

## Connective Expressions as Metadiscourse Markers of Writing Quality in Undergraduate Students' Expository Writing

### Abstract

This article examines third year students' expository writing and the use of conjunctive expressions (connectives) as markers of good quality essays which is measured in terms of conjunctive expressions' appropriate use and density, and is reflected by the teachers' assigned scores to the students' essays. The expository essays were analyzed for connectives' use by adopting Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of conjunctive cohesion. The expository essays were divided into two groups, highly scored essays (above 12) and poorly scored essays (below 10) to test the correlation between the use of connectives and the quality of essays, reflected by marks. The results show that when students use lot of connective expressions, the quality of their writing will not be good, but when they use a little of connective expressions, the quality of their writing will be good. Accordingly, the hypothesis upon which the research is based, that there is a positive relationship between connective expressions' use in terms of frequency and appropriacy, and the students' writing quality, showed negative results and the hypothesis was not, thus, confirmed.

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### ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال الكتابة التفسيرية لطلبة السنة الثالثة واستخدام ادوات الوصل (حروف العطف) كعلامة للنوعية الجيدة للكتابة والتي تقاس من حيث الاستخدام الكثيف والمناسب لادوات الوصل و تنعكس من خلال العلامات التي يعطيها الاساتذة لكتابة الطلبة. وقد تم تحليل الكتابة التفسيرية من حيث استخدام ادوات الوصل من خلال الاعتماد على تصنيف التماسك المقدم من طرف هاليداي وحسن. تم تقسيم المقالات التفسيرية إلى مجموعتين، المقالات الجيدة (فوق 12) والمقالات الضعيفة (أقل من 10) لاختبار العلاقة بين استخدام ادوات الوصل ونوعية الكتابة التي تعكسها العلامات. أظهرت النتائج انه كلما استخدم الطلبة الكثير من ادوات الوصل كلما كانت نوعية الكتابة ضعيفة وكلما استعمل الطلبة القليل من ادوات الوصل كلما كانت نوعية كتاباتهم جيدة. وفقا لذلك فان الفرضية التي يقوم عليها البحث، أي أن هناك علاقة ايجابية بين الاستخدام الكثيف والمناسب لادوات الوصل وجودة الكتابة لدى الطلبة اظهرت نتائج سلبية وبالتالي فانه لم يتم تأكيد الفرضية.

### Introduction

As the Soviet Union approached military parity with the United States, President Successful communication via the written mode of language is, without doubt, a major and persistent issue for teachers at the level of university because writing is considered as a necessary requirement for academic success. This language skill has always received careful attention by being taught and emphasized right from the very early stages of learning English as a second/foreign language.

In part, difficulty in writing arises from the fact that it requires a good command of certain linguistic features and conventions vis-à-vis particular genres of writing. Alone, linguistic knowledge does not suffice for the production of an

acceptable and successful piece of discourse. Awareness of how certain genres are written and the conventions restricting their use is of key importance for communication nowadays.

Several linguistic resources are at the disposal of writers to produce well-organized, well-constructed and coherent texts. These linguistic resources have been thoroughly investigated and resulted in a prolific research in the realm of discourse analysis. They have also been claimed to be a defining factor for the production of coherent and successful pieces of discourse. These latter form an important part of grammatical cohesion; they are, namely, conjunctive expressions (connectives).

Familiarity with conjunctive expressions' use, and raising awareness towards the importance they have in certain genres of writing can help students to produce an approximate native-like writing that can be understood and identified by a given discourse community (academic, in this case). Given their importance in grammar and the role they play in guiding and facilitating the process of reading, the use of such linguistic features is claimed to be critical in writing (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

### **Research Assumptions**

The present research lies upon the assumption that:

- The presence and appropriate use of conjunctive expressions may improve the students' writing quality;
- Students' poor scores in composition may be due to the small as well as the inadequate use of conjunctive expressions in their writing.

### **Research Objectives**

This research paper has been carried out to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To investigate the types of conjunctive expressions used by students in the expository genre of writing.
2. To identify the predominant type of conjunctive expressions used more frequently and which are associated with the genre of expository writing.
3. To explore the relationship between the use of conjunctive expressions and the students' overall writing quality.

#### **1. Theoretical Issues**

##### **1.1. The Writing Skill**

As a component of literacy, writing is seen as an active mode of communication. It allows the writer to express and transmit his thoughts and experience by putting them into words (Spence et al., 2008:21). This language skill is found in any person, and it can be improved through regular practice (French and Sim, 1993: preface). It has also come to be recognized that writing is the major language skill with which student struggle most and have troubles improving it. Tribble (1996:3) maintains that view by stating that, "writing is a

language skill which is difficult to acquire.” According to him (*ibid.*), amongst the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), writing is the skill that is felt to be creating more difficulties for students to learn and/or acquire despite the many years one might have spent learning the language. This problem seem to appear in first and second/foreign languages alike.

As an active means of communication, writing is also seen as a social activity. People use it to interact and to achieve certain purposes: to inform, to convince, to explain, to entertain and so on (Mora-Flores, 2008:1; Harris *et al.*, 2003:2). To be good writers, one important step is to make students aware of their lived experience (Mora-Flores, 2008:1).

### **1.2. The Nature of Writing**

Previously, writing has been conceived as involving the production of graphic symbols only. It has been described as being represented by “letters or combination of letters, which relate to the sounds we make when we speak” (Byrne, 1988:1). That being the case, the skill of writing has been recognized as being a matter of gathering symbols and putting them beside each other to form meaning.

This limited view of what might constitute writing has been criticized, however. Writing has come to be recognized as involving the production of symbols that are arranged in a conventionalized manner so as to form words, which are, in turn, arranged and organized to form complete and meaningful sentences (*ibid.*). Nowadays, this language skill has received due attention and is considered as one of the most valued language competencies. Given the importance it has in language teaching and communication, there is a continuous emphasis on the acquisition and mastery of the necessary linguistic requirements that can booster students’ writing proficiency and successful communication (Kranz, 2007:2).

Despite its great importance and the efforts spent on improving it, writing is always felt to be a difficult and a demanding task for students who have developed a general feeling of fear towards it (Byrne, 1988: 4). This feeling is reasonable, though, since writing is a process involving several steps ranging from “mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic conventions and various mysterious factors in between” (Wall, 1981, qtd. in Pilus, 1993:1). One such factor that makes writing difficult for students is that of time. Writers feel that they are removed from time when writing, and hence, they can never have the chance to receive direct feedback and corrections from their audience. This is why certain linguistic aspects of writing are at the disposal of writers to be used as a compensation strategy which makes texts as explicit as possible to their audience, thus, ruling out any possible ambiguity.

### **1.3. Coherence in Writing**

Coherence has always been claimed to be a defining characteristic of good text quality (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; McCarthy, 1991; Baker, 1992). The significance of this concept is clearly reflected in the several research that has

been carried out to investigate its importance in writing. In their book *Cohesion in English* (1976), Halliday and Hasan put forward their taxonomy of cohesion, but a major confusion between the notion of cohesion and coherence has resulted since the authors did not make the link between the two measures explicit in their discussions. However, it is always claimed that the relationship between these two notions seemed to be indirectly implied. The essential distinction between cohesion and coherence seems to be overlooked not only by the authors themselves, but even by novice students adopting their theory (Brown and Yule, 1983: 195). Halliday and Hasan (1976) maintain, though, that cohesion is an essential pre-requisite for the creation of text coherence:

If a speaker of English hears or reads a passage of the language which is more than one sentence in length, he can normally decide without difficulty whether it forms a unified whole or is just a collection of unrelated sentences.  
(Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 01)

Hence, despite the fact that Halliday and Hasan (*ibid.*) did not make it clear what kind of relation that exists between the notion of cohesion and that of coherence, they did grapple with coherence in an implicit manner. Coherence has been perceived as being more general, hence encompassing the notion of cohesion, which is considered as one element for the creation of coherence. The latter is being perceived as the surface level ties which create connection between sentences, while coherence is the feeling that a text hangs together and that it makes sense (McCarthy, 1991; Baker:1992).

Given the importance these two aspects of language have in writing, several research has been carried out in an attempt to explore the relationship between these two notions. While some **have** been critical to any relationship between coherence and cohesion, others have been more supportive. In their study, Witt and Faigly (1981), for instance, made an analysis of students' essays (high and poor quality essays) using a holistic scale. The results showed that highly rated essays were denser in cohesive ties than the poorly scored ones.

## **2. The Study**

### **2.1. Population and Sampling**

This research is based on an analysis of a randomly selected group of expository essays of third-year LMD (Licence/Master/Doctorat) students at the English Department, University of Constantine 01. The sample included students majoring in Applied Language Studies, whose writing has been scored for coherence and writing quality using a holistic scale. Students' expository essays were analyzed for conjunctive cohesion's use adopting Halliday and Hasan's (1976) conjunctive cohesion taxonomy. The reason behind this choice is the fact that this classification proved to be clear enough and detailed. Also, for purposes of the present study, the essays were divided into two groups, namely, highly scored essays (above 12) and poorly scored essays (below 10) to test the research stated hypotheses.

## 2.2. Research Methodology and Analytical Procedure

The present study is qualitative and quantitative in nature. A descriptive qualitative study was first carried out exploring and identifying the types of conjunctive devices used by third year Applied Language Studies students in their expository writing. For purposes of analysis, the students' essays were all segmented into separate F-units (Functional Units) (Nero, 2006; Ramasaway, 2004), as a qualitative evidence for measuring patterns of coherence. The importance of F-units identification and their usefulness lie in showing the contribution the underlying meanings of the functional units have in the creation of the overall coherence of a text.

The second step in the present research is quantitative, whereby the frequency of all types of conjunctive cohesion has been counted and analyzed (manually) to answer the research stated hypotheses and questions. To investigate the relationship between conjunctive cohesion density and appropriateness and the essays' overall quality, Pearson Moment Product Correlation Coefficient Test has been used (Oaks, 1998; Urdan, 2005). In order to obtain sound conclusions, eight high quality expository essays and ten low quality expository essays from the option of Applied Language Studies were selected. Once the research corpus has been compiled, all conjunctions were located and counted. Their percentage and frequency have been calculated manually, thereafter, they were classified adopting Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of conjunctive cohesion.

### 3. Results

The analysis of students' expository essays has shown that the following types of conjunctive expressions' are the ones that featured students' written compositions in both groups of students (highly scored and poorly scored essays).

	Additive	Temporal	Causal	Adversative	Total	No. Of Texts
Expository High Quality Essays	136	47	47	24	254	08
Expository Low Quality Essays	163	78	62	28	331	10
Total in Expository Corpus	298	125	109	52	585	18

**Table 01: Types of Conjunctions Used in Students' Compositions**

Additive conjunctions are found to be the overwhelmingly used type, followed by temporal, causal, and adversative conjunctions, respectively. This is a

particular characteristic of the expository type of writing since it involves the exposition and the expansion of ideas as shown in the table below.

Types of Conjunctions	Additive	Temporal	Causal	Adversative	Total Percentage%
High Quality Essays Percentage	53.54	18.50	18.50	9.44	99.98
Low Quality Essays Percentage	49.24	23.56	18.73	8.45	99.98

**Table 02: Percentage Density of Types of Conjunction**

**3.1. The Predominant Conjunctive Expressions Used Frequently**

Within one single type of conjunctive expressions, there is an extensive and frequent use of one expression over the others. Within the additive type, for instance, it has been found that the additive expression *and* is the most frequently used conjunctive expression in both high quality and low quality essays.

Conjunction	Percentage %
and	74.26
also	2.94
in addition	3.67
besides	0.73
as well	1.47
moreover	1.47
or	5.88
either...or	2.20
neither...nor	0.73
for example	2.94
that is/ in other words /I	2.94
still	0.73
Total	99.96

**Table 03: Percentage of the More Frequently Used Additive Conjunction in High Quality Essays**

As illustrated in table 03 and table 04 that show each additive conjunctive expression frequency in terms of their percentage, the density of the additive expression *and* forms more than half of the total percentage of the additive conjunctions used both in highly scored essays and poorly scored essays.

Conjunction	Percentage %
and	66.25
also	4.90
in addition	4.90
besides	00
as well	00
moreover	1.84
or	13.49
either...or	0.61
neither...nor	00
for example	4.29
that is/ in other words /I mean	3.06
still	0.61
Total	99.95

**Table 04: Percentage of the More Frequently Used Additive Conjunction in Low Quality Essays**

Within the temporal type of conjunctions, there is also a frequent use of two main categories, these being the *Here and Now* category and *Subsequence* category.

Conjunction	Simultaneity	Antecedance	Conclusive	Sequential	Summary	Here and Now	Subsequence	Total %
High Quality Essays Percentage	2.12	6.38	8.51	4.25	6.38	38.29	34.04	99.97
Low Quality Essays Percentage	00	5.12	3.84	19.23	1.28	50	20.51	99.98

**Table 05: Temporal Conjunction Categories' Percentage in High Quality and Low Quality Essays**

With the causal and the adversative types of conjunctions, the situation is quite similar. There is always a prominence of one category over the rest, as table 06 and 07 show.

ConjunctionCategory	Reason	Result	Purpose	Condition	Total %
High QualityEssaysPercentage	57.44	27.65	4.25	10.63	99.97
LowQualityEssaysPercentage	62.90	17.74	6.45	12.90	99.99

**Table 06: Percentage Density of Causal Conjunction Categories in High Quality Essays and Low Quality Essays.**

The most widely used conjunctive category found within the causal type is that of *reason*. The most frequently used expression in this category is the expression *because (of)* and *since* with a percentage density of 57,44% in H.Q.E. (high quality essays) and 62.90% in L.Q.E. (low quality essays).

ConjunctionCategory	Adversative	Contrastive	Corrective	Total %
High QualityEssaysDensity	66.66	33.33	00	99.99
LowQualityEssaysDensity	85.71	14.28	00	99.99

**Table07: Percentage Density of Adversative Conjunction Categories in High Quality Essays and Low Quality Essays**

The adversative type of conjunctions was found to be the overwhelmingly used type with a higher percentage in both L.Q.E. and H.Q.E. , as it is shown in the table above. The most frequently used expression in this type is the conjunctive expression *but*.

### 3.2. Proper Use of Conjunctive Expressions

With regard to the proper use of conjunctions, students of both high quality and low quality essays displayed a good knowledge of conjunctive expressions' use to express different semantic relations.



Student	Score	Total Number of Conjunctions	Correct Conjunction Use	Percentage %
Student 01	05	30	24	80.00
Student 02	07	43	40	93.02
Student 03	08	42	39	92.85
Student 04	08	31	27	87.09
Student 05	08.5	31	29	93.54
Student 06	08.5	32	30	93.75
Student 07	08.5	28	22	78.57
Student 08	09	30	29	96.66
Student 09	09	29	23	79.31
Student 10	09	35	32	91.42
$\Sigma = 10$		331	295	88.62

**Table 08:Low Quality Essays and Their Conjunctive Proper Use Density Percentage**

As Table 08 shows, all students of L.Q.E. made mistakes concerning the use of some conjunctive expressions, but a good deal of the latter was properly and appropriately used. This is clearly reflected by the total percentage of correctly used conjunctives which is 88.62%. There is no one student's essays, however, that had a hundred percent correct and proper use.

Student	Score	Total Number of Conjunctions	Correct Conjunction Use	Percentage %
Student 01	16.5	22	22	100
Student 02	14	48	48	100
Student 03	13.5	42	42	100
Student 04	12	17	17	100
Student 05	12	33	33	100
Student 06	12	31	29	93.54
Student 07	12	20	20	100
Student 08	12	38	38	100
$\Sigma = 08$		251	249	99.19

**Table 09:High Quality Essays and Their Conjunctive Proper Use Density Percentage**

The case with H.Q.E. is quite different from their L.Q.E. counterparts. Students of the former group displayed more awareness, knowledge and skill in using conjunctive expressions effectively in their writing; they displayed a good knowledge of how to defuse conjunctions over the whole text to create texture. Almost all students of H.Q.E. had a 100% of correctly used conjunctions with one exception only. The students' deft use of conjunctions is significantly high with a total percentage of 99.19%.

**3.3. Results of the Pearson Moment Product Correlation Coefficient Test**

The following tables show the results of the statistical tests applied to compute the value for  $r$  (correlation coefficient) between the density use of conjunctive cohesion and the overall writing quality of the students' essays.

Total of Texts	Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
08	X (Conjunctions)	31.75	11.46	4.0638
	Y (students' Score)	13	1.62	0.5744

**Table 10: High Quality Expository Texts**

Total of Texts	Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Deviation Mean
10	X (Conjunctions)	33.1	5.30	1.6772
	Y (Students' Score)	8.05	1.23	0.3892

**Table 11: Low Quality Expository Texts**

After extracting the mean and the standard deviation from conjunctive expressions' use density and the essays' scores, Pearson Moment Product correlation coefficient statistical test has been used. With high quality essays, the value for  $r$  was -0.66, and that of poorly scored essays was -0.21. The results of this statistical test, which is used to measure the extent to which the students' high or poor performance in relation to conjunctive expressions' use and density, were found to be negative, meaning, thus, that there is no positive relationship between the two observed and analyzed variables in both groups of essays. The results of the present study suggest, hence, that the more the students use conjunctive expressions, even if appropriately, the lower the quality of their written compositions will be, and the hypothesis was, thus, rejected.

Despite adopting the holistic scale of scoring, there is no guarantee, however, about each individual teacher's perception of writing quality. It seems that EFL teachers differ in their perception of what might constitute a good writing quality. There are two categories on which each teacher seems to focus on while correcting students' written compositions, these being the level of accuracy (mechanics) and the communicative efficiency level (cohesion and coherence).

In a study aimed at investigating EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Writing Quality and Holistic Evaluations, Atari (1998) found that teachers seem to hold

the view that mechanics are insignificant categories, but in practice, they put a strong emphasis on them when evaluating essays. Hence, the differences between teacher's ratings in assigning marks to students' texts can be attributed to differences in their perception of what might constitute good quality essays, and their personal tendency to value language aspects over other important aspects.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that the present research revealed negative results vis-à-vis the correlation between conjunctive expressions' density use and appropriateness and the students' overall writing quality, this textual feature continues, however, to impose itself as a distinguishing feature of text coherence and quality. One of the major concerns the present research draws attention to is the fact that due consideration should be directed towards the area of teaching cohesion, conjunctive expressions, in particular.

Students' attention should be drawn to such linguistic features since they are claimed to identify texts as belonging to particular genres of writing. This is supported by the results of the present corpus-based analysis of students' essays since it led to the distinction and identification of certain conjunctive expressions' types that are tightly associated with a particular genre of writing rather than with other genres. Teaching conjunctive cohesion to students in their early stages of learning and within a particular genre of writing is felt, thus, to be of central importance; they help writers to create logical connections between thoughts and ideas, and help draw their attention to the fact that any mistake in using a conjunctive item may result in the distortion of meaning relationship, and consequently, may lead to serious troubles for readers in understanding and getting the underlying message and/or idea.

Another important finding is the fact that there is a large frequency of students' misuse, underuse, and/or overuse of conjunctive expressions in their writing. This implies that such linguistic features should not be taught as separate grammatical items, by presenting them as long lists of isolated conjunctions, or alongside separate and decontextualized sentences. Teachers can help students learn how to use them better by teaching such discourse markers on a discourse-based level. This will, thus, involve teaching conjunctive cohesion within longer chunks of language to familiarize students with the way different types of conjunctions are used in different genres of writing.

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