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## A diagnostic analysis of ELT students' use of connectives

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### Abstract

Pragmatic competence in foreign language learning depends on appropriate and correct use of the target language. Textual competence, on the other hand, is the ability to produce coherent texts. Appropriate and correct use of connectives in writing reflects the extent of textual competence. The significance of this study is that it was conducted in a Turkish ELT Department setting with a particular focus on the use of connectives. Since these students will become future English teachers, it is vital to identify and prevent their errors before they become fossilized. The study investigated the use of connectives in unplanned argumentative essays by Turkish freshman ELT department students. Participants were asked to write an unplanned, well-developed argumentative essay. Afterwards, a questionnaire was conducted in order to collect information about their language backgrounds. In data analysis, connectives in each essay were manually counted by the researcher. Number of sentences and number of words in each essay was also counted to determine sentence length. As a further step, coherence relation categories indicated by each connective was identified. Main findings of the study revealed that students did not use a large variety of connectives in their essays. Many instances of grammatical and punctuation errors were observed in their writings and for what relations students used connectives could not be determined in some cases.

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*Keywords:* connectives, coherence relations, cohesive devices, written English

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### 1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence in foreign language learning depends on appropriate and correct use of the target language. Textual competence, on the other hand, is the ability to produce coherent texts. Appropriate and correct use of connectives in written discourse reflects the extent of textual competence. As stated by (Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980), connectives have an important role in discourse representation and processing. Zamel (1983) and

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Virtanen (2004) also emphasize the importance of connectives in demonstrating the semantic relations between the segments of a particular text. According to Leech & Svartvik (1994:177), connectives are the cohesive signposts in discourse that guide the reader or hearer by signaling how successive units of text are related to each other. Halliday & Hasan (1976) made a detailed description of connectives in terms of the logical and semantic relations they exhibit. The comprehensive theoretical framework drawn by their taxonomy of cohesive devices formed the background of many research studies in the field.

Problems encountered by foreign language learners in the use of connectives have been focused on in many previous studies in the literature. Hartnett (1986) found that connectives aid the comprehensibility of a text when they are wisely used by a competent writer but they also cause confusion when used poorly. Different language backgrounds and culture-related factors have also been found to be effective in connector use by several researchers such as (Mauranen, 1993; Altunay, 2009) emphasized that the misuse, overuse or underuse of connectives in written texts created a mismatch between the message that the student writer intended to convey and what s/he actually conveyed in his/her writing. Results of all these above-mentioned research studies indicate that the appropriate and correct use of connectives by EFL learners is actually a challenging task.

The significance of this current study stems from the fact that it was conducted in a Turkish ELT Department setting with a particular focus on the use of connectives by future English teachers. The use of connectives by the ELT students, and the reasons behind their erroneous and inappropriate uses of connectives are worthy of discussion since these students will become English teachers in the future. Hence, it is vital to identify and prevent their errors before they become fossilized.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Definition of the term 'connective'*

Connectives are defined by several researchers in different ways. They are identified as conjunctions by Halliday & Hasan (1976), cohesive devices by Schiffrin (1987), and 'discourse markers' by Fraser (1999). Brown and Yule (1983) explain that connectives are the formal markers in written texts that indicate the explicitly marked relationships and thus, help readers to relate what has been said to what is going to be said.

### *2.2. Difference between connectives and discourse markers*

Fuller's criteria differentiate between the particles which are discourse markers and the ones that are not. If the semantic relations between the connected discourse elements do not change when the discourse marker is removed from the sentence or utterance, the truth condition remains the same. This is the first criterion offered by Fuller (2003). As for the second criterion, the grammaticality of the utterance or sentence should remain intact in the absence of the discourse marker.

### *2.3. Theoretical Framework on Connectives*

Halliday & Hasan's taxonomy of coherence relations and cohesive devices is one of the most important models among the various views on coherence in literature. (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) offered four types of coherence relationships. These relations were additive, adversative, causal and temporal, respectively. In Halliday & Hasan's taxonomy, the words such as 'and', 'or', 'similarly', 'in other words' are classified as additive. Words such as 'but', 'although', 'however', 'yet' indicate adversative relations and they show concession. Therefore, these connectives are classified in the adversative category. Connectives such as 'so', 'therefore', 'because of', 'as a result', 'consequently' express causal relations and they show reason, purpose or reason. Connectives such as 'then', 'afterwards', 'after that', 'next', 'first', 'finally' are classified in the temporal relations category, because they indicate the relationship between two successive sentences. To sum up, Halliday and Hasan (1976) focused on thematic relations indicated by linguistic devices stated above.

Another important researcher who emphasized the need for establishing coherence in text is Kehler (2002). According to Kehler (2002), interpretation of utterances within a particular discourse is achieved by discovering

how these utterances are related to each other. His classification of coherence relations is grouped under three categories: cause-effect, resemblance, and contiguity.

Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST, hereafter) is another important linguistic approach to the dynamics of text. This theory accounts for how text functions, and how coherence is achieved within a particular text. RST claims that there are two types of units in a text. These units are the nuclei and satellites. Nuclei are the basis of a text and satellites contribute to the nuclei. When the satellites are removed from the text, the text can still be understandable to a certain extent. However, when the nucleus is removed from the text, satellites cannot be understandable by themselves. Therefore, connectives are important cohesive devices in establishing the relation between nuclei and satellites in text. The concept of text coherence through discourse or conjunctive relations offered by RST is still widely accepted in the literature (Taboada & Mann, 2006).

#### *2.4. Previous research on connectives in written texts*

Cho (1998) examined the relationship between the use of connectives by Korean EFL learners and their length of study of English. Results of the study indicated that there was a relationship between the years of study of English and the overall occurrence of connectives. However, the range of connectives that were produced by the learners did not result in syntactically complex sentences. Findings demonstrated that the learner group with 3 years of study of English produced more number of words, connectives and t-units as compared with the ones with 2 years of study. Overuse of some connectives was found in the learners' writing. The researcher regarded this overuse as an expected developmental pattern in the acquisition process of connectives.

Ting (2003) investigated the cohesive ties in the essays of Chinese EFL students. The researcher used Halliday & Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesive devices in data analysis. Good and poor essays were distinguished in order to account for the difference between these two types of essays in terms of the number of cohesive errors. However, no significant difference was found between the good and poor essays in terms of the number of cohesive errors made in the additives, adversatives, causals and temporals categories. Another important finding of the study was that the errors in the additive and adversative categories outnumbered the errors in the causals and temporals categories.

Tapper (2005) investigated how advanced Swedish EFL learners used connectives in argumentative essays in comparison to how American University students used them in their writing. The three types of connectives were examined: adverbial conjuncts, style and content disjuncts, lexical discourse markers. Results of the study revealed that Advanced Swedish EFL learners tended to overuse adverbial connectives compared to American university students. They also used slightly more types of connectives than the American students. However, the high frequency of connectives was not an indicator of good writing quality for either group of students.

Chen (2006) compared the learner corpus of 23 papers by MA TESOL students from Taiwan and a control group of 10 journal articles from two international TESOL journals in terms of conjunctive adverbial use. Results of the study revealed that the advanced EFL learners frequently used additive conjunctive adverbials, whereas the professional writers mostly used adversative conjunctive adverbials in their writing.

Dülger (2007) identified the discourse marker use of 76 Turkish EFL learners. In order to observe a comparison and contrast between the essays written after product-viewed and the process-viewed writing courses, in terms of discourse marker usage, 152 essays (76 essays written after the product-viewed courses, the other 76 after the process-viewed courses) were collected, and the papers were evaluated in terms of number of sentences, the number and variety of discourse markers. Results of the study suggested that a process view of writing is preferable over the product view in terms of sentence construction. There was an increase in the total number of sentences written after the process viewed courses, when compared to the essays written after the product viewed courses. To sum up, students were found to be using more and different types of discourse markers in their essays as a result of process viewed writing courses.

Ying (2007) attempted to identify similarities and differences in the use of connectives among the three types of university students. Participants of the study were the native speakers of English (NS group), non-native Chinese students (CNNS) and non-native Japanese students (JNNS). 'And' was found to be the most commonly used connective in the writings of the three groups of participants. Both the JNNS and CNNS used 'and' for additive and causal purposes. However, the NS group exhibited a variety of functions of the connective 'and' in their writings.

Altunay (2009) investigated the use of connectives in unplanned argumentative written discourse by Turkish ELT department students. Participants were the 132 first year students taking the Academic Writing course in the ELT B.A. program at Anadolu University, Faculty of Education in Turkey. They were asked to write a well-developed argumentative essay. The connectives used by the participants were coded for each question both by the researcher and a native speaker as a second rater. Goldvarb X statistics program was used by the researcher for the statistical analysis. Results of the study revealed that the students did not use a large variety of connectives in their essays. They were found to have grammatical and punctuation errors, which may stem from L1 transfer or from the cognitive and syntactic complexity of the connectives in English. Misuses of some connectives were commonly found. However, underuse and overuse of connectives were not so frequent. Findings also showed that students were not able to use some cohesive devices in correct and appropriate places, and therefore they could not produce comprehensible and coherent texts.

Ramos (2010) investigated the types of discourse markers that adult ESL learners predominantly used in their research papers. 30 research papers were collected from the two research classes (15 papers from the Engineering students & 15 from the Liberal Arts students). As for the findings of the study, students from the College of Engineering wrote descriptive research papers and used the logical connectives of addition, contrast, frame markers more than the other types of discourse markers. Students from the College of Liberal Arts, on the other hand, turned in argumentative research papers and preferred to use logical connectives of addition, contrast, consequence, evidentials.

In the light of the above stated literature review, this current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Which connectives do Turkish ELT Department students use in their written English?
2. For what coherence relations do the students use these connectives?
3. How appropriately and correctly do they use these connectives?
4. What is the relationship between the number of words, number of sentences, number of connectives, sentence length and the raters' holistic evaluation scores of the essays?
5. Do the above- stated relationships differ according to whether the participants studied in the Preparatory Program or not?

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Participants*

Participants of this study were the convenient sampling of 56 upper-intermediate Turkish freshman ELT department students taking the Advanced Reading & Writing course offered in the B.A. program at Pamukkale University, Faculty of Education in Turkey. This course aims to improve students' reading and writing skills, specifically in pre-planning and critical thinking skills. Students have worked on identifying and using different forms of text structure, such as description, compare and contrast, cause and effect, problem and solution, and sequence/process for the whole fall term. They have also been instructed in the use of graphic organizers as tools for taking notes from things that they read as well as for planning before they write. Students in this class were also responsible for keeping a portfolio of their work. Every time they wrote an assignment for class, they turned it in to the instructor, and she corrected errors and gave general feedback to each one of the students. For their portfolio, the students had to use the instructor's corrections to make a final draft of their writing. For some assignments students also received peer feedback. As for the age range of the participants, they were between 18 and 21. As for gender; 39 were female, and 17 were male. The fewer number of males in the sample reflects the general tendency of the population concerned in this study. The number of students who studied in the Preparatory Program of The School of Languages at Pamukkale University was 32. The number of students who did not take the Preparatory Class was 24.

#### *3.2. Data Collection*

Data were collected at the end of the fall semester of the 2011-2012 academic year from 56 first year students. Participants were asked to write an unplanned, well-developed, argumentative essay covering at least 3 paragraphs,

one introduction, one development, and one conclusion. The topic of the essay was “Should everybody go to university?” Some ideas were given below the topic to students for guidance. Students wrote their essays around 30 minutes of the 45 minute class period. There was no word limit and the writing of essays was realized as a regular class activity. Students were informed that their essays would be used for research after they had written their essays.

### 3.3. Materials

Argumentative essays collected from the 56 participants constituted the basic material for the study. Essay type was determined as argumentative only, in order to control for the effect of text type on the kinds of connectives used. Additionally, a questionnaire adapted from Altunay (2009) was used in order to obtain information about the language backgrounds of students. Halliday & Hasan’s taxonomy of coherence relations (additive, adversative, causal and temporal) was used to determine the coherence relation categories. Cho (1998) criteria was simplified and adapted to obtain an overall picture of discourse appropriateness and structural correctness of connectives in students’ writing.

Table 1. Criteria for discourse appropriateness

CATEGORIES	GUIDELINES
Discourse Appropriateness	
1. Appropriate Use	<i>The connective used corresponds appropriately to the relation between sentences.</i>
2. Inappropriate Use	<i>The connective used is not consistent with the relation between sentences.</i>

Table 2. Criteria for structural correctness

CATEGORIES	GUIDELINES
Structural Correctness	
1. Correct Use	<i>The connective used corresponds correctly to grammar and punctuation rules.</i>
2. Incorrect Use	<i>The connective used does not correspond to grammar and punctuation rules.</i>

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Before the actual data analysis for the study, two raters other than the researcher rated the essays holistically for homogeneous distribution. One of the raters was a native-speaker teacher of English, and the other was a non-native instructor of English. The obtained inter-rater reliability coefficient was  $r = .505$ , which is significant at 0.01 level. This  $r$  value shows a positive and moderate relationship between the scores given by the two raters, which is acceptable.

Holistic scoring of the essays was conducted according to the criteria determined by the Test of Written English (TWE). TWE stands for Test of Written English which measures English writing skills. The scale for the scoring of this test is from 1 to 6 (1=lowest and 6=highest). Scores are based on the following criteria:

*Organization:* Do the ideas follow each other logically?

*Development:* Are the ideas supported by adequate and relevant examples, reasons, facts, and so forth?

*Language use:* Are the sentences free of grammatical errors? Do they have varied sentence structures and vocabulary?

Following the holistic scoring procedure, connectives in each essay were manually counted by the researcher. Number of sentences and number of words in each essay was also counted to determine sentence length. As a further step, coherence relation categories indicated by each connective was identified.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. *The number and percentages of Connectives in the Essays*

The first research question was concerned with the number and percentages of connectives that the 56 Turkish freshman ELT Department students used in their written English. Results of the study showed that the participants used 76 different types of connectives in their essays with 612 tokens in total. The most commonly used connectives were “and”, “if”, “because”, “but”, “or”, “so”, “also”, “because of”, “for example” and “when”, respectively. “And” was used in 141 tokens and it was the most frequent connector in the students’ essays.

These results are in line with the findings of Altunay (2009). Results of her study showed that the 132 participants used 72 different types of connectives in their essays and used these connectives in 1111 tokens. The most frequently used connectives in her study were found as “and”, “but”, “if”, “so”, “because”, “when”, “in conclusion”, “first of all”, “however”, and “firstly”, respectively. “And” was detected the most frequent connector in both studies.

As for the striking differences in the findings of both studies, the participants of Altunay (2009) much more frequently used the connectives “in conclusion” and “however”. Though very infrequent in terms of number, her participants used connectives such as “nevertheless”, “actually”, “to the contrary”, “whereas”, “so as to”, “meanwhile”, and “in this case” etc. However, no instances of these types of connectives were detected in this study. Instances of the connectives such as “besides”, “likewise”, “despite”, and “thanks to” were found in the sample of this study, but Altunay (2009) did not find any instances of these connectives in her own sample.

##### 4.2. *The coherence relations for which the connectives were used*

The second research question asked for what coherence relations the students used connectives in their essays. Qualitative analysis of the relations demonstrated by connectives was as in the following: causal, additive, adversative, and temporal, respectively. Due to the argumentative text type, students mostly used causal connectives when expressing their ideas. However, they displayed many misuses of connectives in their writing when expressing the coherence relations. This resulted in incomprehensibility of their points in some cases. The connectives grouped under each relation category are summarized below with the striking examples taken from the participants’ essays.

##### 4.3. *Appropriate and correct use of connectives*

The third research question was concerned with how appropriately and correctly participants used connectives in their essays. The use of connectives in terms of discourse appropriateness and structural correctness are explained below in detail with the extracts taken from the participants’ essays.

##### 4.4. *Relationship between the number of words, number of sentences, number of connectives, sentence length and the raters’ holistic evaluation scores of the essays*

The fourth and fifth research questions aimed to find out the relationship between the number of words, number of sentences, number of connectives, sentence length and the raters’ holistic evaluation scores of the essays, and whether the above- stated relationships differed according to whether the participants studied in the Preparatory Program or not. The data set prepared to find out the answers to these questions is provided in. Table 3 below gives the results of the descriptive statistics for all participants (N=56).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for both groups (N=56, Prep n=32, No Prep n= 24)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of Words	56	132.73	33.265
Number of Sentences	56	11.41	3.731
Sentence Length	56	12.24	3.170
Number of Connectives	56	11.79	3.657
Rater 1	56	3.02	1.700
Rater 2	56	2.84	1.233
Mean Rating	56	2.93	1.277

As can be seen from Table 4, the mean of the number of words used by all participants was 132.73, mean of the number of sentences was 11.41, mean of the sentence length was 12.24, mean of the number of connectives in their essays was 11.79. Mean of the holistic scorings of Rater 1 and 2, altogether, was 2.93 for the whole group (TWE scoring criteria, 1=lowest score, 6=highest score).

As a further step, bivariate regression analysis was conducted in order to predict and explain the relationship between the variables of the study. The dependent variable was the mean of the ratings for the whole group. The mean of the ratings was obtained from the holistic scoring process of all essays by the two raters. The independent variables were the number of words, the number of sentences, sentence length (obtained by number of words/number of sentences for each essay), and number of connectives, respectively. Table 4 below provides the results of the regression analysis.

Table 4. Bivariate Regression Results (Dependent variable: Mean of Ratings)

	R	R Square	F	p
Number of Words	.697	.485	50.929	.000
Number of Sentences	.197	.039	2.182	.145
Sentence Length	.434	.188	12.498	.001
Number of Connectives	.481	.232	16.286	.000

As Table 4 indicates, number of words itself significantly explains 48.5 % of the variation in the mean of ratings. Number of connectives itself significantly explains 23.2 % of the variation in the mean of ratings. Sentence length itself significantly explains 18.8 % of the variation in the mean of ratings. Number of sentences itself, however, only explains 3.9 % of the variation in the mean of ratings, which is not significant. As can be summarized from the results of the bivariate regression analysis, the holistic scoring of the essays by the raters was significantly related to the number of words, number of connectives and sentence length of the participants. However, it was not found to be significantly related to the number of sentences written by the participants.

Last, but not least, intercorrelations between the variables of the study were found by calculating Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients, in order to see the relationship between the variables. Table 5 below presents the correlation matrix of the variables of the study. As demonstrated on Table 5, there was a statistically significant positive moderate relationship between the number of words and number of sentences ( $r = .587$ ). This means that when the number of words in the essays increased, number of sentences also tended to increase. There was a positive, but statistically weak relationship between the number of words and sentence length ( $r = .250$ ). This means that there was little systematic tendency (almost no relationship) between the variables. Statistically significant, positive and moderate relationship was observed between the number of words and number of connectives ( $r = .687$ ). This shows that when the number of words in the essays increased, the number of connectives used also tended to increase. There was a statistically significant, positive and moderate relationship between the number of words and mean of the ratings ( $r = .697$ ). This indicates that when the number of words in

the essays increased, the mean ratings also tended to increase. There was a statistically significant, negative and moderate relationship between the number of sentences and sentence length ( $r = -.597$ ). This means that when the number of sentences in the essays increased, sentence length tended to decrease, and vice versa. Statistically significant, positive and moderate relationship was obtained between the number of sentences written and number of connectives used ( $r = .305$ ). This means that when the number of sentences in the essays increased, the number of connectives used also tended to increase. There was, however, a weak positive relationship between the number of sentences and mean ratings ( $r = .197$ ). This correlation means that the participants who wrote more number of sentences did not necessarily get higher scores from the raters.

Table 5. Intercorrelations between the variables of the study

	Number of Words	Number of Sentences	Sentence Length	Number of Connectives	Mean Rating
Number of Words	1	.587**	.250	.687**	.697**
Number of Sentences		1	-.597**	.305*	.197
Sentence Length			1	.231	.434**
Number of Connectives				1	.481**
Mean Rating					1

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The quality of sentences rather than quantity was more important in the holistic scoring of the essays. There was, however, a significant positive moderate relationship between the sentence length and the mean ratings ( $r = .434$ ). This means that when the sentence length in the essays increased, the scores given by the raters also tended to increase. As for the relationship between the number of connectives and mean ratings, the relationship was significant, positive and moderate ( $r = .481$ ). This indicates that when the number of connectives increased, the scores given by the raters used also tended to increase.

## 5. Conclusion

Findings of this study showed that connectives were challenging for the freshman EFL learners enrolled in an ELT B.A program. Participants did not use a large variety of connectives in their essays. They also did not tend to use multiword connectives. They preferred the most simple and frequent connectives in English. There were some connectives they used frequently, and they either did not or used some other connectives infrequently. This finding indicates that the participants did not know the different kinds of relations that connectives can indicate. The reason for this might be either their proficiency levels in English or the lack of detailed instruction they received on connectives. Results of this study indicated that the students did not use connectives for complex relations.

All these findings might also stem from the fact that students wrote unplanned essays in limited time. The same study can also be conducted by allowing the students extra planning time and compare the results of different methodological applications. Some participants experienced problems in expressing the different kinds of coherence relations stated by Halliday & Hasan (1976). Though these participants might have thought their use of connectives as correct and appropriate, this may not be perceived in the same way in some situations by the reader due to the lack of coherence.

Last, but not least, a significant positive and moderate relationship was obtained between the number of words, number of connectives, sentence length and the raters' holistic evaluation scores of the essays. This means that as the number of words, number of connectives, and sentence length increased in the essays, the raters' holistic evaluation scores of the essays also tended to increase. The dependent variables of number of words, number of connectives, sentence length, and the raters' holistic evaluation scores differed according to whether the participants studied in the Preparatory Program or not. Namely, the participants who studied in the Preparatory Program performed significantly better on the measures of number of words, number of connectives, and sentence length than



those who did not. The holistic mean scores of essays by the two raters were also found to be higher for the participants who studied in the Preparatory Program of the School of Languages.

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