



Conjunctions in the English Essay Writing of Spanish EFL Learners

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to contribute to clarify the question of the relationship between frequency of use of conjunctions in EFL students' compositions and writing quality. The current research was thus carried out to study conjunction and conjunction errors in argumentative essays written by third-year and fourth-year secondary education Spanish learners and to examine the correlation between their frequency of use and writing quality. Participants were 350 secondary education students enrolled in seven different Spanish state schools all of whom had started learning English at the age of five. Analysis of the compositions for cohesion was performed by counting conjunctions in accordance with the taxonomy of cohesive devices provided in Halliday and Hasan (1976), consisting of four categories of conjunctions, in terms of semantic function: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. Results showed a positive significant relationship between conjunction density and writing quality. The qualitative analysis of the students' compositions revealed that additive and casual conjunctions formed the largest occurrence of use, followed by adversative and temporal conjunctions. In addition, there was an extremely limited variety of conjunctions from each category in students' writings. The majority of conjunctions were either underused or not used at all. Participants experienced difficulty in using conjunctions especially adversative and additive ones. Some pedagogical implications are drawn from the study.

Keywords: conjunctions, secondary education, L2 writing quality, conjunction errors;

1. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to contribute to clarify the question of the relationship between frequency of use of conjunctions in EFL students' compositions and writing quality. The current research was thus carried out to study conjunction and conjunction errors in argumentative essays written by third-year and fourth-year secondary education Spanish learners and to examine the correlation between their frequency of use and writing quality. Conjunction is a cohesive relation that refers to "a specification of the way in which what is to follow is systematically connected to what has gone before" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976:227). We can say that conjunctions are aids for the reader to connect sentences and paragraphs in order to make sense of the text.

The use of conjunctions has been found to be problematic for second and foreign language learners from different educational contexts. To the best of our knowledge, few studies have investigated the use of conjunctions in secondary education EFL learners' writing. In order to bridge this gap, the present study targets secondary education Spanish students' expository essay writing.

2. Literature review

One of the most significant works that have contributed to our explicit understanding of cohesion is Halliday and Hasan (1976). Cohesion refers to the range of grammatical and lexical possibilities that exist for linking an element of language with what has gone before or what follows in a text. This linking is achieved through relations in meaning that exist within and across sentences (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 10). Cohesion is divided into lexical cohesion and grammatical cohesion; the latter is subdivided into four types, that is, reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Halliday and Hasan (1976: 226) refer to the cohesive relation of conjunction in the following terms: "Conjunctive elements are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings; they are not primarily devices for reaching out into the preceding (or following) text, but they express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse". Halliday and Hasan (1976:237) categorise conjunctions into four subcategories: additive, adversative, causal and temporal. This categorisation of conjunctions which will be used for the present study.

Over the past 30 years a number of studies have analysed the association between the employment of cohesive items and writing quality. However, no agreement has been reached so far.



Some studies find no connection between cohesion and writing quality (e.g. Bae, 2001; Castro, 2004; Meisuo, 2000; Zhang, 2017). On the other hand, a series of studies discovered some evidence of a significant relationship between cohesive ties and writing quality (e.g. Crossley, Kyle and Macnamara, 2016; Lahuerta, 2004, 2016; Liu and Braine, 2005; Yang and Sun, 2012; Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2017). In addition to the study of the correlation between cohesion and the quality of compositions, researchers have also identified some problems concerning cohesion in the writings of ESL/EFL learners. Some corpus-based studies have shown the underuse, overuse and misuse of conjunctions by ESL and EFL students (e.g. Hamed 2014; Narita, Sato, and Sugiura, 2004; Ong, 2011; Wei-yu Chen, 2006; Yin, 2015).

3. Aims of the study

The aim of this paper is to contribute to clarify the issue of the relationship between the number of conjunctions used and quality of EFL writing as it remains an open one in the literature.

As our second aim, we intend to examine to which extent the use of conjunctions might associate with distinct grade EFL writers. The comparison between third and fourth graders' writings allows us to identify how the use of conjunctions develops within a school setting and may deepen our understanding of the deployment of cohesive items in EFL writing.

Furthermore, we carry out an analysis of conjunction use in secondary education students' argumentative essays in order to identify frequency of use of different conjunction categories and likely difficulties in conjunction usage.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were 350 secondary education students enrolled in seven different Spanish state schools all of whom had started learning English at the age of five. The sample was divided into two groups: One group made up of 161 students in the third year of compulsory education and a second group composed of 189 students in the fourth year of compulsory education. The students in the third year of compulsory education had a lower intermediate level (A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR) and those in the fourth year of compulsory education had an intermediate level (B1 level according to the CEFR).

4.2. Procedure

For the present study, the data come from a written composition activity, which was administered to participants in their own classroom. All the participants were given 30 minutes for the writing activity. In this way, both time and topic constraints were controlled in order to make results comparable (Wolfe-Quintero et al. 1998).

This study mainly concerned the quality of student compositions and thus every sample composition was marked to get a score that could represent its quality. The compositions were rated according to such factors as content, explicitness of ideas, coherence, syntax and vocabulary of each composition.

Analysis of the compositions for cohesion was performed by counting conjunctions in accordance with the taxonomy of cohesive devices provided in Halliday and Hasan (1976), consisting of four categories of conjunctions, in terms of semantic function: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal.

5. Results

A statistical analysis was carried out with the program R Development Core Team 2012, version 2.15.

Regarding the relationship between frequency of use of conjunctions and writing quality, conjunction density was significantly associated with the composition global score ($p = 0.69$, $p\text{-Value} = <0.001$).

The comparison between third and fourth year graders in terms of the frequency of use of conjunctions in their compositions showed a significant difference between both grades. Fourth graders outperformed third graders in the total number of conjunctions (M (fourth graders) = 4.41, M (third graders) = 3.28, Student's t -test, $p < 0.001$).

With respect to conjunction usage in participants' written texts, a total of 879 conjunctions were used in participants' essays, of which 188 (21.3%) were used inappropriately. Additive and casual

conjunctions formed the largest occurrence of use, followed by adversative and temporal conjunctions. The highest percentage of inappropriate use of conjunctions committed by the learners was in the use of adversative conjunctions (17.1%) and additive conjunctions (16.7%). There was an extremely limited variety of conjunctions from each category in students' writings. In addition, the majority of conjunctions were either underused or not used at all.

The highest percentage of inappropriate use of additive conjunctions was *in addition* in fourth and third graders' writings. *And* was the most frequently used conjunction by all participants.

The highest percentage of inappropriate use of causal conjunctions was *therefore* among fourth and third grader writers. *Because* was the most frequently used conjunction in both groups.

The highest percentage of inappropriate use of adversative conjunctions was *however* in third graders' writings and *but* in fourth graders' writings. *But* was the most frequently used conjunction by all participants.

The highest percentage of inappropriate use of temporal conjunctions was *first* in third and fourth graders' writings. *Finally* was the most frequently used conjunction in third graders' writings and *first* in fourth graders' writings.

6. Conclusions

From the results obtained in the present study, we can conclude that conjunction density and writing quality are positively related. This study also showed that higher proficiency EFL learners outperform lower proficiency EFL learners in the ability to use conjunctions. Furthermore, for the secondary level learners of the study, the use of conjunctions still remains at a basic stage, which inevitably affects the quality of their writings.

The application of conjunctions to use in writing may constitute persistent challenges to EFL learners across different grade levels; therefore, from a pedagogical perspective, secondary education ELF teachers should place more emphasis on the use of conjunctions, teaching students a large quantity of these cohesive ties and making them aware of the semantic distinction between conjunctions that belong to the same grammatical category.

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