

VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS' USE OF CONJUNCTIONS IN ENGLISH WRITING: A CORPUS-ASSISTED STUDY

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Abstract. This study adopted a mixed method integrating corpus techniques and error analysis to investigate Vietnamese EFL learners' use of conjunction in English writing. The participants were ten-graders of a Hanoi-based high school. The results showed that additive and causal conjunctions were the most frequently used types, and the students encountered challenges mostly in using adversative and causal conjunctions. Besides, omission and misformation are the most common types of errors in the learners' use of conjunction. Both interference from first language and intra-lingual factors were found to be the sources of the learners' errors. Finally, several implications for teaching and learning conjunctions in Vietnamese high school context were drawn.

Keywords: Conjunction, error, Halliday and Hassan (1976), Surface Strategy Taxonomy.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary context, teaching and learning writing skill play an important role in the English curriculum as the mastery of English entails competence in writing skill (Hotimah, 2015). Writing is distinguished by the characteristics of the presence of surface features (cohesion) holding together discourse and an underlying logic of organization (coherence) (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). To construct the cohesion of a text, conjunction is one of the effective cohesive devices.

By far, there is a body of literature about the use of conjunction in EFL learners' written discourse (Deviyana, 2017; Fauziah, 2016; Hamed, 2014; Melyane and Kurniasih, 2014; Pangaribuan, Haddina and Manik, 2018). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, in Vietnam, there has been virtually no research on the use of conjunctions in high school learners' written paragraphs with implications for teaching; thus, this present study sought to investigate the use of conjunction in 10th-graders' English written paragraphs with an aim to uncover the use of conjunction, identify errors in the use of conjunction (if exists) and draw implications for teaching and learning. Since the author deemed that the data would be fairly large, corpus technique was applied in the study to

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analyze a large number of texts automatically and add quantitative data for further qualitative investigation (Granger, 2002).

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Theoretical Framework

*** Cohesion**

Halliday and Hasan (1976) define cohesion as something that occurs to bind sentences together to hold the inherent meaning in connected sentences. In a text, cohesion is constructed by cohesive devices, which can be categorized into five types including reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion and conjunction.

*** Conjunction**

The term ‘conjunction’ is defined as “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, 1976:226).

The present research combined and adapted Halliday and Hassan’s (1976) taxonomy and Stern’s (2003) classification to form a classification with five types of conjunctions, including four types from Halliday and Hassan’s (1976) taxonomy (additive, adversative, causal and temporal) and one types named “Nominal/Adjectival conjunctions” from Stern’s (2003) classification.

*** Error analysis**

Taking into consideration the concepts of errors proposed by Brown (2007) and Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), the research recognized all deviations, both performance and competence-based, made by participants as errors.

Corder (1967) introduced a three-step model in error analysis procedure. The model includes three stages of data collection, description and explanation. The original three-step model was then rearranged into a more detailed five-step model (Corder, 1974).

As one of the most important characteristics distinguishing writing involving composing is the presence of surface features, i.e. cohesive devices (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) proposed Surface strategy taxonomy, explaining four ways surface structures are altered, namely omission, addition, misformation and misordering.

According to Richard (1974:173), errors can be attributed to two sources, namely Interlingual errors and Intralingual and developmental errors. He also devises a subdivision of intralingual errors, including Overgeneralization, Ignorance of rule restrictions, Incomplete application of rules and False hypothesis.

2.1.2. Corpus Techniques

Corpus techniques are generally considered a useful source of quantitative data for ELT research as it may facilitate the analysis of a large database. Conrad (2000:556) maintains that corpus linguistics should ‘emphasize concrete pedagogical applications’.

Sinclair (2001:xii) suggests that corpus evidence can illuminate from many perspectives; for instance, it can provide ‘the accurate description of structure, reliable models of usage [...] what are the characteristic errors of learners’.

Most prominent corpus softwares such as Antconc (Anthony, 2019) or Wordsmith tools (Scott, 1996) can provide analysts a frequency list of words, which illustrates salient lexical and grammatical items in the corpus (items that are frequent and typical).

2.1.3. Previous research

Several empirical studies of learners' writing have found that the application of conjunctions has challenged ESL/EFL learners (Deviyana, 2017; Fauziah, 2016; Hamed, 2014; Pangaribuan, Haddina and Manik, 2018). Besides, there have been many studies employing corpus techniques for quantitative and qualitative analysis of large database. The majority of corpus-assisted studies in the use of conjunction still had to incorporate other research methods, error analysis as an example.

2.2. Methodology

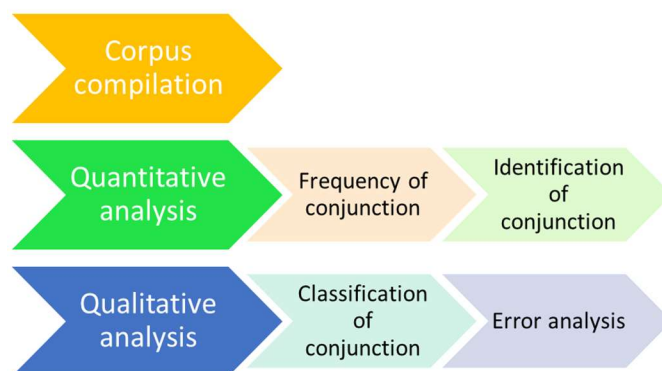


Figure 1. Research procedure

A mixed methods approach involving quantitative and qualitative method was employed. The quantitative method was used to provide statistical data of conjunctions with list of items and frequency. AntConc (Anthony, 2019), a corpus software, was used for the production of quantitative data. The qualitative method was employed in the manual analysis of the concordances to detect and classify the learners' errors in the use of conjunction and also served as the basis for explaining causes of errors in the later stage. The analytical framework for error analysis incorporated Corder's (1967) three-step model of error analysis and Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy for error identification, classification and explanation.

The population of the study was 100 10-graders in a public high school in Hanoi. Each student submitted four assignments on four different topics covered by four units in the textbook English 10 (Education Publishing House, 2018). The research was compiled from 400 paragraphs written. The total number of word tokens in the corpus was 61,899 tokens, which derived from 4,510 word types.

2.3. Findings and discussion

2.3.1. Frequency of conjunction

Table 1. Frequency of conjunctions, divided by types

Category of conjunction	Frequency	Percentage in corpus	Number of conjunction
Additive	2,504	4,05%	32
Adversative	381	0.62%	15
Causal	1,016	1,64%	24
Temporal	803	1,3%	43
Nominal/ adjectival	709	1,15%	12
Total	5,413	8,75%	

As is illustrated in Table 1, there are 5,413 instances of conjunctions in the students' written paragraphs, constituting 8.75% of all word tokens in the corpus. Additive conjunction is the most frequently used type of conjunction in the research corpus, whose frequency figure far outnumbers those of its counterparts. There are 32 conjunctions belonging to the additive type. Following additive conjunction is causal conjunction with 1,016 occurrences of 24 different conjunctions, occupying 1.64% of the corpus' word tokens. Temporal conjunction is the third most frequently used type of conjunction as 803 instances of 43 conjunctions are found, equivalent to 1.3%. Ranked in the next place is nominal and adjectival conjunction, which was used 709 times in the corpus (1.15%). There were 12 conjunctions coming from nominal and adjectival type. Adversative conjunction is found to be the least used type of conjunctions with 381 instances of 15 different conjunctions (0.62%).

The results of frequency of conjunctions used indicates a strong preference of students for certain conjunctions over others. It is evident that some common conjunctions like “and”, “because” or “so” were used hundreds of times while there are conjunctions, despite belonging to the same semantic category, employed only once in the whole corpus. This finding supports the argument that respondents showed little variety to the use of conjunction in their writing and they tended to have a limited repertoire of conjunctions (Martinez, 2015).

2.3.2. Error analysis

2.3.2.1. Identification and classification

Table 2. Errors in conjunctions, divided by types of errors and types of conjunctions

Type of conjunctions	Type of errors				Percentage (number of conjunctions)
	Addition	Misformation	Misordering	Omission	
Additives	26	59	4	663	3,55%
Adversatives	35	46	0		21,26%
Causal	59	143	0		19,88%
Temporal	3	27	0		3,74%
Nominal/ adjectival	4	7	0		1,55%
Total	127	282	4	663	

Table 2 shows that omission of conjunctions is the most popular type of errors with 663 errors identified (62%), followed by misformation with 282 errors (26%). Addition places the third position as the students also committed 127 addition errors (12%) when using conjunction in writing. Only 4 errors of misordered conjunctions were spotted in the corpus, equivalent to 0,37%. The finding that the students made errors in the use of conjunction supports the viewpoint of Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) that it is inevitable for people to learn a second or a foreign language without “systematically committing error” at first (p.138). The above findings also confirm the results of previous studies that using conjunctions in writing is problematic to EFL learners (Fauziah, 2016; Melyane and Kurniasih, 2014; Pangaribuan, Haddina and Manik, 2018).

With regards to types of conjunctions, the students seemed to have the most enormous difficulty in using adversative conjunctions when every five times the students used adversative conjunctions, there was one error found. Likewise, causal conjunctions appear to pose another big challenge for learners as incorrect uses accounted for approximately one-fifth of the number of causal conjunctions. In striking contrast, the students are likely to keep better control when using nominal/adjectival conjunctions, additive conjunctions and temporal conjunctions in writing as the percentage of errors committed in these three types is as low as 1.55%, 3.55 and 3.74%, respectively.

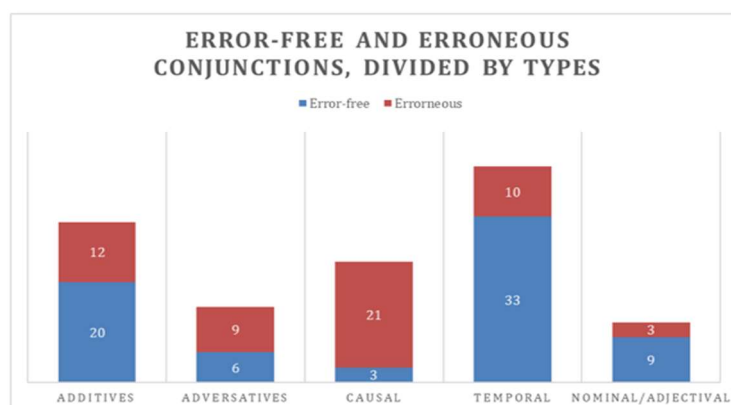


Figure 2. Error-free and erroneous conjunctions, divided by types

As far as the number of error-free and erroneous conjunctions in each type is concerned, causal conjunction has the largest number of erroneous cohesive linkers with as many as 21 erroneous conjunctions out of 24 items (see Figure 2). Adversative ranks at the second place when the students committed errors in 9 out of 12 times they used adversative conjunctions. In sharp contrast, the remaining groups of additive, temporal and nominal/adjectival conjunctions have more error-free items than the erroneous ones, as the number of error-free instances is about three times higher than that of the erroneous ones. These findings imply that although students attempted to use different conjunctions, they tended to have more troubles diversifying their choice among causal and adversative conjunction.

2.3.2.2. Description

*** Addition**

127 addition errors in conjunctions were found in the corpus. In general, the students

made the most addition errors in causal conjunctions with 59 errors, then in adversative conjunctions with 35 errors. Below are several typical addition errors in the students' use of causal conjunction "so":

Excerpt 1. Because this is a popular TV show in Vietnam so I want everyone will watch and support this program. (All color changes in words were made by the researcher)

In Excerpt 1, the causal conjunction "so" was unnecessarily added into the sentences. As "because"-clause and "if"-clause are dependent clauses starting with causal subordinate conjunctions, they should be linked directly with the independent clauses by a comma to make a complex sentence rather than by a coordinate causal conjunction like "so" to avoid repetition.

Another conjunction that was unnecessarily added in sentences on a frequent basis is the adversative conjunction "but" with 33 instances of incorrect use identified. Evidence of addition error in the use of "but" can be seen in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 2. Although I don't have much of vegetables, but I have a lot of fruits.

In Excerpt 2, "but" is incorrectly added into the sentence because dependent clause starting with subordinate adversative conjunction "although" can be connected directly with the main clause by a comma instead of a coordinate adversative conjunction to avoid double-marking.

In summary, that the participants used two conjunctions to link two clauses in Excerpt 1-2 is inappropriate as Raimes (1992) suggested that conjunction is ways to connect two clauses by using a comma followed by one of the connecting words in order to be aligned sentences.

* Misformation

Table 3.2 indicates 282 misformation errors in conjunctions found in the corpus. Similar to addition error, the participants committed most misformation errors in causal conjunction with 143 errors, followed by additives with 59 errors. Overall, the misformation errors in conjunctions identified in the corpus can be classified into two categories, namely errors in terms of grammar and structure as well as those in terms of lexical meaning. For example:

Excerpt 3. My dad is responsible for doing heavy lifting, and he also mows the lawn once a week. While, my mum does most of the cooking and shops for groceries.

Excerpt 4. Everybody in the family shares housework in order to we all can have some time to rest and recreation.

Excerpts 3 - 4 exemplify misformation errors in conjunctions with regard to grammar rules and sentence structure. In Excerpt 3, the sentence starting with subordinate adversative conjunction "while" is fragmented sentences. It is actually a dependent clause. Meanwhile, misformation in terms of grammatical rules is evident in Excerpt 4. There, causal conjunction "in order to" is followed by "we all can have some time to rest and recreation", which is a clause; however, "in order to" should be followed by an infinitive verb to be grammatically correct.

Excerpt 5. Their tiring will affect the works so that they cannot concentrate or work effectively as men.

Moving onto errors in lexical meaning, in Excerpt 5 above, it is clear that the students who wrote them experienced misunderstanding of the meaning of the causal conjunction “*so that*” and additive conjunction “*in addition*”. In Excerpt 5, the clause “*their tiring will affect the work*” should be the reason of the following clause. Therefore, a causal conjunction denoting reason-result should be used instead of “*so that*”, which refers to the purpose of a certain action.

*** Misordering**

In the corpus, misordering is found to be the least common error in the students' use of conjunction with only 4 instances (See Table 3.2). Another notable finding is that all the 4 misordering errors were committed when the students used the coordinate additive conjunction “*and*”. For instance:

Excerpt 6. Fish and meat, nuts accounted for the remaining one quarter.

It can be seen from Excerpts 6 that the conjunction “*and*” was misordered. As a coordinate conjunction, in these cases, “*and*” should be used to connect nouns and should be put before the last noun. However, in excerpt 6, for example, “*and*” is put between “*fish*” and “*meat*” and the last noun “*nuts*” is connected by a comma, which is grammatically incorrect.

Such findings imply that the learners tended to show proper understanding of the place of conjunction in a sentence or between sentences and keep good control of ordering conjunction in writing.

*** Omission**

With 663 instances, omission is the type of error in using conjunctions that the students made most in their writing (See Table 3.2). The participants tended to omit conjunctions at sentential level and supra-sentential level. The excerpts below exemplify omission error in conjunctions at sentential levels:

Excerpt 7. Thirdly, being working mother among being working at the office will make woman feel tired and exhausted, they will be unhealthy and always get sick, often angry with no reason to other people like husband or children. (All highlights were added by the researcher).

In Excerpt 7, there are two omission errors in the learners' use of conjunction. These stretches of language “*being working mother among being working at the office will make woman feel tired and exhausted*” and “*they will be unhealthy and always get sick, often angry with no reason to other people like husband or children*” are two independent clauses with their own subjects and verbs. Each of them expresses a complete meaning, so they should be linked by a conjunction (either coordinate or subordinate) or a semicolon rather than a comma. Another error in the same sentence is “*always get sick, often angry*”. “*Sick*” and “*angry*” are both adjectives which can collocate with the verb “*get*”, so it is acceptable to use one verb and two complements “*sick*” and “*angry*”. However, instead of being connected by a comma, “*sick*” and “*angry*” must be linked by a coordinate conjunction like additive conjunction “*and*” for the addition relation to be explicitly expressed.

Besides omitting conjunctions that connect different parts within a sentence, the participants are found to have left out necessary conjunctions to link sentences together,

which results in weak cohesion and coherence. Since the students omitted conjunctions that join sentences in a text, it is necessary to look at the whole/a part of a paragraph for the understanding of meaning relations. Below is a typical error:

Excerpt 8. There are three people in my family: my dad, my mom and me. My dad is the breadwinner of my family as he takes the main responsibilities for family finances. Thus, he does few household chores after a long day of hard work. He usually does hard stuff such as mending things and lifting heavy things.

In the excerpt above, the student omitted necessary conjunctions which should have created a link between the two sentences in terms of both structure and meaning. The omission of conjunctions deprived the text of strong cohesion as the connectedness and relation of ideas were not explicitly presented, and this dearth also weakened textual readability.

2.3.2.3. Explanation

On a close examination, errors in conjunctions made by participants can be attributed to the sources proposed by Richard (1974), namely intralingual and interlingual sources. Evidence from the corpus suggests that the students' use of conjunction is interfered by their first language, as is illustrated in the following samples:

Excerpt 8. And if the mother is sick, then the kid's health also gets affected.

In Excerpt 8, there are two clauses in one sentence. The first one is an "if"-clause, which is a dependent clause denoting a condition or hypothesis. The second one is another dependent clause about a result with the causal conjunction "then". This sentence is structurally incorrect due to the lack of an independent clause. This error can be rooted from the interference of Vietnamese language, allowing for the linking word pairs "Nếu ... thì", while in English, "if"-clause is joined with an independent clause without any conjunction denoting a result. The above finding confirms the argument by Brown (1980), who maintains that the majority of errors in the second language committed by learners result primarily from the learner's false assumption that the second language forms bear great similarity to the native language.

Additionally, as mentioned before, the students' errors also come from intralingual source as a gap could be found in the students' knowledge of the grammar rules:

Excerpt 9. Secondly, despite they work to earn money, they do not have enough time to take care of families.

In Excerpt 9, the write used "despite" to start a clause "they work to earn money", which violated the English grammatical rule: "despite" should be followed by a noun (phrase) or a gerund in lieu of a clause.

Overall, these findings about the sources of errors are in accordance with the findings reported by other authors such as Binh (2014), Budiarjo (2018), Fauziah (2016) and Hamed (2014), who emphasized that the majority of EFL/ESL learners used conjunctions erroneously due to not one source only but both interference from their first language and incomplete mastery of rules. This similarity implies the resemblance in the way EFL/ESL learners commit errors in conjunctions, regardless of their social and educational backgrounds.

Errors in the use of conjunction deriving from intra-lingual source found in the corpus can also be subdivided into two main sub-categories with reference to the sources of intra-lingual errors proposed by Richard (1974), namely incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesized.

2.3.3. Pedagogical implications for teaching English conjunction in Vietnamese high schools

From the findings and discussion of the present study, several important pedagogical implications can be drawn. First, it is essential for teachers of English to understand their students' common errors in the use of conjunction and the sources of errors to adjust teaching methods. Second, it is necessary that teachers are well-advised to place more emphasis on teaching conjunctions to students so that students can overcome the persistent challenges posed by the use of conjunction. Third, a wider variety of conjunctions with different lexical and grammatical functions should be introduced to learners to diversify their use of conjunction. Fourth, radical changes in the lessons containing the teaching of conjunctions in English textbooks should be made. Lastly, teachers cannot shirk from the responsibility for avoiding the interference of learners' mother tongue in their use of conjunction in English.

3. Conclusions

In this paper, we have conducted a corpus-assisted study into the use of conjunction in writing by Vietnamese 10th-grade students. The evidence from this study indicates that the research participants showed a little variety in the use of conjunction as there was a great disparity in the frequency among conjunctions. The two most frequently used types of conjunctions were additive and causal. Another remarkable finding is that the students did have difficulty in using conjunction as they made errors by adding unnecessary conjunctions, misusing conjunctions, misordering conjunctions and omitting necessary conjunctions. Omission and misformation were the most common types of errors committed and the students had the biggest difficulty in using adversative and causal conjunctions. This study has also unraveled the underlying reasons for the learners' errors in the use of conjunction, involving both inference from the learners' native language Vietnamese and intra-lingual factors. Finally, some pedagogical implications have been drawn from the research findings and discussion.

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