

The Effect of Using Conjunction as Cohesive Device on the Undergraduates' Quality of Writing in Argumentative Essays of Jordanian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The goal of this research was to investigate the effect of use conjunctions on the overall quality of argumentative writing of Jordanian English as foreign language (EFL) learners. This mixed-method research included sixty (n=60) undergraduate students at the Department. of English Language and Literature at Mu'tah University in Jordan. The participants of the research were selected using purposive sampling method. The data of the research were collected using written essays and interviews. The data was analyzed using SPSS. The data was collected using analytical scale Jacob et al., (1981) to measure the quality of argumentative essays. The result of this research showed that there was a weak negative but irrelevant correlation between writing quality and the frequency of conjunctions as cohesive devices. This correlation indicates that the frequent and general use of devices in the writing of Jordanian students did not contribute to the quality of the writing under any conditions. Also the finding revealed that there is an extremely negative but irrelevant correlation between the use of conjunctions devices by Jordanian EFL students and their writing quality. Therefore, the correlation was negative and insignificant for Jordanian EFL students. More specifically, the result shows that the frequencies of conjunctions were not found as an indicator of good writing quality for Jordanian EFL students. This research is significant for providing a considerable number of pedagogical implications for further research that will offer great contribution to the field of teaching writing in EFL setting in Jordan in particular and English as second language (ESL) context in general. Moreover, the research has shown a better understanding of cohesive devices / conjunctions by Jordanian EFL students at Mu'tah University.

Keywords: Argumentative essays, conjunction, cohesive device, English as a foreign language, Jordanian undergraduate

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Introduction

English teaching methodology especially for writing skills in second language (ESL) settings has undergone various stages of development in the last few decades (Mirhosseini, 2009). In the process of its development, specific models of writing were assumed the most successful at the various stages of development (Yang, 2007). One previous model emphasizes the mastery of the mechanics of grammar to create errorless written essays without much consideration to the manner a text is written. This has resulted in the judgment and evaluation of such written texts in terms of the number of errors and not in terms of the significance of text or on the element of logic (Gangemi & Presutti, 2011).

Alkhotaba (2015) admits that textbooks do not provide students whether in English as a second language (ESL, hereafter) or English as a foreign language (EFL, hereafter) context with adequate introduction to the depth and diversity of coherence features which are essential in the production of a good piece of writing. Therefore, many EFL textbooks present sentences according to the grammar item which just teaches students to provide supporting examples and details without investigating the multitude of coherence features (Alkhotaba, 2010).

Halliday and Hasan (1976) criticize the focus on the grammaticality and mastery of sentence structure. They argue that such focus results in the neglect of discursive aspects, to little or no transfer to use in actual written essays with the effect that it might develop into an inhibiting rather than enhancing factor in a written product.

Klimova and Hubackova (2014) also criticize the emphasis of conventional methods on the correct word usage, grammar, spelling and punctuation. He argues that these methods do not provide much awareness to extra-textual features that contribute to the process of constructing coherence in a written text. In addition, the principal goals of these traditional methods were to endorse knowledge of the language system and to develop students' competence by means of controlled performance (Aryadoust & Liu, 2015).

This was so because they believed that when learners are taught how to relate to the formal elements of the language system, their competence will develop automatically (Asassfeh, 2015). For this reason, sentences were treated as self-contained units and many believed that mastery of proper sentence structures would lead to an improvement in competence and performance. Such a practice was more like teaching to write sentences in a vacuum, since they do not specifically target a particular audience or a particular situation (Coker, Jennings, Farley-Ripple & MacArthur, 2018).

Calkin (2018).argue that there was an assumption that foreign language learners can advance from the sentence-level to appropriate essays writing without sufficient preparation, basically because learners can produce an effective written essays in their native language. In fact, this is still one of the beliefs that many English language teachers and learners in Jordan adhere to.

Literature Review

In the tertiary level of education students who study English as a foreign language attend various classes, such as literature, history, speaking, listening or essays. In the writing classes it is demanded from them to show skills in writing in a foreign language. Therefore, academic writing requires from students linguistic abilities as well as discourse knowledge as they are expected to demonstrate a conscious “effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas” (Myles, 2002, p. 1).

Grabe and Kaplan (1998) explain the nature of writing in terms of the rhetorical triangle“ which comprises textual structure, cognitive processing and social contexts. Therefore, writing is described as an interaction between writer, reader, subject matter and text; therefore, writing is the synthesis of cognitive, social, and textual factors (Grabe & Kaplan 1998).

Accordingly, a skilful writer needs to possess content knowledge where he/she manifests the knowledge of concepts involved in the subject matter; context knowledge; language system knowledge where he/she indicates the skills of appropriate use of lexis and syntax; and writing process knowledge (Zhao, 2018).

Therefore, among all four skills that EFL students need to acquire proficiency in English, writing is regarded as more complicated because it tests not only the student’s ability to use language but also to express ideas (McKinley, 2018). Writing in a foreign language requires the writers to demonstrate skills both in the form and in the function of the English language (Marshall & Marr, 2018). Because of that, writing is considered as a process of discovering and creating meaning where ESL skilled writers show the ability to explore and clarify ideas and are capable of attending to language-related concerns primarily after their ideas have been delineated. Writing is a thinking process where decisions are made by the writer on lexical choices, structural options and possible organization of information and ideas. The writer “is always purpose- and goal-guided” as he or she is involved in planning and advancing the written discourse. Consequently, the writer needs to select and arrange words and sentences with caution so that “cohesion and coherence can be achieved through various semantic, syntactic and contextual ties”. Hence, “writing is regarded as a dynamic process; and the construction of a text involves links at various levels- lexicon, grammar and organization” (Kuo 1995, pp 47-48).

In academic settings, writing skills are practiced in the form of essays. Composing involves combining of structural sentences units into a more-or-less unique, cohesive and coherent larger structure. A piece of writing which implicates composing contains surface features that connect the discourse and underlying logic of organization which is more than merely the sum of the meanings of the individual sentences. Composing consists of two kinds of writing: the writing as telling or retelling, and the writing that involves transforming. The former contains narrative and descriptive writing, and the latter expository and argumentative writing (Grabe & Kaplan 1998). Therefore, it is stated that “academically valued writing requires composing skills which transform information or transform the language itself” (Grabe and Kaplan 1998, p 17).

Even though EFL undergraduates have been learning English for years, it is estimated that writing in a foreign language still can cause some obstacles, namely some students fail to recognize

and appropriately use the conventions and features of academic written prose by producing vague and confusing essays with an improper structure or by writing essays that are too personally involved (Hinkiel 2004:4). Other discourse-level difficulties of EFL writers are poor topic continuance, inadequate use of examples, limited vocabulary, and incorrect or limited use of cohesive devices (Meisuo 2000:61). Many studies have been carried out on cohesion devices and revealed the importance of cohesion in ensuring the quality of texts. Jalififar (2008) investigated the Iranian junior, senior and MA students' essays, majoring in TEFL, and found that there was a direct and positive relationship between the quality of the essays and the number of well-functioned discourse markers. The results also revealed statistically significant differences between the use of discourse markers and essays quality in the groups. All these researchers clearly stated that the higher number of DCS and the higher variation of DCS the topics used in their essays, the better the overall quality of their essays will be.

Likewise, Kalajahi and Abdullah (2015) aimed at finding out the relationship between use of discourse connectors and cohesion of writing one in the writing samples of Malaysian school students. 90. Argumentative Writing chose from the Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing (MCSAW, Version 2).

Although the rubric checks for five components, including content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics, to address to the purpose of the research only "Organization" marks were taken in to account since it is an only component that measures cohesion of essays. The result revealed that there was a weak negative insignificant correlation between writing quality and the frequency of the DCS in the writing of Malaysian ESL students. The lack of relationship between writing quality and DC use can imply that DCS has not been used effectively and appropriately by the Malaysian ESL students (Jacob's et al., 1981).

Moreover, Sanchez, (2019). Examined the Use of Discourse markers in Argumentative essays by Learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language. A mixed-method approach was used; a total of 64 essays from 5 levels of proficiency were analyzed to identify connectors, discursive operators, and metatextual connectors, following Calsamiglia and Tusón's (2001) classification of discourse markers. Findings revealed that there is a statistically significant increase in the number and the variety of discourse markers used from beginners to advanced levels. The accuracy in the use of discourse markers decreased as the proficiency level increased. Furthermore, discourse markers were shown more essential for the quality of the essays at the advanced levels; a higher number and a wider variety of discourse markers correlate more strongly with quality scores at the higher levels.

In Jordan, English is instructed at all educational levels as a foreign language. Learners are expected to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills of writing in English. However, the students encounter problems when it comes to writing particularly in generating an appropriate argumentative writing. They find it problematic to create a well-developed argumentative writing. This is due to the lack of understanding of the different structures of English and writing processes (Al-Khotaba, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, more complaints have been voiced out by Jordanian language instructors regarding undergraduates' poor writing. Instructors commented that most students faced difficulty when they attempted to produce a piece of writing. They misused cohesive devices in their writing as they lacked the appropriate vocabulary and knowledge of coherence in writing (Obeiah and Bataineh, 2016).

Also, the students are not able to produce unified, integrated, and coherent essays. They lacked the necessary and important techniques in producing well-developed essays. They do not use appropriate cohesive devices to show their creativity and critical thinking skills in argumentative writing (Rababah & Melhem, 2015). For instance, the students tended to use simpler lexical repetitions and fewer complex lexical repetitions in their writing. They tend to avoid the use of complicated words when attempting to produce a piece of writing (Al Khotaba, 2010). Despite, the years of learning writing, many Jordanian undergraduates are still incompetent and unable to produce coherent writing. They produce disconnected and isolated sentences which result in incoherent and sometimes meaningless written texts (Al Natsheh, 2007; Al-Zuoud, 2013; Al Jeradaat, 2008). The undergraduates writing problems are due to many reasons such as the writing curriculum imposed by the Ministry of Higher Education in Jordan which requires EFL students to follow specific traditional methods used in the teaching of writing (Obeidat, 2006).

The use of cohesive devices in the Jordanian undergraduates investigated by many researchers (Alsawalha and Chow, 2012; Al Khotaba, 2010; Al- Natsheh, 2007; Al-Jeradat, 2008 ; Shatarat, 1990). For instance, Alsawalha and Chow (2012) explored the relationship between writing proficiency and writing process of English language and literature students at a local University in Jordan. Writing methods were seldom used among the students. Also, English proficiency affected the writing methods used among the students.

Methodology

Search Design

This research employed quantitative design to investigate the use of cohesive devices in argumentative essays produced by 60 undergraduate students majoring in English language and literature at Mu'tah University in Jordan for the academic year 2017/2018. According to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009) using quantitative design in a research study helps a researcher cross-validate the research instruments of the study and the findings of the research.

Participants of this research consisted of sixty Jordanian students, who were selected using purposive sampling method to participate in the present research. The sample consisted of 21 females and 39 males. The number of subjects in this research was similar to the number of participants recruited in previous studies by Nawal (2014) and Al-Khresheh (2010). The subjects' ages ranged from 21-22 years old. All the subjects speak Arabic as their first language. They have studied English for 12 years at schools and four years at a public Jordanian university.

Instruments

The instruments that were used in this study were: 1. ESL Essays Profile and 2. Concordance Software. These instruments are described in the next section.

ESL Essays Profile

This profile was developed by Jacob et al. (1981) which has been used extensively (Ting, 2003; Meisuo, 2000; Sasaki, & Hirose, 1999; Perkins, 1983). The ESL Essays Profile divides writing into five components with various percentages, i.e. content (30%), organization (20%), vocabulary (20%), language use (25%) and mechanics (5%). Each component has a set of criteria ranging from “excellent to very good” to “very poor” with a specified range of scores.

Analytical Tools: Concordance Software: AntConc 3.4.4m (2014)

Recently, with increasing interest in the area of corpus studies, the above software will be used for this research. As Paltridge (2006) stated, almost all texts collected in corpus studies are generally saved and analyzed electronically. To determine how and where the specific features of language were located in the discourse, researchers mainly use the concordance to analyse the occurrences of that specific features of language in the corpus.

Procedures tried to conclude whether or not such a connection could be found in the writing of the Jordanian EFL students. To this point, a total number of 60 purposive sampled pieces of writing from tertiary education level at Mu'tah University in Jordan, was selected and scored by two raters. Using Jacob et al. (1981). Scale, the raters first scored the quality of the writings. Then, they calculated the frequency counts of different examples of conjunctions devices in each writing.

Then, the researcher succeeded in successively using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test to determine how the quality of writing was correlated with the use of cohesive devices.

The Research Objective

The current research intends to achieve the following objective:

- i. To examine the effect of the use of conjunctions on the overall quality of writing.

Research Question

This research addresses the following research question:

- i. What is the effect of the use of conjunctions on the overall quality of writing?

In this regard, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was used to determine how the quality of writing was correlated with the use of cohesive devices. In the next section, Table 1.1 indicates the overall correlation of the writings across the sampled writings and Table 1.2 exhibits the correlation between the use of conjunctions devices and the quality of the writing of the Jordanian students' written essays.

Table 1. *Overall Correlation between Writing Quality and the Frequency of Conjunctions*

		Frequency of DCS
Writing Quality	Pearson Correlation	-.02
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.84
	N	90

p<.001

As can be viewed, there was a weak negative but irrelevant correlation between writing quality and the frequency the use of conjunctions as cohesive devices $r(90) = -.02$, $p < .001$. This correlation indicates that the frequent and general use of devices in the writing of Jordanian students did not contribute to the quality of the writing under any conditions. Consequently, it is possible that frequent and extensive use of cohesive devices will reconstruct the quality of the writing.

Table 2. *Correlations between Writing Quality and the Frequency Use of Conjunctions in the Jordanian EFL Students*

Level		Frequency of DCS
University	Writing Quality	Pearson Correlation .23
		Sig. (2-tailed) .23
		N30

Table two presents that there is an extremely negative but irrelevant correlation between the use of conjunctions devices by Jordanian EFL students and their writing quality $r(30) = .23$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the correlation was negative and insignificant for Jordanian EFL students $r(30) = .23$, $p < .001$. More specifically, the findings show that the frequencies the conjunctions were not found as an indicator of good writing quality for Jordanian EFL students.

This study was the first research to investigate the correlation between frequency the use of conjunctions devices and quality of the essays in an EFL setting. The findings of the research showed that it is possible that students' argumentative writing with more coherent devices will seem more coherent to the writer. Negative and insignificant correlation in Jordanian EFL learners may suggest that these EFL students attempted to include more coherent devices in their writing basically because they believed in the use of 'how' as conjunction.

It may also infer that they favored not to attempt to use some of the unfamiliar conjunctions. It may also assume that those cohesive devices are not being applicably and methodically addressed in the teaching resources they were officially shown to. It may be the case that the teaching materials and methods might focus more on the accuracy of language and give insufficient

attention to the language elements that allow students to connect effectively and adequately in English.

However, findings of the present research do not agree with the results of the studies that report a high and sometimes significant degree of correlation between the use of conjunctions and overall writing quality such as Kalajahi and Abdullah (2015) and Sanchez, (2019). It may be impressive to show that there are relevant studies with findings contrasting with the results of the current research. For example, Jalififar (2008) explored the Iranian junior, senior and MA students' essays, majoring in TEFL, and found that there was a direct and positive relationship between the quality of the essays and the number of well-functioned discourse markers. The results also revealed statistically significant differences between the use of discourse markers and essays quality in the groups.

All these researchers clearly stated that the higher number of DCS and the higher variation of DCS the topics used in their essays, the better the overall quality of their essays will be. Relating the findings of the present research with those discussed earlier in this research, it can be argued that the text quality cannot be just a function of conjunctions. There appear for the other components (e.g., lexical reiteration, collocation pattern, reference, etc.) that enhance the consistency, coherence and quality of the texts. Additionally, this relationship can be affected by the type of the text and whether or not the writer is a native speaker.

Discussion

This research found that there is significant relationship between the use of appropriate conjunctions with quality of essays. It is significant to examine relationship between the Jordanian EFL students' use of conjunctions and their writing quality. These findings agree with previous research on the use of conjunctions such as Martínez, (2016) and Sanchez, (2019), who stated that proper use of conjunctions contribute to the development of students' writing quality. The quality of argumentative essays were measured by use of analytical scale Jacob et al. (1981) It gives an overall quality score depending on a general impression of argumentative writing, considering syntactic and organization quality. Since the use of conjunctions is associated to the developed text organization, analytical valuations of the students' essays were measured for appropriate scoring technique. The possible presence of a correlation between different types of cohesive ties, particularly conjunctions devices and writing quality has been investigated widely since the publication of Halliday and Hasan's (1976), *Cohesion in English*. In general, no formulated correlation has therefore been tabulated for the writings of native speakers (Tapper, 2005), past research has witnessed many studies tried to discover such association in the script of non-native speakers of English in an ESL/EFL background. In relation, the researcher was impressed to establish a correlational analysis for the Jordanian EFL students' writing since the findings of past research were inadequate and it was, in fact, insignificant to restate it.

Consequently, the findings of the research showed that investigating the use of conjunctions is essential for both EFL learners and teachers provide them with solutions for writing-quality based problems in one hand. On the other hand, the result of the research is also helpful for curricula designers to consider incorporating conjunctions in textbooks and classroom materials.

Conclusion

The research concluded that students used different types of conjunctions devices in their written essays including additive, adversative, causal and temporal. These conjunctions or devices were main blocks in the textual organizations found in the students' argumentative writing. These textual organizations were the results of the text cohesion brought about the use and frequencies of the different types of conjunctions in the written essays produced by Jordanian English as foreign language students at Mu'tah University.

The result revealed that the presence and absence of any of the conjunctions affected the overall cohesion of the written essays. Also, the result revealed that a written essays that has a high frequency in the use of cohesive devices provided meaningful written text to the readers while a written essays had a low frequency in the use of conjunctions did not provide its readers with a coherent and meaningful summary. For instance, written essays such as T21–High Group, T5–High Group, T4– High Group, and T6– High Group, respectively used varied types of conjunction including *also*, *but*, *first of all*, *secondly*, *on the other hand*, *in addition*, *and*, *to sum up* in which the percentage in the use of conjunctions by 26 texts produced by Jordanian students showed 74.72%.

Consequently, these written texts appeared meaningful and unified due to the dense use of conjunctions devices. This made the written essays meaningful and coherent to their readers because their sentences are well-connected and organized with one another, whilst written essays that contained lesser number of conjunctions devices such as T15– Low Group, T22–Low Group, T29–Low Group and T30–Low Group were not well-connected with one another and did seem meaningful due to the low percentage in the use of conjunctions recording about 4.53%. On the other hand, written essays that contained many conjunctions along with other lexically connected sentences were able to provide the readers with a brief summary the theme of the topic. However, sentences that contained many conjunctions and cohesive devices assisted in making a written text more coherent and meaningful. This means that there is a positive correlation between the quality of writing and the frequent use of cohesive devices in the writing of Jordanian students it does not only contribute to the quality of the writing under any conditions but it may work otherwise.

Moreover, it is possible that frequent and wide use of cohesive devices will reconstruct the quality of the writing. Interestingly, it was revealed that students' argumentative writing with more coherent devices will seem more coherent to the writer, cohesive devices are, therefore, by no means the only confirmation of a unified and cohesive text.

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