

## The Difficulties Faced by Libyan EFL University Students in the Use of Conjunctions: Performance Analysis

د. حسن علي محمد البكوش

كلية الآداب جامعة الزاوية

**ملخص:** الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب جامعة الزاوية في تعلم واستخدام أدوات الربط. تم التركيز في هذه الدراسة على مادة القواعد الإنجليزية نظراً لما لها من أهمية بالغة في استخدام اللغة في حد ذاتها. وتفحص هذه الدراسة الحالة الحالية فيما يتعلق بتدريس هذه المادة، التي من بينها الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في تعلم واستخدام أدوات الربط في اللغة الإنجليزية.

تتمثل الطريقة المنهجية التي استخدمت في جمع البيانات في دراسة عدد 40 مقالة قصيرة، كتبت بواسطة 40 طالباً وطالبة من طلبة السنة الرابعة، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية الآداب جامعة الزاوية، كان إجمالي أدوات الربط التي استخدمت في جميع المقالات 1327، منها 1015 أي [73%] كانت صحيحة.

وأنَّ الاستخدام الصحيح لمعظم أدوات الربط ناشئ عن التركيز على صياغة التعليمات والتدريب والتقييم الأسلوبية، حيث كان معظمها لها مرادفات في اللغة العربية. أنشئت هذه الدراسة استناداً إلى بعض الدراسات السابقة حول التماسك طبقاً للمنهجية والمخرجات. وكان عدد 312 خطأً أي [27%] تم اكتشافها ومعظمها ناتج عن سوء الاختيار والإدخال؛ وذلك لأسباب لغوية.

إنَّ التعليمات المركزة قد تجعل المتعلم أكثر فاعلية باستخدام الإستراتيجيات الإدراكية لمعظم الأخطاء الشائعة.

لذلك فالسديد للأداء حول جوانب أخرى للتماسك حاجة ملحة قبل الحكم على مهارة طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في استخدام أدوات التماسك طبقاً لأدوات جمع المعلومات مثل الاستبيان الإدراكي، واختبارات التمييز، والمواضيع التعبيرية التي يفرضها المعلم.

**Abstract:**

English grammar itself was a concern for investigation in this study because grammar is what makes communication possible. This study examines the current situation in English grammar teaching by exploring the difficulties that Libyan EFL university students faced when they study and use the logical conjunctions. The method that was used to find out all of these difficulties is a number of 40 short essays written by 40 fourth-year English department students at the university of Zawia were examined. Out of 1327 conjunctions were used, 1015 [73%] and judged to be correct. The correct production of most of the conjunctions was most probably due to systematic form-focused instruction, practice and feedback since they are closed-class words and most of them have equivalents in Arabic. Thus, this study constitutes a departure from the previous studies on cohesion in terms of methodology and findings. An analysis of the 312 errors detected indicated that they were mostly selection and insertion errors committed for linguistic reasons. Form-focused instruction can be made more effective and learner-centered by taking into account the cognitive strategies underlying the most common errors. Further extreme performance analyses are needed in other aspects of cohesion before judgments about EFL students' competence in the use of cohesive devices based on unreliable data collection tools such as perception questionnaires, recognition tests and teacher-imposed composition topics.

**1.Introduction:**

The majority of linguists and language teaching specialists talk about cohesion by referring to Halliday and Hasan's [1976] pioneering publication on the issue. Not only did their book as a basic discourse analysis and text linguistics but also had a significant impact on language teaching and learning. All of the definitions of the concept of cohesion center around Halliday and Hasan's [ibid, p.25] view that it is 'a basic unit of meaning' that signals relationships between sentences and paragraphs of a text, [see also Adas, 2012, Al-Jarf,2001, , Leo, 2012]. Elsewhere, Halliday and Hasan [1985, p.4] say that "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text". According to

them, cohesive devices include reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion. The first three are grammatical whereas conjunction is "on the borderline of grammatical and lexical levels". [Halliday&Hasan, 1976,pp. 5-6].

This study focuses on the use of conjunctions by Libyan learners of Foreign language [EFL]. Conjunctions are variously referred to as linking words, connecting words, discourse markers, logical connectors and transitional devices. They are a closed-class words defined by Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman [1983, p.323] as "words and phrases whose function is to show some logical relationship two or more basic sentences". Some of these linking words are coordinating conjunctions connecting clauses or sentences that are grammatically and syntactically equal; the others are subordinating conjunctions connecting unequal clauses or sentences. The two types show paratactic and hypotactic relationships respectively.

Cohesive devices play crucial role in spoken and written text building [Ball, 1986; Sadighi, 2012]. They facilitate comprehension of the text [Adas, 2012; AL-Jarf, 2001; Castro, 2004; Leo, 2012]. Celce-Murcia and Larrsen Freeman [11983,p.323] show the importance of logical conjunctions in speaking, writing, listening and reading for EFL learners. As Tomiyama [1980] says, improper use of linking words results in global errors which may lead to misunderstanding and even communication breakdown. Similarly, Oshima and Houge [1991,p. 165] talk about the detrimental effect of the first language when it leads to excessive use of coordination which makes EFL students' composition "boring to read and difficult to focus on the ideas expressed". Thus, the text suffers syntactically and semantically if the logical conjunctions are not used, overused or improperly used.

Many researchers believe that cohesion poses a serious problem to EFL learners. For example, Tangkieng [2010] concludes that students have problems with cohesion even at an advanced level of proficiency in EFL. Adas [2012] reviewed a number of cohesion studies Olatjn, [2006] to support his view that EFL students are incompetent in cohesion. Al-Jarf [2001] and Sadighi [2012] studied the use of cohesion by Arab EFL students respectively. Unlike Tangkieng [ibid] who investigated cohesion in general, Al-Jarf and Sadighi rank

ordered the different aspects of cohesion according to their levels. According to Al-Jarf substitution was the most difficult whereas Sadighi found reference to be the most difficult. Both of them agreed that conjunctions were the easiest. Al-Jarf used a recognition test for data collection whereas Sadighi asked her students to write about one of two topics she had given them.

## **2.Aims of the Study:**

This study focuses on the use of conjunctions by Libyan EFL university students. It is intended to constitute a departure from the above mentioned studies in terms of data elicitation and analysis. First, it aims to control the variables which might have affected the reliability of their findings. Second, it aims to focus exclusively on the use of the relevant conjunctions through a performance analysis – an analysis of the correctly used as well as the incorrectly used conjunctions – in order to see the magnitude of the problem compared to the correct production within the same aspect, not in comparison with other aspects of cohesion. Thus, performance analysis constitutes another point of departure from the studies where researchers compared conjunction errors with those committed in the other aspects of cohesion. This study is intended to give a complete picture of EFL students' performance in the use of relevant conjunctions when data collection variables are controlled. It also seeks to present a deeper and more detailed analysis of the errors in this area.

As stated earlier, this study gained impetus from the data elicitation tools and procedures used in some relevant previous studies and the findings reported in them. Kharma[1985], for example, based his findings on the predictions of contrastive analysis of English and Arabic which may not reflect the students' actual errors. Al-Jarf [2001] used a recognition test. A production test would have reflected the students' actual competence in using the cohesion devices. Sadighi [2012] used a writing task where the students had to choose one of three given topics. Since the students were not involved in the selection of the topics, their background knowledge might have affected their linguistic performance. The same applies to Tangkieng [2010] who provided feedback on the students' written work.

### 3. Methodology:

The present researcher collected composition topics from the final exam of the academic year 2014 / 2015 fourth year students. They were Libyan EFL university students, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Zawia. They were taking a post-intermediate essay writing course as a part of the requirements for a bachelor degree in English. The essays were written as a final exam in the first session. The students had already studied four writing courses: paragraph writing in the first year and essay writing in the second year. In the third year course, the students were required to write mostly argumentative essays using the various modes of writing they had studied in previous two years [description, definition, narration, comparison and contrast, analysis, etc.]. The first four to six weeks of the third year were devoted to [1] revision of writing thesis statements and topic sentences, and [2] revising teaching and practicing the cohesion devices. The rest of the year was spent on [1] suggestion and discussion of topics and preparation of outlines, and [2] writing the essay and provision of feedback on the common problems in previous essay in the second year. In the fourth year, the students were devoted to write several kinds of four to six paragraphs essays. Regarding used in this study, in the final exam of the academic year 2014 / 2015, 40 students of the fourth year department of English chose to write about one of four topics; College Life, Health, Vacation/Holiday and My Ultimate Dream. The students were asked to use correct conjunctions according to correct relationship by taking into account cohesion and cohesive devices.

### 4. Results and Analysis:

The total number of the conjunctions used in 40 essays was 1327 at an average 33 conjunctions per essay. The two tables below show the number, percentage and means of correct and incorrect conjunctions.

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Correct and Incorrect Conjunctions in 40 Essays:

Total Used	Correct		Incorrect	
1327	1015	73%	312	27%

Table 2. Means and Percentage of Correct and Incorrect Conjunctions per Essay ;

Used	Correct		Incorrect	
32	25	73%	7	27%

Tables 1 and 2 above show that the students used a remarkable number of linking words, among other cohesion devices, to achieve cohesion. The correctly used conjunctions [73%] were far more than the incorrectly used ones [27%]. This finding caution us against making sweeping generalization about the difficulty of cohesion in learning EFL such as those made by Adas [2012], Pearson [2005] and Tangkieng [2010]. The results concur with of Al-Jarf [2001] and Sadighi [2012] who found the use of conjunctions to be the easiest of all aspects of cohesion [reference, substitution, ellipsis etc.]. However, as stated earlier, Al-Jarf and Sadighi did not conduct a performance analysis, they focused only on the errors and compared conjunction errors with the errors made in the use of other cohesive devices.

The students in this study used various types of logical conjunctions expressed at least 13 different relationships [addition, emphasis, similarity, exemplification, cause, result, condition, sequence, manner, transition to a new point, choice, opinion, stating the obvious, summary, conclusion]. They used both coordinating and subordinating conjunctions within and between sentences and paragraphs. The essays typically started with a brief introduction including the thesis statement which contained a concessive sentence such as "Health is Wealth. Health is Freedom from Disease and Sickness". The thesis statement was then developed by using various rhetorical modes such as enumeration, sequence, description, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, conclusion and recommendation.

The findings of this study show that even the students who had problems with vocabulary and grammar used most of the linking words correctly. This is in line with Sadighi's [2012], p.260] finding that "good and poor essays did not differ significantly in cohesive devices." However, the findings of this study show that coordinating conjunctions, especially 'and' , were not as excessive as reported by researchers. According to Kharma [1985] this could be attributed to

increased proficiency in the language. It is worth mentioning here that 'and' in English and 'wa' in Arabic share at least seven functions: sequence, contrast, concession, addition, condition, resumption, comment and simultaneity. Instead of expressing addition by 'and', many students used multi-word conjunctions such as 'not only .... But also'. Some even used idiomatic expressions such as 'To add fuel to the flame'. Not only did the students use semantically correct conjunctions but they also select the appropriate ones from a set of conjunctions expressing the same relationship, [e.g. because vs since – yet vs but]. In almost all essays, the concluding paragraph started with the appropriate conjunction [In brief, Briefly, To conclude, To sum up, In conclusion, In a nut shell, etc.]. In some essays there were no conjunction errors.

The large number of correctly used conjunctions [73%] could be due to systematic form-focused instruction, revision, practice and feedback on cohesion in the third year. The students might have studied and practiced cohesion also in their previous writing courses in the first and second year. Related to the issue of instruction is the fact that the language learners' cognitive development is usually a head of their linguistic development. Since conjunctions express semantic and logical relationships between facts and ideas in a text, foreign language learners, by virtue of their cognitive maturity, can understand and express such relationships. This may explain EFL students' ability to use logical conjunctions correctly even if their grammar and vocabulary lag behind. The large number of correctly used conjunctions could also be due to positive transfer from the first language [Arabic]. Overuse of 'and' Arab EFL students is attributed to negative transfer [Kharma, 1985]. Existence of negative transfer presupposes existence of positive transfer, especially in case of logical conjunctions – a closed-class of about 200 words. In many cases there is one-to-one correspondence between Arabic and English conjunctions. [Kkarma,1985]. However, detection of the positive influence of the first language is not as easy as the detection of its negative effects. Correct production of a linguistic form or structure may be due to other reasons such as implicit acquisition through exposure to the language or positive transfer from the target language

itself. Thus, the correct use of the logical conjunctions could be attributed to [1] systematic form-focused instruction, practice, revision and feedback, [2] cognitive maturity, [3] positive syntactic transfer, [4] acquisition through exposure to the language, and [5] positive semantic transfer.

Most of the researchers who analyzed the cohesion errors of Arab-speaking university students [Kharma, 1985; Mohammed, 2010] underscored the excessive use of coordination by using 'and' as the most frequent error. However, the relatively small number of conjunction errors found in the present performance analysis [27%] include both coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Effective teaching techniques need to take into consideration the most common difficulties that learners face which calls for a detailed classification and a deeper analysis of the most frequent errors. Teachers need to know the cognitive strategies underlying such errors. Some errors could be attributed to learner-external factors such as inadequate explanation or excessive correction by the teacher. This could lead to confusion and misunderstanding resulting in instruction-induced errors. Another reason for the analysis of errors in this study is that the examples clearly show students' grammar and vocabulary problems which were more serious than their cohesion problems as stated earlier.

Accordingly, the 255 errors detected in this study were classified and quantified according to the main manifestations of error: selection, insertion and omission [Table 3]. In each of these categories, the errors were classified according to the various logical relationships that the students intended to express. A third and important dimension was added to the analysis by further classification of the errors with the aim of arriving at their possible psycholinguistic explanations. Errors analysis usually acquires a psych-cognitive dimension through classification of the errors in terms of selection, insertion and so forth since these are the manifestations of the various underlying learning and communication strategies used by the language learners. Compound errors and ambiguous errors were ignored because they were very few; they constituted only 2.3% and 1.1% of the total number of errors made respectively.



Table 3. Number and Percentage of Selection, Insertion and Omission Errors:

	Selection	Insertion	Omission	Total
Number	157	132	23	255
%	55	37	4	.....

#### 4.1.Selection:

Table [3] above shows that most of the errors were due to the use of formally or semantically incorrect conjunctions. [i.e. selection errors]. These were made in various types of logical relationships [addition, concession, cause& effect sequence, etc.]. They could be divided into the following three main types:

##### 4.1.1.Incorrect Conjunction for Correct Relationship:

In the examples above, the student used an incorrect conjunction from a set of conjunctions expressing a particular relationship. In other words, this type of selection error was committed when the student correctly figured out the logical relationship between facts and ideas [e.g. concession] but failed to choose the contextually or syntactically appropriate conjunction from among those which express that relationship [e.g. though, even though, however, but, even so, yet, still, while, nevertheless, regardless of, despite, in spite of]. This could be due to transfer from Arabic where one conjunction stands for two or more conjunctions in English [e.g. 'raghm'= although, even though, despite, in spite of]. The same applies to the use of 'like' and 'as' where Arabic uses 'ka' for both. It could also be due to problem related to the construction of the sentence [e.g. the use intensifiers 'very' and 'so ..... that' . In the examples listed in the study, the other errors [grammar, vocabulary, etc.] were not corrected to give the reader a clear picture of the students' level of proficiency in EFL. Another reason is that some conjunction errors might have induced by problems in vocabulary or structure.

##### 4.1.2.Fomally Incorrect Conjunction:

This second category includes errors related to the form of the conjunction. The logical relationship between ideas and the choice of the linking word were both correct. Thus, the errors could be due to

low proficiency level in the language. They were mainly vocabulary and orthography errors.

- \* All at all [All in all]
- \* On the other side [On the other hand]
- \* As the same time [At the same time]
- \* Beside [Besides]
- \* Moretheless [Moreover]
- \* In briefly [In brief – Briefly]
- \* Latest but not the least [Last but not the least]
- \* Than [Then]
- \* Further more [FURTHERMORE]
- \* Where ever [Wherever]

#### **4.1.3. Incorrect Logical Relationship:**

Unlike the errors in the previous two categories where the logical relationship between ideas and facts was correct, in this third category the conjunction does not express the correct relationship. This could be attributed to the students' inability to logically link the sentences; it could also be due to the students' ignorance of the meaning of the linking word.

#### **4.2. Insertion:**

Cases of redundant conjunctions amounted to [37%]. These could be divided into three main types.

##### **4.2.1. Dublication of Meaning:**

Most of these errors were due to the repetition of the meaning by using synonymous word, phrase or sentence which could be attributed to the influence of Arabic whose style is characterized by repetition and over-statement.

##### **4.2.2. Dublication of the Conjunction:**

In this category, the logical relationship between two ideas was expressed by two synonymous conjunctions. Such an error could originally be due to an error in the first language carried over to the foreign language. The students might duplicate the linking words in Arabic as a result of the negative influence of the phenomenon of repetition discussed above.

#### 4.2.3. Use of a Conjunctions Where None is Required:

Another type of insertion error was the use of a linking word where none was required. Like selection errors, this could be due to failure to recognize the logical relationship between ideas or due to the ignorance of the meaning of the conjunction or cases of its use. Redundant conjunctions could also be instruction-induced. They could be due to incomplete or inadequate explanations leading to confusion or misunderstanding on the part of the students. The teacher's exclusive focus on conjunctions at the expense of the other aspects of cohesion [repetition, substitution, ellipsis, etc.] may lead to their excessive use. Insisting on cohesion when teaching or providing feedback may be misunderstood by the students and result in such a single-minded view of cohesion. This study revealed cases where the students unnecessarily and indiscriminately used linking words within and between sentences and paragraphs.

This is most probably an instruction-induced problem reflecting a one-sided view of cohesion. The student might have thought of the process of cohesion only in terms of using conjunctions. Therefore, he used an addition word at the beginning of the paragraph to link it with the previous one believing that by doing so he would produce a physically linked group of paragraphs leading to a coherent essay.

#### 4.3. Omission:

Out of the 255 conjunction errors found in this study, only 13 [4%] were cases where a required conjunction was not used. Most of the missing words [7] were addition conjunctions [and, also, not only ...but], two were cause and effect and two were concession conjunctions. Such omissions could be performance slips. They could also be competence errors resulting from misunderstanding. For instance, students might have generalized the use of the comma when listing items in a sentence, thus dropping the linking word 'and' before the last item on the list. To sum up, the conjunction errors [7%] detected in this study included selection, insertion and omission errors committed for syntactic as well as semantic reasons. These very reasons, among others, may also account for the correct use of some linking words.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications:

The analysis of the performance of EFL university students in the area of conjunctions revealed that most of linking words [73%] were correctly used. Error analysis, by definition, would not show what the statements were able to do; it would give a one-sided view of their competence. The analysis of errors in all aspects of cohesion [reference, ellipsis, , substitution, etc.] may show the relative difficulty level of logical conjunctions, but it still focuses only on the empty part of the cup. Analyzing the students' performance in all aspects of cohesion was not possible in this study due to limitation of space. Therefore, only the linking words were singled out for investigation. Further studies are needed to shed light on the students' performance – errors or non-errors – in other aspects of cohesion.

Contrary to what some researchers believe, the findings of this study show that the use of logical conjunctions by EFL students does not pose a serious problem. No doubt, students' proficiency level in the language plays a role in this respect. However, this study revealed that both good and weak students used most of conjunctions. This is most probably due to the fact that these conjunctions are a small group of words [about 200 closed-class words] which can be mastered, among other things, by effective instruction and practice. As Lee [2002, p.154] said, cohesion can be "understood, taught, learnt and practiced in the classroom" Hence, form-focused instruction and practice together with a rigorous performance analysis are needed before envisaging conjunctions as a serious problem based on the findings of error analysis, perception, studies or predictive contrastive analysis. The data for this study was collected following systematic instruction, practice, revision, and feedback on cohesion. The drawbacks inherent in the data elicitation tools used in some related studies were avoided by adopting a learner-centered approach to process-oriented writing.

Effective form-focused instruction and practice need to take into account the common difficulties that the students face. A deeper and more detailed analysis of the most frequent errors may yield useful material to be incorporated in teaching, practicing, revising and providing corrective feedback. In this study, a three-dimensional

analysis of errors was conducted. They were classified and analysis according to [1] types [selection, insertion, omission], [2] the logical relationships [addition, concession, cause & effect, etc.], and [3] the possible reasons. Such an analysis can shed light on the possible learning and communication strategies underlying the errors. Knowledge about these strategies may, in turn, help in achieving a learner-centered teaching technique. Awareness of the role of the first language [Arabic] through negative transfer may explain why Arab students commit errors when using, for example, 'although' and 'despite'. In such cases, brief and simple contrastive comparisons between Arabic and English may be an effective technique. A reasonable use can be made of the first language to encourage positive transfer and warn against its possible negative effects. Reference to the first language can be particularly useful in teaching EFL conjunctions since they are closed-class words and many of them have equivalent in Arabic.

Apart from the learner-internal errors, the analysis revealed some possible instruction induced problems. Cases of overuse of some conjunctions and the indiscriminate use or omission of some others could be attributed to incomplete explanations or excessive correction. Thus, like bilingual contrastive comparisons, form-focused monolingual instruction, practice, revision and feedback need to be planned and delivered carefully to safeguard against confusion or misunderstanding that may result in such induced errors.

### **6.Recommendations:**

In the light of the above discussion, the following recommendations are given:

1. Teachers reconsider their attitude towards teaching methods and focus more on teaching grammar inductively more than deductively as a tool to help students of using language.
2. Teachers should make clear effort to help students learn and use the logical conjunctions in writing compositions.
3. Students should be able to criticize their own language performance which may help them to strengthen their writing weak points.
4. Students should persist in learning the language by doing more reading and writing.

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