braine (2005), Mohamed-Sayidina's study (2010), and Djigunovic and Vickov (2010) found that participants in their studies employed additive the most in their compositions. However, Liu and Braine's study (2005) showed that causal and temporal



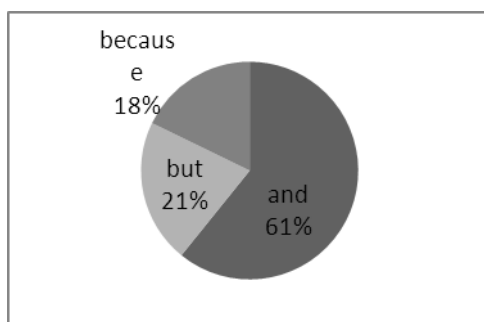
conjunctions were ranked the second and third rank respectively, while Mohamed-Sayidina's study (2010) ranked the temporal then causal conjunctions second and third respectively. Djigunovic and Vickov (2010) cited McCutchen explaining that elaborative discourse markers, including additive conjunctions here, are acquired the first due to their semantic features. The present study ranked additive conjunctions as the most frequently used followed by causal, adversative and then temporal as the least employed type of conjunctions. While these findings supported the findings of the previous studies that additive conjunctions are the most type of conjunctions used, it does not reach the same result regarding the second and third ranking of the conjunctions. The difference between the second and third ranking of the conjunctions, though minimal, might probably be attributed to the difference in the nature of the tasks whether they were descriptive, argumentative or expository.

Answer to research question four:

What are the most frequently occurring additive, adversative, causal, and temporal conjunctions in the composition of the pre-service student teachers?

	and	but	because
Percentage	61 %	21 %	18 %
Mean	10.55	1.80	1.50
Std. Deviation	4.11	1.60918	1.19

Table (2) the most frequently occurring additive, adversative and temporal conjunctions
The following pie chart visually represents the findings about the most dominant conjunctions amongst the main type of conjunctions.



Graph (3): The dominant conjunctions amongst the main type of conjunctions.



The findings showed that there were certain dominant conjunctive words amongst the main conjunction types. Under the main type of additive, the word '*and*' was the most commonly used by the participants. It was used 61 % of the total additive conjunctions with an average of 10.55 times every 250 word paragraph with a standard deviation of 4.11. It should be noted that most of the uses of '*and*' were coordinating '*and*' between phrases and clauses as explained in research question two. Under the adversative conjunctions, '*but*' was the most dominant. It was used 21 % of the entire adversative conjunctions with an average of 1.80 times in every 250 word paragraph with a standard deviation of 1.60. '*Because*' was the most dominant under the causal conjunctions. It was used 18 % of the total casual conjunctions with an average of 1.50 time every 250 word paragraph and a standard deviation of 1.19.

These findings are congruent with previous studies. Doushaq's study (1986) showed that Jordanian Arab EFL learners at college level superficially used '*and, but, because*' most of the time. Djigunovic and Vickov (2010) found that the Croatian primary and secondary school students used '*and, because, but*' the most frequently compared to other discourse markers. Liu and Braine's study (2005) revealed that Chinese undergraduate overused '*and, and but*'. These studies from three different contexts corroborated the same finding shows the universal simplicity of these conjunctions.

Careful analysis of the findings discussed above and the previous literature reviewed, it can be said that successful employment of conjunctions poses persisting challenges to the participants of this study. These challenges might be accounted for several factors such as the huge cognitive load required while writing especially during class time, L1 negative transfer, lack of engagement in process writing, drafting, re-drafting and feedback while teaching writing skills. On this basis, it seems that the participants would possibly develop their use of conjunctions overtime should these factors were taken into consideration while teaching and focused intervention was given on the use of conjunctions to build cohesion. The participants used conjunctions, but they either overused or misused them as many instances demonstrated. Their cognitive skills about



writing, the use of conjunctions in particular, seems to be rudimentary. They used conjunctions as if they speak to someone. They used the conventions of spoken discourse when they wrote. Besides, the findings showed that most of the conjunctions used were structurally, orthographically, and phonologically simple and semantically unambiguous. The participants learned these conjunctions as soon as they learn to speak English, therefore they over used them.

Pedagogical implications and conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that, the pre-service student teachers at College of Education and Women College- Hadhramout University employed conjunctions fairly well. However, they tended to overuse the additive conjunctions. They specifically tended to overuse certain simple conjunctions. Therefore, their writing style is rendered as superficial and their use of conjunctions was monotonous. In order to enhance learners' use of conjunctions and ultimately develop their writing skill, the following implications can be drawn.

Teachers may need to engage students in process writing and offer their students various sources of feedback. Equal emphasis on the various types of conjunctions should be struck while teaching or giving feedback and learners need to be trained to use different types of conjunctions while writing. They should not be limited to the simple conjunctions that they are familiar with. New conjunctions should be systematically introduced, explained and modeled. Critical reading might be integrated with teaching of writing. The reading material and the teaching process can provide the learners with essential input in their EFL context. Exposing learners to authentic samples of writing and careful analysis of these writing samples may assist learners to acquire the rhetorical conventions of English throughout learning experience. Common errors attributable to L1 interference might be explained with contrastive examples from both languages.

Although the findings of this study may not be generalized to other contexts, they shed light on a universal phenomenon that ESL/EFL students encounter difficulties to appropriately apply cohesive devices, conjunctions in particular, while writing in L2. Also, it



is worth noting that the participants of this study also encountered difficulties to appropriately apply other cohesive devices as demonstrated in their writing. It is highly recommended that further studies investigated the use of other cohesive devices.

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