
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Usage of Adverbial Connectors by Saudi Female EFL Learners

Arwa Hamdan AlShlowi

Department of English Language and Literature, Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Arwa Hamdan AlShlowi, **E-mail:** arwaeshloowi@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the different usage of adverbial connectors in Saudi Female EFL learners' (NNS) writings compared to native English (NS) writings. The 10 most frequent connectors in the two corpora, a compiled Saudi English learners' corpus and the BNC Baby Corpus of academic prose were selected to examine the differences between both writing samples. The results support previous studies that Saudi learners are generally more prone to overuse and underuse connectors and tend to overuse specific listing and contrastive connectors while ignoring others redundantly. It also presents evidence of Saudi learners' tendency to position adverbial connectors only sentence-initial or sentence medial, whereas native speakers of English interchange between medial and initial positions. These findings should be considered pedagogically to enhance EFL learners' understanding of English discourse connectors to produce better cohesive writing.

| KEYWORDS

Corpus; adverbial connectors; EFL Saudi learners; usage

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 17 March 2023

PUBLISHED: 26 March 2023

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2023.51.10

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, linguists and educators have received great attention and development, significant linguistic research, and language teaching methods to investigate language learner skills. Electronic corpora are one of these devices adopted widely today to analyze and compare different EFL writings with NSs writings to improve learners' ability for better academic writing (Corder & Allen, 1974). Many studies have been conducted to examine the usage of conjunctive adverbials between L1 and L2 corpora (Milton and Tsang, 1999; Granger & Tyson, 1996; Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Narita, Sato, and Sugiura, 2004; Chen, 2006). Evidence of the overuse of specific connectors and the underuse of others by EFL learners was revealed. The suggested causes of this phenomenon are EFL learners' lack of knowledge regarding how and which connectors should be used and first language interference.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Discourse must be cohesive to be comprehensible. To achieve this goal, EFL learners must understand how to use devices such as adverbial connectors. Generally, EFL learners tend to overuse and underuse them in their writing. Educators need more attention to this lack of knowledge and inappropriate usage of connectors to enhance learners' ability to use the correct connectors to produce solid academic writing.

1.2 Significance of the study

The importance of this paper is to provide knowledge of any existence of differences between Saudi NNSs and NSs in the use of connectors. This information would result in making the most suitable changes in EFL teaching and learning, enhancing the ability of non-native learners to produce high-quality discourse.

1.3 Aim of the study

The present study aims to investigate how Saudi English high school female learners use adverbial connectors in essay writing. The study attempts to address the following questions:

1. Do Saudi Female NNSs overuse or underuse adverbial connectors in English writing compared to NSs?
2. Do Saudi NNSs position connectors differently from English NSs?

2. Literature review

Learner corpora were first used to study adverbial connectors around three decades ago. Milton and Tsang (1993) were among the first to do this by analyzing the usage of 25 logical connectors in a compiled Chinese learners corpus and comparing it to the corpora of native speakers. They found that 20 of the 25 connectors examined were overused. They claimed the reason for the overuse of connectors is the firm belief of learners that the more connectors one uses, the more cohesive their written discourse.

Another study by Granger and Tyson (1996) investigated connectors used by French English learners. The researchers assumed that French learners would transfer the overuse of connectives from their native language to English and generated the "overuse hypothesis." Quirk et al.'s (1985) connector list was used to classify connectors. The findings showed that French learners are indeed influenced by their L1 and overuse connectors due to this. They also indicated that French learners of English overuse some connective classes while others are underused.

Additional research was conducted by Altenberg and Tapper (1998) on using connectives in Swedish EFL learners' writing. It was hypothesized that Swedish EFL learners use very few connectors compared to native speakers. They compared these findings with Granger and Tyson's and found that French EFL learners' writing pattern is similar to Swedish English learners.

Bolton et al. (2002) examined discourse connectors between Hongkong EFL students and Britain students. The study was interested in investigating both the overuse and underuse of connectives. The results indicated that both overused students connectors, but Chinese students overused connectives to a greater degree.

Narita, Sato & Sugiura (2004) researched Japanese learners' written English essays using connectors. They concluded that Japanese EFL learners greatly "overused the conjunction 'but' whereas significantly underused the connectors 'yet' and 'instead.'" They also found that Japanese EFL learners overused sentence-initial connectives while native speakers use connectives interchangeably between initial and medial positions.

Chen (2006) studied Taiwanese MA TESOL students' English writing and compared them to an NS sample. She found that EFL learners overused additive connectors while native advanced writers leaned more toward adversative connectors.

Ai (2006) investigated Chinese EFL learners' usage of adverbial connectors. The study showed that Chinese learners overused connectors like all other EFL learners. From the findings, the researcher concluded that the overuse of connectors in English discourse is a universal characteristic of all EFL learners.

3. Methodology

Since this study is of a quantitative nature, data collection is of a statistical numerical form. The compiled corpus is a collection of written English essays by Saudi female junior high school students at high school 115 in Ash Shifa District. All the participants were born and raised in KSA and had never lived or studied in any English-speaking country when the study was conducted. Their similar proficiency in English would make them an ideal representative group of all Saudi junior high schoolers. The academic prose section in the BNC Baby Corpus was the NS corpus chosen for comparison. This corpus was selected explicitly since it was created to improve English language teaching.

Quirk et al.'s (1985) framework was adopted to classify connectors. It divides 'conjuncts' according to their semantic category. The following table illustrates this framework.

Table 1. Classification of Adverbial Conjuncts

Semantic Role	Conjunct words
Listing	First(ly), second(ly), third(ly), in the first/second/third place, first of all, to begin with, next, then, finally, last(ly), last of all, in addition, additionally, and, similarly, likewise, further (more), besides, also, moreover, equally, correspondingly, in the same way, what is more, above all, for one thing...for another (thing)
Summative	in sum/summary/conclusion, summing up, to sum up, to summarize/conclude, in all, all, overall, (al)together, in brief, in short, briefly, generally (speaking), in general, so far, thus, therefore, on the whole

Appositive	That is (to say), i.e., in other words, namely, (more) specifically, particularly, in particular, for example, e.g., for instance, or rather
Resultive	Consequently, as a/in consequence, hence, so, therefore, thus, as a result, in turn, somehow, subsequently, else, then, finally, eventually, in other words
Inferential	Accordingly, in that case, in this way, perhaps, by the same token, otherwise
Contrastive	However, on the other hand, rather (than), alternatively, conversely, on the contrary, in/by contrast, by the way of contrast/comparison, in comparison, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, (al)though, yet, but, in spite of that, all the same, despite, unfortunately
Transitional	By the way, in the meantime, instead (of), anyhow, anyway, still, in any case/event, at any rate, after all, at the same time, at all events, needless to say, admittedly

The AntConc software was employed to analyze connector frequency in both corpora. The 10 most frequently occurring adverbial connectors in both corpora were chosen to be compared.

For the two corpora to be equally compared to one another, they must be of a similar size. Therefore they are normalized. Many researchers in this field have used this normalization method, including Bieber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998). According to this technique, the number of adverbial connectors is divided by the total number of words in a corpus. The resulting number is then multiplied by 10,000.

4. Data results and analysis

The total number of words (tokens) in the two corpora is normalized to be comparable. The following table shows the normalized frequencies per 10,000 words.

Table 2. Normalized Frequencies per 10,000 Words in both Corpora

	Saudi Female EFL Corpus	BNC Baby (academic prose)
Total number of tokens	2,897	66,017
Total number of connective tokens	344	2,594
Connectives per 10,000 tokens	1,187	392

The statistics above show that Saudi NNSs significantly overuse connectors compared to NSs. The NNSs used triple the number of conjuncts NSs did when writing an essay. Table 3 below provides a more detailed look at the number of connectors used in each semantic category according to Quirk et al.'s (1985) classification.

Table 3. Number of Conjuncts per 10,000 Words According to Quirk's Semantic Classification

Semantic Role	Saudi NNSs	NSs
Listing	952	298
Summative	0	5
Appositive	0	4
Resultive	0	10
Inferential	0	0
Contrastive	235	75
Transitional	0	0

The data indicate that both groups tend to use listing connectors far greater than the other types of conjuncts in writing. It also suggests that NSs vary in their usage of adverbial connectors, whereas Saudi NNSs limit themselves to the two connective categories, listing and contrastive. Further analysis of the 15 most frequent connectors used in the corpora is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Usage Percentage per 10,000 Words of the 10 most Frequent Conjuncts

Saudi NNSs			NSs		
Conjunct	%	Per 10,000 words	Conjunct	%	Per 10,000 words
1. and	66.8	793	1. and	66.5	261
2. but	9.35	111	2. but	11.4	45
3. also	6.6	79	3. also	3.3	13
4. however	3.7	44	4. then	2.8	11
5. second	3.4	41	5. first	2.3	9
6. though	3.2	39	6. however, rather	2	8
7. first	2.9	35	7. though	1.8	7
8. on the other hand	2.8	34	8. second, thus, hence, therefore	1.3	5
9. although	0.5	7	9. although	1	4
10. then	0.3	4	10. for example, yet	0.7	3

Results show that both NSs and Saudi NNSs of English frequently use the same three connectives, *but and* essay writing, respectively. These three conjuncts form over 80% of the connectors used in both corpora. The table also indicates that despite NNSs' overuse of connectors, they only use a few listing and contrastive conjuncts redundantly. They repetitively used the 8 conjuncts *and, but, also, however, second, though, first, and on the other hand*, while ignoring other connectors in the same categories, such as the words *yet* and *rather*. NSs, however, appropriately use a variety of connectives in their writing. In addition, the data shows that only NSs used connectors in the resultive, summative, and appositive categories, including the words *thus, hence, therefore, and for example*.

The position of connectors in both corpora is also something to be considered. It was found that NSs interchange their usage of connectors between sentence-initial and medial positions. In contrast, Saudi NNSs prefer positioning conjuncts, either sentence-initial or medial, as displayed in table 5.

Table 5. Position of Connectors in Saudi NNSs and BNC Baby (academic prose) Corpora

Position per 10,000 words	Saudi NNSs Corpus	BNC Baby of academic prose Corpus
Sentence-initial	233 (59%)	20 (15%)
Sentence-medial	161 (41%)	111 (85%)

The connective was used significantly by both groups (more than 66%), occurring mid-sentence, which would highly interfere with the results found concerning the positioning of the remaining connectives in the corpora. Due to this reason, it was excluded from the table above.

The data highlights that Saudi NNSs position conjuncts either sentence-medial or sentence-initial. For example, *however, first, second*, and only occurred initial-sentence position in all essays written by them. Moreover, the connectors *but* and *then* positioned sentence-medial for each occurrence. On the other hand, results indicate that NSs use each connector interchangeably, changing between initial and medial sentence positions in their written essays.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question is whether Saudi NNSs overuse or underuse adverbial connectors compared to NSs. The overall findings indicate that Saudi NNSs significantly overuse connectors three times more than NSs. However, they lack variation in their usage and stick to a small group of listing and contrastive conjuncts, unlike NSs. This limited collection of connectives is *and, but, also, however, second, though, first, and on the other hand*.

The findings also demonstrate that Saudi NNSs are significantly underused or ignored in the remaining connective categories of resultive, summative, appositive, inferential, and transitional. In contrast, NSs used a few, including *thus, hence, therefore, and for example*.

The overuse of a few conjuncts by Saudi NNSs could be a result of EFL learners' belief that the more connectors used, the higher the quality of a text (Milton & Tsang, 1993) or might be a strategy to use familiar connectors and avoid unfamiliar ones which lead to constant repetition (Xu & Liu, 2012).

Other reasons for the two phenomena of overuse and underuse may be EFL learners' limited English vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, nervousness, and low self-confidence, which highly reflects the EFL learners' lack of sufficient knowledge in the usage of adverbial connectors resulting in low proficiency writing.

Regarding the second research question of whether Saudi NNSs position connectors similar to NSs, results show that Saudi EFL learners position connectors differently in sentence-initial or sentence-medial. The conjuncts, *however*, *first*, *second*, and *also* only occurred at the beginning of a sentence while *but* and *then* were always positioned in the middle of sentences in their written texts. On the other hand, NSs would switch the usage of adverbial connectors between initial and medial positions.

Using connectors by Saudi NNSs in sentence-initial might be used to avoid making mistakes due to their incapability of knowing the correct place of conjuncts in the middle of a sentence. NSs, on the other hand, use conjuncts interchangeably, which might indicate their sufficient understanding of language use and is reflected in their high proficiency in writing.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Ai, H. (2006). *A corpus-based study of connectors: Research from the CAS learner corpus of English*. Unpublished master's thesis, Graduate University of Chinese Academy of Science, Beijing, China.
- [2] Altenberg, B. & Tapper, M. (1998). The use of adverbial connectors in advanced Swedish learners' written English. In Granger, S. (Ed.), *Learner English on Computer* (pp.80-93). London: Longman.
- [3] Biber, D., Conrad, S. & Reppen, R. (1998). *Corpus linguistics: Investigating language structure and use*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] *The BNC Baby*, version 2. (2005). Distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. Available at [HTTP://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/)
- [5] BNC Consortium, (2007) *British National Corpus, Baby edition*, Oxford Text Archive. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12024/2553>
- [6] Bolton, K., Nelson, G., and Hung, J. (2002). A corpus-based study of connectors in student writing: Research from the International Corpus in Hong Kong (ICE- HK). *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 7(2), 165-182.
- [7] Chen, C. W. (2006). The use of conjunctive adverbials in the academic papers of advanced Taiwanese EFL learners. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 11(1), 113-130.
- [8] Granger, S. & Tyson, S. (1996). Connector usage in the English essay writing of native and non-native EFL speakers of English. *World Englishes* 15, 17-27. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227647492_Connector_Usage_in_the_English_Essay_Writing_of_Native_and_Non-Native_EFL_Speakers_of_English
- [9] Milton, J. and Tsang, E. (1993). A corpus-based study of logical connectors in EFL students' writing: Directions for future research. In R. Perbertom & E.S.C. Tsang (Eds.), *Lexis in Studies* (pp.215-246). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. Available at <http://repository.ust.hk/ir/Record/1783.1-1083>
- [10] Narita, M., Sato, C., & Sugiura, M. (2004). *Connector usage in the English essay writing of Japanese EFL learners*. Paper presented at the Fourth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation.
- [11] Narita, M., Sato, C., & Sugiura, M. (2004, May). *Connector Usage in the English Essay Writing of Japanese EFL Learners*. In *LREC*. 1171-1174).
- [12] Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.
- [13] Xu, Y., & Liu, Y. (2012). The Use of Adverbial Conjuncts of Chinese EFL Learners and Native Speakers--Corpus-based Study. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 2(11).