AN INVESTIGATION OF THE USE OF CONJUNCTIVE COHESIVE DEVICES IN EMIRATI STUDENTS' ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT: *This study was conducted to scrutinize the use of conjunctions as cohesive devices in Emirati students' argumentative essays. The study specifically purported to investigate how solid the correlation is between employing conjunctions and producing high quality written texts. The context was one of Ras AlKhaimah Colleges, and the participants were one teacher and six Female students who were enrolled in the English Foundation Program. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from students' writing samples evaluation forms and through an in-depth interview with the classroom teacher. The data were analyzed in view of Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesive devices, specifically their classification of conjunctions. In contrast to many studies that emphasized the close connection between using conjunctions and achieving high scores in writing, the findings of this study did not indicte such correlation. The findings also showed that additive conjunctions were found to be the most frequently used type, whereas temporal conjunctions were found to be the least used type. Moreover, two problems were found regarding students' use of conjunctions: 1) adversative conjunctions seemed problematic, and 2) among the overall array of conjunctions, 'and' was particularly overused. Although limited to one school, this study is significant as it disvalidated the long-established belief that the use of conjunctions is an index to a high score in writing.*

KEYWORDS: conjunctions, cohesive devices, writing scores, writing quality, additive conjuctions, adversatives

INTRODUCTION

Overview

As the English language has become a "lingua franca" that is being learned and taught internationally, it became essential to discover every aspect of it and provide answers to educators' concerns for the purpose of achieving high quality of English education. It is no secret that writing is one of the pivotal pillars of language and that it remains one of the biggest challenges for learners. In essence, language development is not likely to transpire without learning writing (Hyland, 2003). English is no exception, and the situation is often exacerbated in the context of learning/acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL). The reason why writing is a hard nut to crack by EFL learners is that this skill involves a host of techniques, knowledge-related factors and cognitive factors that can be extremely hard to possess and master (Nunan, 1989). These factors include, inter alia: grammatical accuracy, lexical choices, transitions between sentences, cohesion and coherence, organisation, spelling and punctuation. The abundancy of the challenges facing EFL in learning writing has led to a surge in the research about ways of enhancing the ability of learners in the writing skill (e.g. Mofrad, 2017).

In particular, problems related to organisation and to cohesion and coherence of texts have been the focus of educators and researchers alike because it is the use of cohesive devices that determines whether a text is a text

in the first place (Salkie, 1995). In other words, failing to connect the different parts of the text has been identified and acknowledged to be as a major problem in writing, and, by extension, the correct use of cohesive devices (linguistic tools that link the various parts of the text together) has been acknowledged to be an index to text quality.

A corollary of the emphasis on text organisation, cohesion and coherence, is that there has been a ceaseless debate on the most appropriate model to consider apropos the devices used to link the various parts of the text. One of the earliest models introduced in the 1970's was that of Halliday and Hasan (1976), a model that has so far been viewed as the most comprehensive and the most articulate taxonomy of cohesive devices (Baker, 2011; McCarthy, 1991). The 1976 model, which roughly categorises cohesive devices into grammatical (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions) and lexical (reiteration, collocation), has been used in a significant number of studies (e.g. Abu-Ayyash, 2019; Leo, 2012; Tahsildar & Yusoff, 2018). Quite understandably, the categories of the 1976 model underwent much scrutiny and witnessed some adaptations, for example acknowledging *parallelism* (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981) and *associative reference* (Cutting, 2008) as cohesive devices.

Another debate related to cohesion and coherence was related to whether the use of cohesive devices was an index to text quality. While studies, such as (Castro, 2004) indicated that there was no noteworthy tie between the use of cohesive devices and writing degree of excellence, other studies, such as (Mohammed, 2015) provided evidence of a direct link between the use of cohesive devices, including conjunctions, and Nigerian students' writing grades. Since, taken together, the studies that looked at conjunctions established a correlatin between these devices and the writing quality, this study was set to investigate the issue.

Significance of the Study

Interestingly, and even though a significant number of studies were conducted to investigate the role of conjunctions in producing better quality written texts, a recent study argued that the available studies seem repetitive as they focus on listing examples more than going deeper in texts (Yeibo, 2012). It was this claim that instigated the idea of the present study, which was set to investigate the claims about an-almost-always positive correlation between the employment of conjunctions and the writing quality. In addition, there is a shortage in the number of studies that elucidate the use of conjunctions in Emirati ESL classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

In order to provide a more all-embracing understanding account of cohesive devices, definitions have been provided to clarify some of the key terms that will be used in the literature review and throughout the study. The definitions were taken from various sources and have been cited accordingly. The terms involved in this study include *clause*, *conjuctcion*, *cohesion*, *coherence*, *cohesive devices*, *lexicon*, *tie*, *text* and *texture*. According to Leech, Cruickshank & Ivanic (2001), **clause** is a group of words that includes a subject and a verb, and **conjunction** is a "joining word" that links together two parts of a sentence. Halliday and Hasan (1976) defined **cohesion** as relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text. **Coherence**, on the other hand, referes to the general notion that a text makes sense through the organization of its content (Harmer, 2004). **Cohesive devices** are text-specific linguistic elements employed to assemble an integrated, interpretable, and meaningful text (Adiantika, 2015). **Lexical** is an adjectival form of (lexicon). A lexical pheonomenon is one involving words, as opposed to, for example, grammatical structures (Johnstone, 2002). Johnstone (2002) has also defined **discourse** as the actual instances of communication in the medium of lanauge. According to Adiantika (2015), a **tie** is a single instance of cohesion, a term for one occurrence of a pair of cohesively related items. The word 'text' is by and large used in linguistics to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does construct a unified whole (Widdowson, 1979). **Texture** in this study is defined as "what makes a text a text". The feature of text which makes it a unified whole and distinguishes it from something that is not a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976)

Theoretical Underpinning

It can be rightly argued that the best theoretical underpinning of the present study on cohesive devices is the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which considers language as a system and emphasizes on how meanings are made. According to Mohammed (2015), SFL provides a set of methods for analyzing written texts. By and large, SFL is a multi-stratal theory that looks at textual analysis in terms of three strata, or levels. In essence, this approach to texts is, above all, interested in meaning (Derewianka, 1990). The stratum of meaning is organized into three functional-semantic components that help in recognizing how texts make sense. The three components are: ideational (experiential; logical), interpersonal and textual (Figure1). This study is mainly concerned with the textual level, or stratum.

Figure1: The Trinocular Perspective (Eggins, 1994)
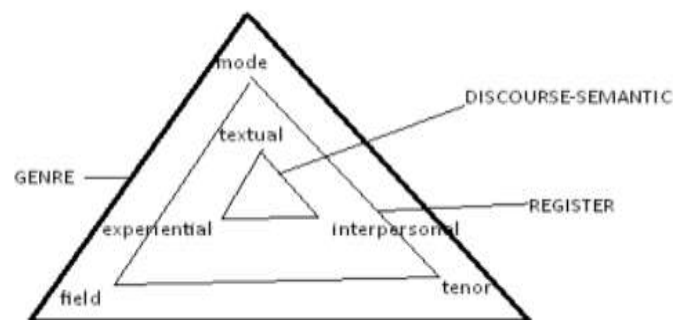
Huen (2011) suggested that "…textual meaning deals with how texture can be gained, how sentences and clauses are conjoined structurally and semantic logically". In other words, this part focuses on how using and organizing grammatical units can help in making connections among elements in text, and therefore achieving cohesion. The concept of cohesion was also emphasized by Bahaziq (2016) who maintained that texts can reach cohesion when the elements depend on each other and are linked with ties creating a text that is meaningful to readers.

Related Work

Baker (2011) recommended the 1976 cohesion model that was introduced by Halliday and Hasan as a tool for discourse analysis, describing it as the best and most effective model available. Halliday and Hasan (1976) believed that cohesion does not only rely on grammatical aspects, but it can also be expressed through vocabulary. Therefore, they classified the textual ties into two types: lexical and grammatical. Lexical cohesion, which is concerned with vocabulary, includes reiteration and collocation. Halliday and Hasan (1976) stated that reiteration could take different forms in discourse, which are repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy or meronymy. On the other hand, grammatical cohesion could be expressed in the form of reference, substitution, ellipsis, or more importantly, conjunctions. All these devices help in maintaining texture, or unity of a text, holding the various parts of a piece of writing together, and therefore achieving cohesion. Table 1 summarizes Halliday and Hasan's (1976) Taxonomy by providing definitions and examples of each tie. However, since this study revolves around examining the use of conjunctions in particular, the subsequent review will be limited to conjunctive elements.

Category	Type of tie	Definition & Example
Grammatical cohesion	Reference	Definition: one element cannot be semantically interpreted unless it is referred to another element in the text Example: **Clifton** achieved the highest grade in the test. **He** must have studied well.
	Substitution	Definition: substitution occurs when an item is replaced by another item in the text to avoid repetition Example: I bought the red blouse. My sister preferred the red **one**.
	Ellipsis	Definition: the process of omitting an unnecessary item Example: -Are the guests coming soon? -Yes, they are. **(coming)**
	Conjunctions	Definition: linking devices between sentences or clauses in a text. Example: Mark failed to meet the assignment's deadline. **Therefore**, he failed this module.
Lexical cohesion	Repetition	Definition: restatement of the same lexical item Example: They were lost in the **woods** for three days. The **woods** were really frightening.
	Collocation	Definition: a combination of vocabulary items that co-occur together Example: Let's **go swimming** this evening.
	Hyponymy	Definition: refers to items of 'an example of' relationship Example: I bought a number of **electronic devices** last month. I got an **iPhone**, an **iPad**, and an **iPod**.
	Synonymy	Definition: items of similar meaning Example: I **left** my house last year. Actually, I **departed** the whole area.
	Antonymy	Definition: items with opposite meanings Example: My friend lived in a **small** villa. It is located in a **huge** compound.
	Meronymy	Definition: a 'whole-part' relationship Example: My **car** broke last night. There was something wrong with the **engine**.

Table 1: Cohesive Ties (Bahaziq, 2016; Abu-Ayyash, 2017)

Leech, Cruickshank and Ivanic (2001) defined conjunctions as 'joining words' that link together sentences and clauses in a text such as because, and, yet, but, etc. Conjunctions are an essential part of cohesion and represent a vital method of showing how sentences are to be interpreted and understood in the context of each other (Centonze, 2013). As Bahaziq (2016) stated, the major difference between conjunctions and other grammatical devices is that instead of conveying the 'logical-semantic' connection between words and simple structures, a conjunctive word shows this relation between sentences (Collage 1).
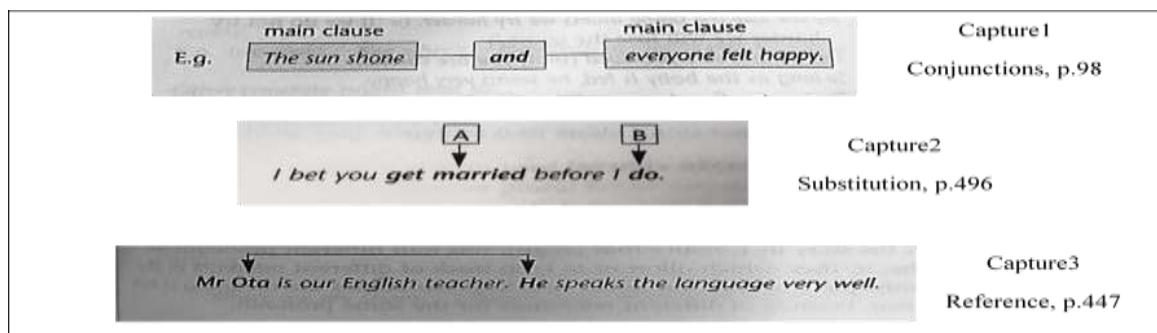
Collage 1: Grammatical cohesive devices (Leech, Cruickshank & Ivanic, 2001)

Halliday and Hasan's (1976) Model

Shedding light on the (1976) model, Halliday and Hasan suggested that conjunctions can be classified as *additive*, *adversative*, *causal* and *temporal* conjunctions. As Bahaziq (2016) explained, *additive conjunctions* connect elements that are semantically alike, *adversative conjunctions* express opposing results or opinions, *causal conjunctions* present results or reasons, and finally *temporal conjunctions* link elements in an order of events and time (See Table 2). However, it is important to mention that sometimes conjunctions can fit more than one category because of the different meanings that conjunctions might display depending on the setting (Centonze 2013).

Conjunction	Examples
Additive	and, likewise, furthermore, in addition, also, as well, additionally, moreover, thus, etc.
Adversative	but, however, in contrast, whereas, though, on the contrary, rather, etc.
Causal	thus, therefore, because, so, hence, etc.
Temporal	finally, then, soon, at the same time, next, previously, at that moment, first, second, meanwhile, in the end, etc.

Table 2 : Examples of conjunctions-Halliday and Hasan's classification (Centonze, 2013)

Even though Halliday and Hasan's (1976) classification of conjunctions was clear and comprehensive, it has been criticized by many scholars and has been adapted several times since it has been introduced. The main reason behind such adaptations could be that making a full wide-range list of the different types of conjunctions is not easy (McCarthy 1991).

In accordance with literature that discussed the shortcomings found in Halliday and Hasan's work and taxonomy and the changes that their model went through, Abu-Ayyash and McKenny (2017) stated that the four types of conjunctions have been expanded into nine conjunctions by Halliday and Mathiessen (2014) who added *opposition* (e.g. for example), *clarification* (e.g. by the way), *variation* (e.g. instead), *comparative* (e.g. similarly), and *respective* (e.g. in this respect). Moreover, *listing* has been added as another type of conjunctions by Locke (2004).

Other examples of adapting the (1976) model could be the one suggested by Christiansen (2011) who kept the four types suggested by Halliday and Hasan but added one more category; *continuatives*. Continuatives include conjunctive words such as now, of course, and anyway.

Conjunctions in ESL/EFL classrooms

In the last three decades, many researchers studied the validity of the link between using different types of cohesive devices and the quality of texts produced by non-native English writers. However, they varied between supporters and opponents. A recent study (Zhang 2000) focused on examining the use of cohesive devices in Chinese students' papers and found that there is no solid tie found between cohesion and writing quality. Similarly, Castro (2004) reported the same finding after examining the argumentative essays of Filipino college students.

While some studies showed negative results, a great deal of research provided evidences of a noticeable association between using accurate and logical cohesive devices, including conjunctions, and students' writing

quality (Liu & Braine 2005; Yang & Sun 2012). In fact, conjunctions found to be prominent in students' compositions (Bahaziq 2016). Supporting Bahaziq's claims, Mohammed (2015) also stated that 66% of all the analyzed texts were high in conjunctions numbers.

Looking deeper into the use of conjunctions, Bahaziq's findings in 2016 indicated that additive conjunctions were frequently used in students' writing, specifically the words *and* and *also*. The adversative conjunction *but* and the causal conjunction *because* were also very common. However, there were no cases of temporal conjunctions. Unlike Bahaziq (2016), a recent study found that temporal conjunctions were not problematic and were frequent in Libyan students' argumentative papers. Instead, students appeared to have problems with using adversative conjunctions correctly (Hamed 2014).

Mohammed (2015) also drew attention to this very important part; the mistakes. He stated that even though conjunctions were highly used and helped in producing good quality papers, there were many mistakes and incorrect usage of conjunctions that should not be ignored. Mohammed argued that it is not the presence and absence of conjunctions that give texts texture, but the correct use of these devices. Therefore, he advised teachers to put extra effort in teaching to help students master the mechanics of cohesion through using conjunctions.

In principle, even though using cohesive devices helps in binding elements of texts together to make writing more meaningful, it is not enough to analyze the quality of writing. Even though Halliday and Hasan (1976) emphasized the vital role of cohesion in creating meaningful discourse, their claims have been questioned. Scholars such as Brown and Yule (1983) discussed that there is another element that is needed to make writing accessible, which is *coherence*. Brown and Yule (1983) stated that ensuring cohesion in texts does not always lead to the production of coherent ones. They provided examples of written discourse that displayed cohesive ties but did not demonstrate a unified meaningful whole. Therefore, coherence is highlighted to provide logical interpretation possible.

Interestingly, while cohesion and coherence are both needed for writing to be accessible, many studies focused on analyzing the quality of writing focusing on the presence of cohesive devices and giving little attention only to coherence, which in fact should not be less important. A text can be rich in cohesive devices but makes no sense because of the absence of coherence. Therefore, the significance of this study comes from the need to provide a clear comprehensive picture and fill the gaps found in literature. Moreover, very few studies exploring conjunctions were specific to the UAE context which makes it vital to provide in-depth insights into the quality of (Emirati) students' writing concerning cohesion and coherence, the use of conjunctions, and the incorrect employment of these devices if any is found.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The overarching aim of the present study is to investigate whetehr there is a correlation between the use of conjunctions and the quality of Emirati students' writing. In order to further clarify the scope of this general aim, it was broken dow into three research questions:

- What is the most frequently used subcategory of conjunctions and what is the number of occurrences?
- What is the least frequently used subcategory of conjunctions and what is the number of occurrences?
- How accurate is the students' employment of conjunctions in their argumentative writing?

METHOD

This case study will be analyzing Emirati students' use of conjunctions in their argumentative essays, focusing on the quality of writing, most used type of conjunction, least used type, number of occurrences and the incorrect use of conjunctions. The participants were six female students and one teacher from one of Ras Al Khaimah colleges. The participants were enrolled in the English Foundation Program, which means that they do not meet the college English entry requirements and this program intends to improve the students' language skills and

prepare the students for their studies. The data collection tools were students' writing samples evaluation forms, and an in-depth interview with the classroom teacher. The gathered data will be analyzed keeping Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model in focus, which was recommended by Baker (1992) as an effective comprehensive one. It was important to consider some factors that could have affected the study results. Therefore, the gender, the essay length and topic, and the task duration were all controlled.

Why argumentative essays?

Argumentative essays were found to be the most effective type as it allows students to generate complex sentence, which will therefore give students a chance to use more cohesive devices to link sentences and manage their argumentations. In this way, students' ability to use conjunctions would be easily seen, analyzed and evaluated.

Data collection tools

Students' writing samples evaluation form

Six argumentative essays discussing the importance of fashion were collected. Based on these samples, an evaluation form was designed to evaluate and analyze students' writing and use of conjunctions in a clear organized way. IELTS writing grading criteria was used as guide for forming some of the questions. These forms are expected to serve both the quantitative and qualitative data collection processes and help in providing responses and answers to the four research questions.

In-depth interview with the classroom teacher

Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun (1993) suggested that using more than one tool can help in providing a more complete understanding of the situation than one instrument can do alone. Therefore, and in addition to the writing evaluation forms, an in-depth interview was designed for the classroom teacher. The interview had several questions that would allow to have deeper insights into the study and collect more in detail qualitative data.

Ethical considerations

Focusing on the ethical consideration while conducting any research is a very important step to protect the participants' rights and reduce their concerns (Winter 1987) . Therefore, and before the exploration stage, a permission letter was sent to the Foundations Program supervisor and the classroom teacher. Anonymity of the selected college and individuals participating in the study was also ensured. The participants were enlightened that the writing samples will be used solely for academic benefits. The participants also had rights of withdrawal to stop being part of this study if they wanted to.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To begin with, the data collected from the students' writing samples evaluation forms revealed that additive conjunctions were used 84 times and were found to be the most prevalent type used in all six samples, followed by adversative conjunctions that were also found in all six samples. Causal conjunctions, however, were found to be used less than the first two types and occurred in five out of six samples. As shown in Collage2, student E did not use any causal conjunctions, and student C used this type only once.

Sample	Total #	Additive	Adversative	Causal	Temporal
A	30	16	5	4	0
B	28	10	3	6	1
C	29	18	3	1	0
D	37	22	5	4	0
E	19	11	4	0	0
F	20	7	3	6	0
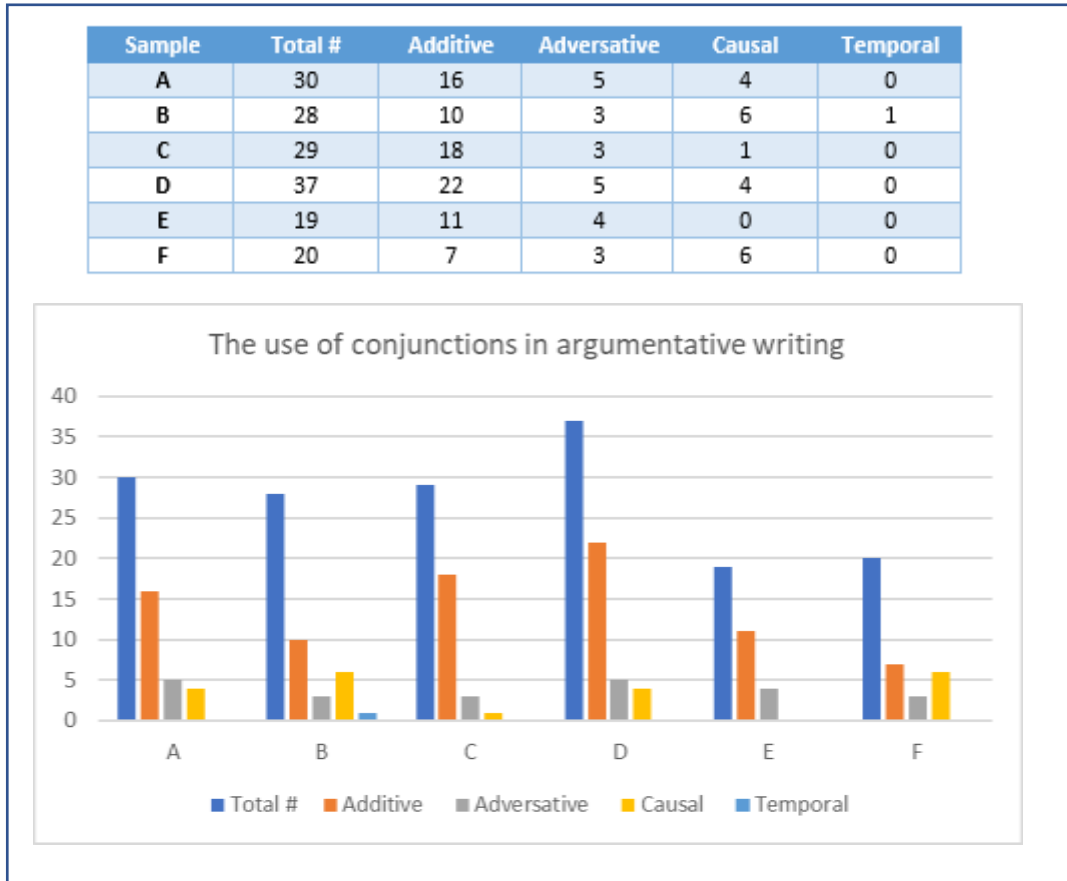
Collage2: Use of conjunctions in argumentative essays

In accordance with previous studies such as Bahaziq (2016) who stated that additive conjunctions were the most used type in students' writing, specifically the words *and* and *also*, the data collected from the writing samples also shed light on the fact that there was an overuse of the word *and*, which can be considered as one of ESL students' writing problems. It was used 54 times, which represents 36% of the total percentage of additive conjunctions (See Collage3). This was also noticed by the classroom teacher who highlighted in the interview the misuse of *and* by students in writing (See Figure2).
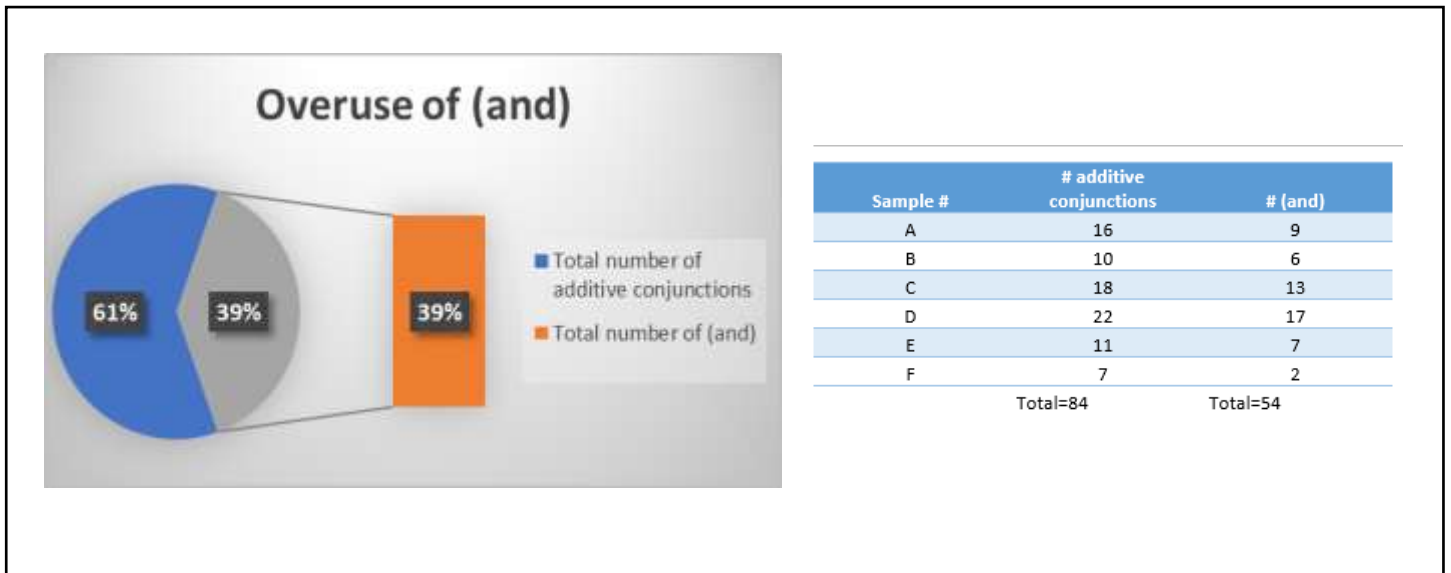
Collage3: Overuse of
(and)

Figure2: Interview with the classroom teacher

In fact, this specific finding was predictable. I argue below that there could be several reasons explaining why ESL students overuse some various linkers in writing compared to native English students. The main reason, however, could be first language transfer in second language. This issue was addressed by Lee (2013) who found that transfer errors was the main reason behind overusing and underusing some connectors in English essays written by Korean ESL students.

Moreover, in contrast to Hamed's findings in 2014 who stated that temporal conjunctions were frequent in Libyan students' argumentative writing, this study findings revealed that temporal conjunctions were the least frequently type used with one occurrence only among the six samples. Student B was the only student who gave an example of temporal conjunctions which was the word *after* (See Collage4 and Figure3).

Figure3: Student B Essay

Interestingly, even though student B was the only student who provided a wide variety of conjunctions using the additive, adversative, causal and temporal types, the text was very hard to understand and there was a lack of the overall progression in the text. In fact, this finding draws attention to this study key question: 'Is there any significant link between the use of conjunctions and the quality of Emirati students' argumentative writing?'

The following chart in Figure4 summarizes the ranking results that were taken while analyzing students' writing samples quality. Based on the students' writing evaluation forms and as shown in the chart, the number and the variety of conjunctions used were not correlated with the writing quality. Back to Collage2, and while student D had the highest total number of conjunctions used and student F used a range of logical conjunctions, they both had very low scores regarding sequencing information logically and arranging ideas coherently (Figure4). Their essays were hard to understand and follow. Moreover, as shown in Figure4, student C got high scores in how understandable and coherent the text was even though there was not a range of cohesive devices used.
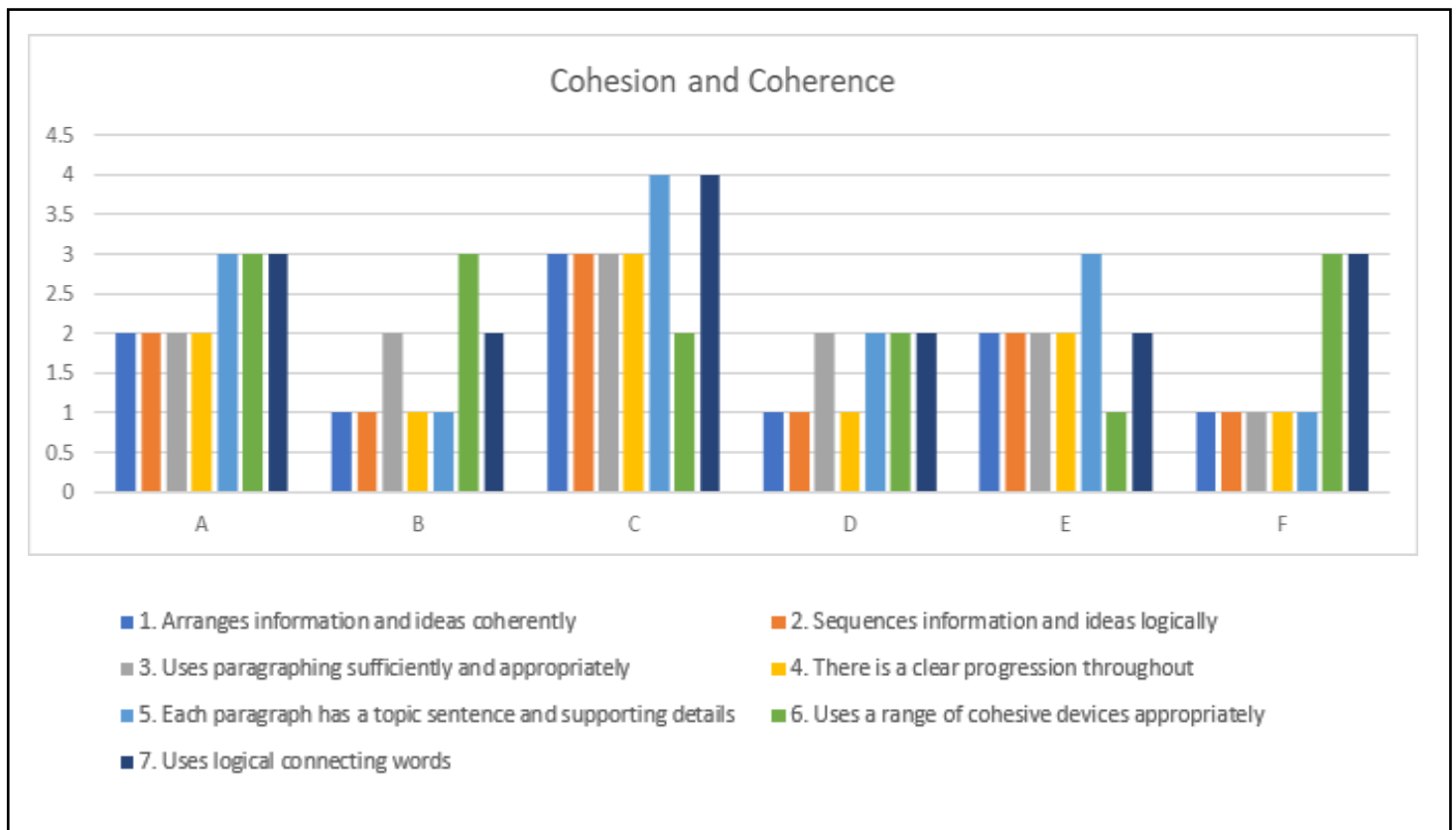
Figure4

Cohesion and Coherence Chart

It seems that using conjunctions helps in linking elements together and make the text more understandable but do not always lead to high quality writing. As the findings revealed, there are other factors that affect the quality of a text such as coherence and how information are presented logically. Similarly, Brown and Yule (1983) stated that the ensuring that a text is cohesive does not always lead to coherent texts. Coherence is also needed to provide logical interpretation possible.

Looking deeper into the study findings, the evaluation forms also revealed that the students had problems in using adversative conjunctions, particularly the word *rather* (See Collage5).

Collage5: examples of incorrect employment of conjunctions

This was also noted by the classroom teacher who stated in the interview "…but I noticed that they have problems in using 'contrast' words", and provided examples of the mistakes that were found in one of the writing tests (See Figure5).

Figure5

Conjunctions mistakes

Another finding was that there was a frequent use of conjunctions such as (first, second, third, etc.) which were found in all six samples. Even though these words exist in the temporal category, they were used here for another purpose which was "listing". As been mentioned earlier, the listing category was introduced by Locke (2004) who adapted Halliday and Hasan's model to make a more comprehensive list. A question then arises: how suitable is the (1976) model to analyze written discourse? It seems that the four categories were not enough in covering all the conjunctions that were used by the students, although it was recommended by Baker (1992). The adaptations that the (1976) model has gone through were effective in providing more suitable wide-ranging lists that consist of more categories of conjunctions. To add to this, Student B has used the word (now) which in fact does not belong to the (1976) model. Rather, it belongs to the "continuatives" category that was later suggested by Christiansen (2011) (See Figure6).
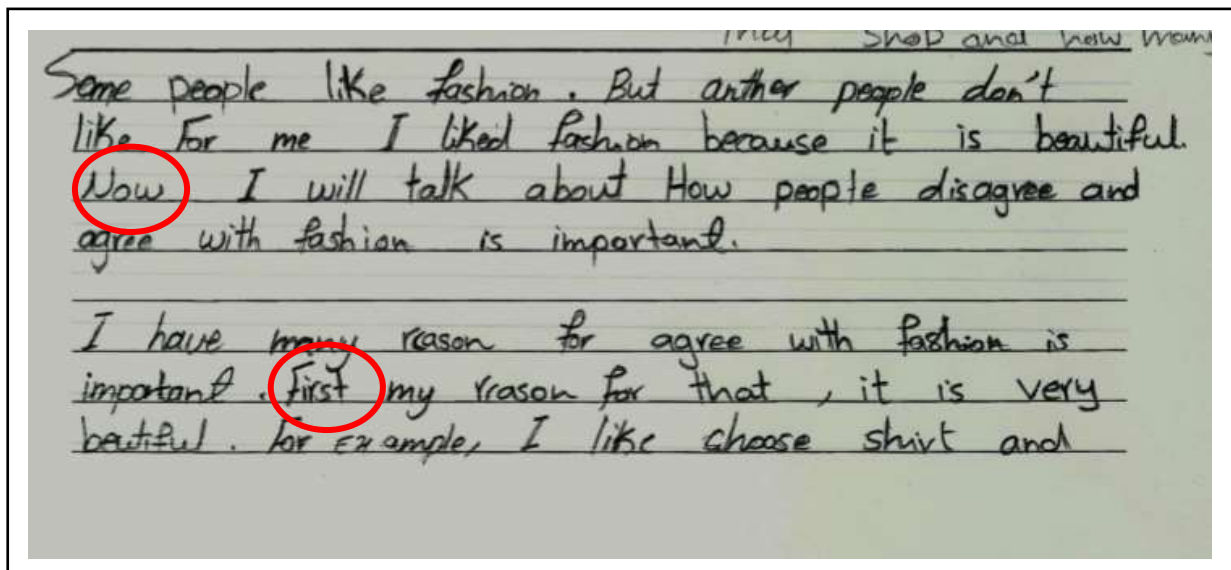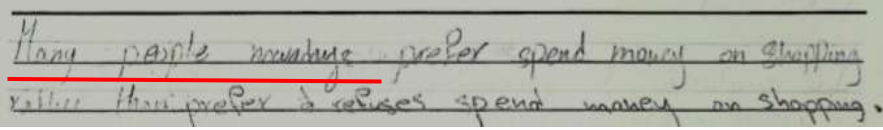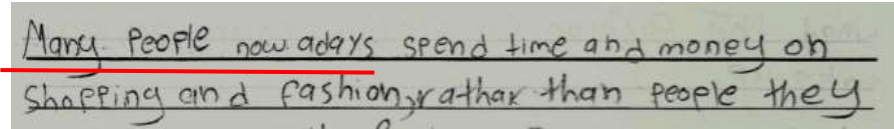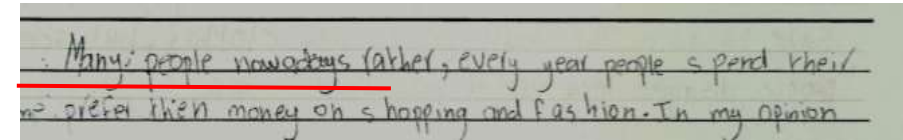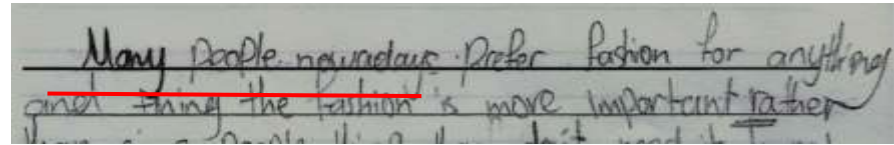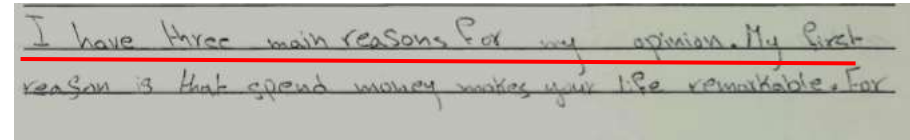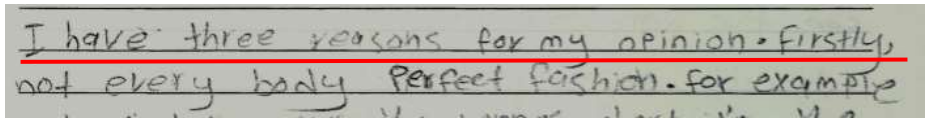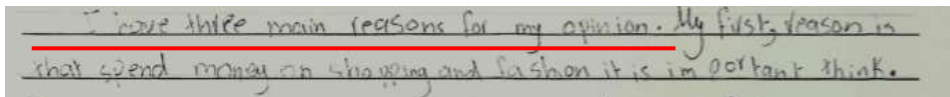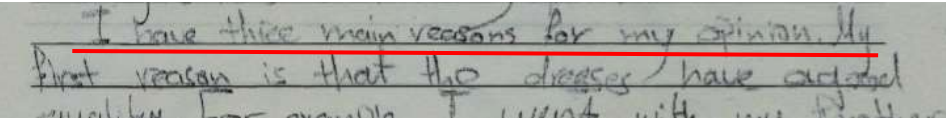

Figure6

Student B: *now* and *first*

An additional unexpected finding of this case study concentrating on students' writing quality, the samples reflected lacks in terms of writing skills. All the six participants seemed to write using the same words, structure and expressions (See Collage6, 7 and 8). The samples looked like being written based on a ready-made template. There is no sign of the essence of the writing skill found in any of the samples.
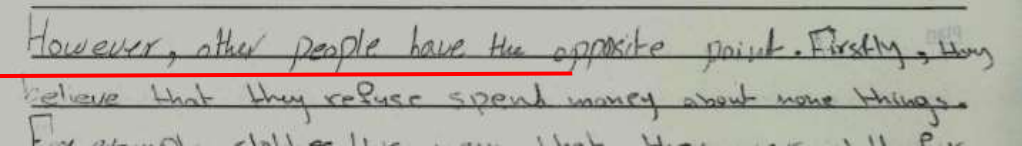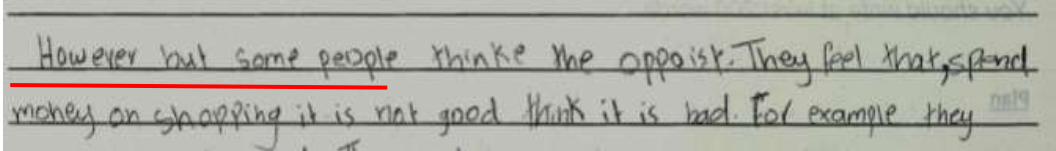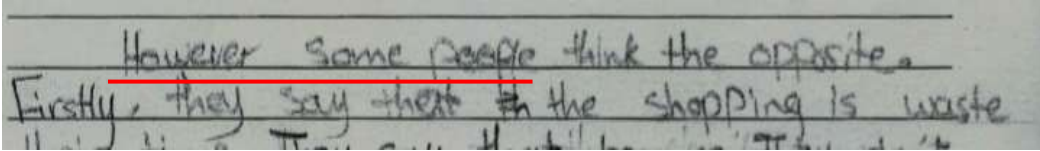
I argue below that teaching students based on "one expression fits all" is a serious problem that causes redundancy and educators should be taking it seriously. This can never teach students the skill of writing. Rather, it might lead to the incapability of writing decently as well as killing the skill of creative writing.

Collage 6: participants' writing

Collage 7: participants' writing

Collage 8: participants' writing

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this case study was conducted to investigate how conjunctions are used in Emirati students' argumentative essays and whether it is solidly tied to the quality of writing or not. As the findings showed, the use of conjunctions helped in acting as a bridge between sentences in texts, joining different parts of the text together and completing the meaning, however, there was not a positive correlation found between conjunctions and quality of writing. There were some cases where the students used a wide range of conjunctions correctly and accurately but produced texts that were hard to understand. Coherence was found to be very important in producing good quality essays. The way the students arranged information coherently and sequenced their ideas logically had a major effect on how understandable the essay was. Moreover, additive conjunctions were found to be the most frequently used type, whereas temporal conjunctions were found to be the least used type. There were also other problems that were noticed in students' writing and that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, there was an overuse of the additive conjunction "*and*" which affected the quality of writing negatively. Secondly, students were found to have difficulties in using adversative conjunctions. Words such as *rather* were used incorrectly by five out of the six participants and using the word *however* in sentences also seemed to be an issue. Thirdly, the students' writing samples clearly showed that the students have been taught writing based on "one expression fits all". In fact, it was such a disappointment to see college students write without any sign of the essence of writing.

Even though the study helped in getting deeper insights into the use of conjunctions in Emirati ESL classrooms and its relationship with the quality of writing, these findings cannot be generalized as the study focused on only six participants. It was difficult to get a full access permission from the college to students' writing and only six samples were provided, which was the major limitation of this study.

Thinking of this case study, specifically in the UAE context, the education system now focuses on increasing students' proficiency in English, especially concerning grammatical features orally and in writing. Therefore, it is important to take the last finding into consideration. Further research on how writing is being taught in Emirati

English classrooms and how to improve students' writing skills instead of teaching them to write based on a ready-made template seem necessary. As educators, our goal is to encourage students to be good writers, not to kill the essence of writing and the skill of creative writing.

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