

Zone of Proximal Development: Investigating the Most Usage Conjunctions and the Common Issues Written by EFL Students at Paragraph Levels

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Received: September 25, 2023

Accepted: December 5, 2023

Online Published: December 28, 2023

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n2p109

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n2p109>

Abstract

This qualitative paper covered an in-depth investigation of using different types of conjunctions taking into consideration their meaning and functions. To investigate the common issues of using conjunctions and exploring the most types of conjunctions that the participants applied, ZPD was framed to develop the study. The participants were undergraduates who were studying at one of the Saudi universities. They were selected from level one who enrolled in the Grammar 1 course. The sample of the study was chosen randomly. They were divided into two groups, which were Group one and Group two. Both received the same instructions from the same instructor in the class. The difference was that group one had an opportunity to use their textbook and were allowed to discuss and receive help from their partners. Whereas, group two did not receive any help; they were supposed to structure their written texts individually. For this reason, the zone of proximal development theory was selected as a framework. The findings of the study highlighted the participants' issues in using conjunctions, including fragment sentences, creating too-long sentences with unclear messages, and failing to use punctuations with conjunctions. Further, the results listed the conjunctions that each group used. Group two only used three familiar conjunctions, which were And, But, and Because. However, group one was better at using various conjunctions because they tried to use more types, such as And, Or, So, But, and Because. Thus, applying cooperative learning and scaffolding raised the chance of using student-centered methods in grammar classrooms.

Keywords: conjunctions, EFL, cooperative learning, writing, zone of proximal development

1. Introduction

Saudi governments and their citizens are aware of the importance of learning different languages in general and English in a specific for international trade, communication, education... etc. (Alqurashi & Ghani, 2021). Learning languages means exposing and developing language proficiencies including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Writing is one of the most complex proficiencies, "...and writing with cohesion and coherence is increasingly difficult" (Qadeer & T'chiang, 2020, p. 557). It is important for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to be exposed to cohesion and coherence through learning writing elements. Basically, cohesion refers to the flow of a text and how all parts of the text are connected (Afrianto, 2017). Cohesion is defined as "Intra-textual relations of the grammatical and lexical items that make the parts of the text hang together as a whole to convey the complete meaning" (Alzubeiry, 2019, pp. 412- 413). In other words, the emphasis on cohesion is mainly on the sentence level while the emphasis on coherence is on connecting thoughts and ideas altogether. That means writing is not only presenting ideas and expressing opinions, but also it is tightly related to adequate sentence structures and grammatical rules to create accurate and comprehended texts (Fitriati & Yonata, 2017). Focusing on structuring clauses, using proper punctuations, organizing ideas clearly, and considering the audience during writing processes are all essential elements that English learners are hard to learn in the early stages. One of the grammatical rules that EFL learners have challenges with is using conjunctions appropriately in their written texts. Conjunctions help readers to easily understand the intended messages because of the flow and organization of the ideas, which lead to achieving coherence and good quality writing (Alshamalat & Ghani, 2020).

Different research studies attempted to examine and investigate the use of conjunctions in the English language. In other words, they focused on using conjunctions in students' writing in terms of exploring learners' issues and difficulties (Unubi 2016; Purba et al., 2017; Alshamalat & Ghani, 2020; Sadri et al., 2021). However, most researchers did not investigate students' applications of using conjunctions within the Zone of Proximal Development theory (ZPD) as a complementary framework. For this reason, this research hoped to contribute to investigating (EFL) students' applications of linking ideas by using conjunctions in their written paragraphs in the Grammar 1 course. The main focus was on two parts of their writing. The first part was the most types of conjunctions that students used in their writing. The second part was the common issues that students made while using conjunctions in their written output. To explore the students' understanding and applications of the learned rules of conjunctions, the researcher relied on the zone of proximal development theory to enrich the research and examined whether receiving assistance or not from others impacts students' learning development and

performance of applying conjunctions. This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the common conjunctions that EFL students use in their written paragraphs?
2. What are the common issues that EFL students make during writing their paragraphs?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conjunctions

Conjunctions are defined as a connector to link ideas, words, phrases, and sentences (Malmkar, 1991; Unubi, 2016). In writing, conjunctions are considered one of the cohesive devices that learners should be aware of (Zahra, 2021). Although conjunctions are related to cohesive devices, they are categorized as “closed class” in terms of the difficulty of deriving another term from conjunctions (Aarts, 2001, p. 45). It is impossible to modify conjunctions since they are considered closed class. In other words, it could not be added inflection (suffixes or prefixes) to conjunctions or prepositions; whereas there is a possibility to manipulate and add inflection to nouns and verbs (Unubi, 2016).

There are different types of conjunctions, which are coordinating, correlative, and subordinating (Purba et al., 2017; Sadri et al., 2021). Halliday and Hasan (1976) proposed four types of conjunctions, which are additive conjunctions, adversative conjunctions, casual conjunctions, and temporal conjunctions. Additive conjunctions are used to connect thoughts and ideas. Examples of additive conjunctions are (and, also, or, nor, neither...etc.) However, adversative conjunctions are used to compare similar or different concepts, such as (but, however, on the other hand...etc.) For casual conjunctions, users apply them in their output to provide reasons or causes including (so, for this reason, as a result...etc.) The last type is temporal conjunctions that are used to show relationships or order between ideas, such as (then, next, third, then...etc.). EFL/ ESL learners should expose to those types of conjunctions to enrich their grammatical knowledge to use them in their output. Knowing those types with the accurate rules of conjunctions empowers EFL/ESL learners while working and creating their written texts.

2.2 Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

In this study, the zone of proximal development has been selected as a framework to investigate the impact of this theory on students’ written performance through using conjunctions. ZPD has been proposed by Vygotsky who emphasizes the significance of receiving interlocutor support to learners to achieve language development (Tharp et al., 1988). ZPD is defined as a difference between a learner who receives assistance from others including teachers, parents, classmates, or adults, and a learner who does not receive any help or assistance (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). That means interaction with others leads learners to develop their proficiency skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, comprehension...etc. Interaction could occur naturally inside or outside classrooms, especially between students and teachers or among students themselves. The conversation that occurs between learners may lead to a beneficial discussion that let them reach mutual comprehension (Sarem & Shirzadi, 2014). Also, Yang (2021) found out that students who had writing conferences with their teachers got benefits and gained better comprehension because they found answers and explanations about their questions and concerns. Thus, learners need to have an opportunity to interact, share, discuss, and communicate with others. Not only limited lack of opportunities impacts negatively students’ performance but also limited vocabulary and lack of understanding affect students’ confidence and prevent them from communicating with others (Alqurashi & Ghani, 2021). Therefore, instructors need to encourage their students to interact with others by using effective strategies that lead them to talk and share their opinions without thinking about their mistakes. Based on ZPD, Figure 1 reflected several zones where learners can or cannot work on different tasks by themselves.

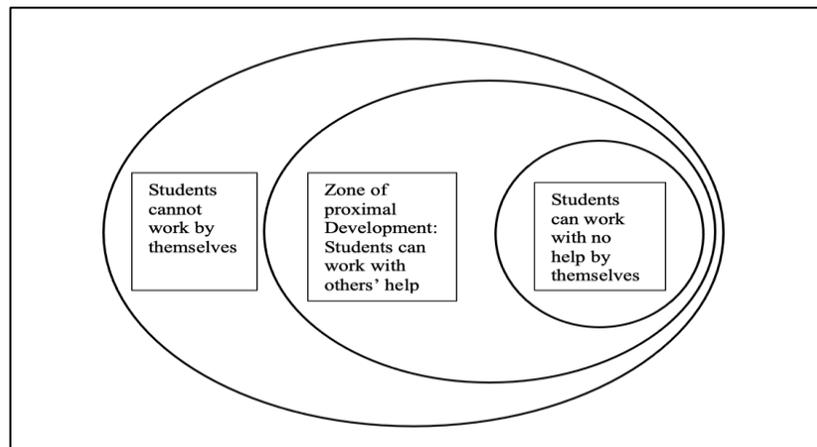


Figure 1. Students’ abilities of working based on ZPD

During working together, instructors can apply Cooperative Learning (CL), which refers to a group of students who work together under instructional practices to develop their understanding and achieve common objectives in class (as cited in Lei et al., 2023). One of the

benefits that students may get is developing their capacity for interacting with others in classrooms because they use their interpersonal skills to help and motivate others (Yassin et al., 2018). Thus, the development of social skills through teamwork in classrooms prepares students for different situations in real life because it makes them think critically and solve various problems. Instructors should clarify the main goal of teamwork before asking students to work together to be ready and prepared for what they are exposed to. However, one of the disadvantages of CL is that it requires time-consuming because the instructors should design the activity that should be suitable to students' levels and needs (Ghufon & Ermawati, 2018).

3. Methodology

In this current study, the qualitative research method was selected to reflect in-depth understanding and investigate EFL students' written performance. According to Creswell (2009), the qualitative method helps researchers to explore and investigate social or individual's problems.

3.1 Participants

The participants were EFL students; they enrolled in the Grammar 1 course at one of the Saudi universities. The participants were from the Department of English Language and Translation. All participants were Saudis and had learned with the same instructor. The course was one of the required courses for their study plans. The participants were fresh students, and their levels in English were between lower and intermediate. The number of participants was 15 students from level one in the English department. Based on the number of the class, the instructor divided them into two groups. Group one contained 10 students, and the instructor divided this first group into pairs. Thus, the number of pairs was five. Whereas, Group two consisted of 5 students who should work individually.

3.2 Data Collection

In the first phase of gathering data, the instructor introduced and explained the connecting ideas to the students. The instructor relied on the grammatical textbook by Azar, Kock, & Hagen (2009) because it was a required textbook in this course. This textbook highlighted specific conjunction rules (see Table. 1), which made the researcher only focused on them in the analysis stage. All the lessons were explained, taught, and practiced with different activities that were completed within five weeks. Thus, the current study developed based on the rules that the students have been exposed to. The examples of the rules for connecting ideas are shown below (Table 1). In this phase, the instructor was the main source and the role model for all students.

Table 1. Examples of the rules in the required textbook

Rules of Connecting Ideas	
1	Combining thoughts by using And
2	Combining thoughts by using But
3	Combining thoughts by using Or
4	Combining thoughts by using So
5	Combining thoughts by using Because
6	Combining thoughts by using Even though/Although

In the following phase of collecting data, the instructor provided an opportunity for the students by specializing two days to revise them to ensure that they comprehended the rules and answered all students' inquiries. Then, the instructor decided to hold a day for writing activity for the students. In the writing session, the instructor divided the students into two groups. Group one should work in pairs by dividing 10 students into five groups. The pairs were divided randomly by the instructor not based on students' preference. Group two should work individually by asking five students to work by themselves without receiving support from anyone.

Then, both groups received the same instruction before the writing session. They were asked to write paragraphs using the conjunctions that they learned in class. In this phase, the instructor stopped being the main resource for the students. Based on ZPD, Group one was allowed to (1) use the textbook while composing their paragraphs and (2) discuss and ask any questions to their partners. Thus, the pair of students had the opportunity to discuss, scaffold, share, and organize their thoughts together. However, Group two did not receive any support; they were not allowed to use supplementary materials or ask their classmates or instructor any questions or clarification. Therefore, Group two should think, work, and organize their ideas individually. In other words, Group two only relied on the information that they had learned in the classroom during the five weeks.

The periodical time for the writing session was two hours. In the first 15 minutes, Group one discussed and built an outline to organize their ideas; whereas Group two worked on their outline individually. The instructor chose the topic **Employed Students Vs Unemployed Students** because she provided different topics, but all students preferred this topic. The instructor tried to involve the students in selecting the topic since they had not used to write in the grammar course. Regarding ethical issues, the researcher hid the participants' identities in the study and told them that the findings would be used for academic purposes.

3.3 Data Analysis

After collecting the data, each paragraph was analyzed based on the conjunction rules that they have learned as shown in Table 1. The researcher ignored other grammatical issues that students made in their writing. The data were analyzed in two phases. In the first phase, the focus was on the most conjunctions that the students used while writing their tasks. In this phase, the researcher first analyzed Group one's

writing and then analyzed Group two’s paragraphs. In the second phase, the emphasis was on the common issues that the students made while using conjunctions. The researcher analyzed the groups’ issues and then raised the most common issues that both groups made in their paragraphs. Then, the themes emerged based on the analyzed data; after that, the comparison occurred to answer the research questions.

4. Results

Q1. What are the common conjunctions that EFL students use in their written paragraphs?

4.1 The Most Usage of Conjunctions between Group One and Group Two

4.1.1 Using Conjunctions in Writing Paragraphs by Group One

In group one, the most connector that students used was And. And is considered the most familiar conjunctions among ESL and EFL learners. The data showed that the students understood the different usage of the connector And. They tried to connect nouns, adjectives, and phrases by using And. The data reflected the accurate usage of And because they could send the message clearly and precisely. The examples below presented students’ symbols of using And.

Table 2. Examples of using AND by group one

Examples of Using AND	
1	Studying online is easy and convenient.
2	In classroom you can easily ask the teacher and the student for help because everyone is close to you.
3	The employed is smart and more educated.
4	The employed student is tidy and organized, while the unemployed student has unstructured time.
5	E-learning loses the feature of communication between the teacher and the student.

Besides applying And as a connector, the data indicated that the students also used other learned conjunctions such as But, So, Or, and Because as shown in Table 3. It seems that the students comprehended the meaning of each connector based on the sentences that they composed regardless of the other grammatical mistakes that they applied. Comparing And to other conjunctions that the students used, they extensively used And more than the other connectors.

Table 3. Examples of using different conjunctions by group one

Examples of Using BUT, SO, OR & BECAUSE	
1	The employees receive a salary every month but the no employees do not receive a salary.
2	So I think most students prefer classroom learning because it is more fun.
3	E-learning is more easy than in classroom you can learn everywhere but you can’t understand sometimes in the online classes even if you ask a million times.
4	As for me, I like to study online because my focus in it is better than studying face to face.
5	Online learning is easy to attend than in classroom learning, so you can be in another country and still attend to your classes.
6	As for distance education, the content of the educational material is presented in books, electronic papers, online education sites, or other audio, or visual resources.

4.1.2 Using Conjunctions in Writing Paragraphs by Group Two

The data presented students’ usage of conjunctions. All groups stuck with only three connectors, which were And, But, and Because. Two students used rarely Or and So. The most conjunction that the students in the second group used was And. They used And confidently in different cases. They used And as a connector in different accurate ways. First, they started their sentences by using And. Although it is considered an informal way to use And at the beginning of the sentence, they applied it properly and understandably as shown in example 1 Table 4. Second, they used And as a parallel by combining more than verbs, adjectives, nouns, or phrases as shown in examples 2, 3, and 4, in Table 4.

Table 4. Examples of using AND by group two

Examples of Using AND	
1	And you can learn whatever you want at any time.
2	Nowadays online learning is the most helpful and useful way to learn multiple things.
3	There are many differences between online learning and offline learning.
4	Offline community has its advantages and disadvantages too.

Even though the students used But and Because, they did not use them as much as the connector And. They confidently used But and Because with minor errors. Although there were errors, the intended meaning was clear. The data also revealed that the participants used But in an informal way as in example 3 Table 5. Other instances in Table 5 below listed some students’ applications of using But and Because.

Table 5. Examples of using different conjunctions by group two

Examples of using ‘BUT’ & ‘BECAUSE’	
1	The class online is good because is easy.
2	I agree with online because the online make life easier.
3	But do not agree with class online.
4	Students say that online helped them to be confident, but others disagree saying it was hard to focus on.

Comparing the analyzed data in both groups, the data reflected that group one used more conjunctions than group two. In other words, group two only stuck to three connectors, which were And, But, and Because. However, group one tried to include And, But, Because, Or, and So in their writing. Although group two stuck with only three connectors, both groups understood the meaning of the connectors that they learned. Also, both groups used the conjunction And extensively in different places in their texts more than other conjunctions.

Q.2 What are the common issues that EFL students make during writing their paragraphs?

4.2 The Common Errors that EFL Students Make while Applying the Learned Conjunctions

Based on the collected data, both groups had the same errors while applying different connectors. First, although the students could integrate the connectors accurately as meaning, they failed to apply punctuations properly with them. They still had difficulty using the punctuation in the right place. In other words, they needed time to assimilate that if they have two full sentences, they had to use a comma before the connector as example 1 Table 6. Rare students who could use the comma in the right place with two sentences. Also, students tried to divide the sentences, which might make the meaning unclear as example 3 below. In fact, using proper punctuation is essential to lead the readers to follow the author’s ideas. In example 5, the student used a period, which made the sentence incomplete and difficult to understand. For using commas with conjunctions, students either preferred avoiding applying commas with the connectors or improperly using them. The instances below presented students’ applications in their production as shown in Table 6.

Table. 6. Examples of using commas improperly

Examples of Using Commas Unproperly	
1	When you miss someone, you want to see him face to face, <u>and</u> connecting with him in person.
2	I think learn face to face. <u>Because</u> you will focus with the doctor.
3	There is difference between a student who works, <u>and</u> does not work.
4	Maybe because they need money, <u>or</u> just to take experience.
5	<u>But</u> do not agree with class. <u>Because</u> the time.

The second issue was that both groups composed too long sentences including different conjunctions as shown in Table 7. The long sentences impacted the message that the students tried to deliver because of using unneeded words and other grammatical errors that they made. Also, some long sentences that students created needed only to be divided into different sentences to be more understandable. As example 2 below, it was easy to separate the long sentence into more than one sentence because there were different ideas in the same sentence. In addition, students wrote too long sentences because they may try to compare two concepts by keep providing more details and explanation about a specific point as the example in 3 below. This might be because they just learned how to use conjunctions, and they could not use them in comparison. Also, students sometimes created long sentences because they tried to describe and provide more details to make their message more clear to readers. Providing more details does not always the proper choice to clarify writers’ ideas.

Table 7. Examples of creating too-long sentences

Examples of Creating Too Long Sentences	
1	In online learning we can share our time and not be late for classes but on the other hand the online learning can make students lazy because they do not more much unlike face to face learning makes students more attentive and interactive.
2	We used to study anything in classes, but after Corona everything changes in a heartbeat we started online classes for one year and it works well with some students, but the others not.
3	The classroom learning is more conversation and more activity and participation where is online learning do not have this much participation, but many students these days prefer online learning because of the ease and comfort.
4	One of pros of classroom that you can make more friend and see them face to face, but in online learning you cannot see them, in the same way in online learning you can take your class in any place where you were (in your home, in another country, etc) because the technology now applied this in online class.
5	Classroom learning is the most common way for education and E-learning comes next, so for me I prefer classroom learning because I can make eye contact with the teacher and it motivates meet to participate, but also E-learning make some people and specially shy people participate more, and I think E-learning sometimes useful if I work and study at the same time or if I’m sick.

The third issue was creating incomplete sentences or ideas while using connectors. In example 2 below, the student tried to start with a hook, but she failed to write accurate and understandable questions. She first did not add a question mark at the end of the questions. She also did not structure the question in a precise way to clarify the meaning even when she used the connector Because in a proper way. It seemed that students tried to include the learned conjunctions, but they missed completing their ideas as shown in Table 8. Their main focus was on including conjunctions more than completing their ideas.

Table 8. Examples of writing in complete sentences

Examples of Writing Incomplete Sentences	
1	Before there was only one way to teach, and that’s was by the teacher met the students in person.
2	Is me know in the past few year, the study was online because of the virous.
3	E-learning because of the many problems and they can’t understand very well.
4	The most obvious difference about E-learning and classroom learning.
5	But do not agree with class. Because the time.
6	Because a person can work and study at the same time.

The fourth issue was that both groups used double connectors. This issue was the least because three students made it. It was important to spotlight it because rarely students tried to use unfamiliar conjunctions in their production. For example, in example 1, the student started with although and added but in the middle of the sentence. The student should select either Although or But to reflect the target meaning. In example 2 below, the student used On the other hand and But in different places in the same sentences. It seems that the student was aware of the meaning of those words, but she needed more time to practice using conjunctions until mastering them. However, in example 3 below, the students wrote But and On the other hand at the beginning of the sentence. In this example, the student seemed to transfer her thoughts informally as if she was talking orally to someone. She should choose either one because both hold the same meaning and usage.

Table 9. Examples of using double connectors

Examples of Using double connectors	
1	Although close education is better, but distance education is easier in terms of participation.
2	Unemployed students, <u>on the other hand</u> , will probably feel more relaxed or not stressed, but may have problems buying supplies or hunting for jobs.
3	<u>But on the other hand</u> learning face to face at campus with your colleagues is much better because you can get the idea immediately and when you don’t get it you can ask your teacher or your fiends to help you.

The last issue, most students wrote informally. The data showed that the students first began their sentences with **And** or **But**. They learned that starting with those conjunctions is considered an informal way. The examples below presented samples of their writing. In example 3 below, the student was not only informally starting her sentence, but she also used the first-person noun **You** to complete her idea. Also, it seems that the most informal sentences that the students wrote were short, and the ideas needed clarification.

Table 10. Examples of an informal way

Examples of Writing in an Informal Way	
1	And then acquire many skills.
2	<u>But</u> , it is also better for the people social life.
3	And the learning online it is not depend on your attends and you can use the internet and a lot of devices.
4	But do not agree with class. <u>Because</u> the time.
5	But in online learning, there are a lot of distractions.
6	And that the different between them.

5. Discussion

In brief, the main conclusion was drawn from the above findings, which was that applying the ZPD-based instruction to teach and use conjunctions in writing passages by EFL students has a positive impact on their performance. The results in the current study confirmed prior studies’ findings that discussed different functions and applications of scaffolding in different forms of ZPD instruction (Alavi et al., 2012, Tajeddin & Tayebipour, 2012; Shil & Rahman, 2020; Nazerian et al., 2021). Also, the findings specifically stressed the significance of applying ZPD-based instruction in teaching and learning conjunctions within writing activities; these results support Pahlevansadegh and Mirzaei’s (2020) claims who indicated that collaboration increases the opportunities for learners’ interaction and form-focused output. Since there are no studies that combined ZPD-based instruction with teaching and learning conjunctions, this current research casts new light on the function and nature of the ZPD instruction emphasizing the difference between learning and applying conjunctions with a partner or individual.

The results discussed two parts of students’ written performance, which were: (1) the types of conjunctions that each group used and (2) the common issues of using conjunctions that EFL students made in their written tasks. Regarding to the first part of the result, both groups used the main and familiar conjunctions such as, But, Or, And...etc in their writing. This result is in line with Zewitra, Bakhti, and Ramadhan’s (2023) findings which revealed that the most types of conjunctions that have been used by Diploma-III EFL students was coordinate conjunction including And, But, and Or. However, group one used more conjunctions better than the second group. That’s because group one exploited all the received scaffolding and support provided by partners and materials. This finding is consistent with Nazerian et al. (2021) who found that each learner should receive the needed limit of scaffolding for their own ZPD to develop their performance and achieve the target goals.

The second part of the results highlighted the common issues in using conjunctions by EFL students. The first issue was properly placing the

punctuation while using conjunctions. This finding is in line with the results of Alsalami's research (2022) which indicated that Saudi students failed to use punctuation properly because they had an issue with a fragment sentence; thus, it was normal to not be professional in using punctuation. In other words, their attention was on structuring sentences more than placing and using punctuation properly. Yemez and Dikilitas (2022) indicated that English learners do not adhere the sentence structures as well as punctuations while writing different clauses. Alsalami (2022) reflected instructors believe that their students will not master applying punctuations and writing accurate conjunctions because they are still confused about structuring sentences. Another issue was that EFL students wrote incomplete sentences while using conjunctions. This finding is similar to Phuket and Othman's (2015) results who pointed out that the most difficult element in writing for EFL learners was fragment and grammar; this might be a sign of their progress in learning and developing their language.

6. Conclusion

Applying writing in the grammar course is not always welcomed by EFL students. However, changes in combining the ZPD-based instruction with writing activities to use conjunctions were positively received by EFL students. There was a positive impact on group one's written performance because they took the chance to use all kinds of support and scaffolding that they received during their writing process. Group one had an opportunity to use their textbook and discuss with their partners while working on their written texts. This support helped group one to complete the tasks and achieve their goals successfully. Interestingly, applying cooperative learning in classrooms raised the chance of using the student-centered method, which helps instructors avoid being centered and reduce learners' boredom. Also, it encouraged the students to socialize and share information through their discussion as what happened with group one. To sum up, the results conclude that EFL students have been able to use the familiar conjunctions in their writing, but providing support increases the positive chance to take a risk and step out of their comfort zone to apply different types of conjunctions in their output. Therefore, understanding the target concept is not enough, rather learning and practicing how to function the rules is crucial.

7. Recommendations

The finding draws essential recommendations for both researchers and English instructors. For further studies, I recommended other researchers interview EFL instructors and students to reflect on their perspectives toward teaching and learning conjunctions in writing tasks besides analyzing students' writing. Also, more studies are needed to compare ESL learners' usage of conjunctions in their writing to EFL learners' applications to find the weaknesses and strengths through structuring different paragraphs. Additionally, I highly recommended EFL/ESL teachers to...

1. ensure that ESL/EFL students understand the components of full sentences to avoid fragment sentences.
2. focus on developing ESL/EFL students' usage of punctuation by providing more exercises and activities.
3. encourage ESL/EFL students to apply unfamiliar conjunctions until mastering them.
4. apply cooperative learning in grammar courses to strengthen ESL/EFL learners' proficiencies and social skills while learning different grammatical rules.

Acknowledgment

I dedicate this paper to Qassim University, and I am thankful to the participants who contributed to my study.

Acknowledgments

I appreciate the participants who shared their written texts in this study.

Authors contributions

Dr. Itithaz Jama was the only one who was responsible for the study design, revising, data collection, data analysis.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

I declare that I did not use any personal relationship in my study to influence the results of the conducted research.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available

due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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