

# A Corpus-Based Study of Conjunction Use by the Turkish EFL Learners

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## Article History:

Received 17.03.2023

Received in revised

form 06.06.2023

Accepted

Available online

01.07.2023

The language learning process includes and follows some stages and skills, such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing. According to scholars, speaking and writing are the most difficult skills to master in English language learning. To date, the studies focused on the importance of these skills and investigated how to develop them. All aside, writing skill consists of various aspects, and appropriate conjunction use is among them. The present paper tries to illuminate the use and the frequency of conjunction use by Turkish English language learners in their final exam mini-essay writings administering a small corpus-based study. Based on the results, the study discusses the potential reasons behind their preference for conjunction use. In conclusion of the study, "and", "but", "because", and "if" are the most common conjunctions (with the use of over 100) among other conjunctions.

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**Keywords:** Conjunctions, writing, corpus-based, EFL

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## INTRODUCTION

As communication lies at the core of human life, we must communicate with others in some way, and the way of communication might be written or oral. While acquiring our mother tongue or learning a new language, we first learn to communicate orally and then how to write. During the time of learning a language, we need to master the four basic skills of a language: reading, listening, writing and speaking. The first two, reading and listening, are receptive skills, and the other two, writing and speaking are productive. Davies (1976: 441), defined the receptive reading skill as "the ability to understand texts of various degrees of complexity in the foreign language", the receptive listening skill as "the ability to understand the spoken language", and the productive skills as "the ability to communicate actively in the foreign tongue, to speak it and write it". The order of acquiring the receptive reading, receptive listening and productive skills is regarded as the stages of learning a foreign language, primarily for post-childhood learners (Davies, 1976), which means that learners follow these stages when learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

Generally, speaking in English is said to be the most challenging of the skills, followed by writing, as these are productive skills, not receptive. Norrish (1983) suggested that the most problematic skill for both language learners and language speakers is writing skill. When individuals improve both their speaking and their writing skills, they become superior communicators of the language in the long run. Prommas and Singwonsuwat (2011:77) stated that writing skill is more complex than speaking since we cannot use any other form of communication, such as gestures and mimicry which are essential elements for easing communication, in written discourse (Darweesh & Kadhim, 2016).

It is known that there are several factors affecting EFL writing. One of these factors is the language proficiency of the learners. Students' level of language proficiency can significantly affect the success of their EFL writing. Students with higher proficiency levels will typically have better control of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, allowing them to express their ideas more effectively in writing. Another factor is the writing goal. The purpose of the writing task can have a significant impact on the success of the writing. For example, if a student is writing a persuasive essay, his/her writing will need to be clear, logical, and well-supported to persuade readers effectively. Writing task and genre are other factors. The type of writing task and the text's genre can also affect the success of EFL writing. For example, a narrative essay requires a different writing style from an argumentative one.

Cultural knowledge, which is about understanding the cultural context in which the writing is taking place, can also affect learners' success in EFL writing (Kachru, 1999). For example, cultural knowledge might be necessary in order to understand the appropriate use of humour, sarcasm or other forms of expression. In summary therefore, it can be said that the success of EFL writing can be influenced by various factors, including language proficiency, writing goals, writing tasks and genres, and cultural knowledge. By considering these factors, EFL students can work to improve their writing skills and achieve greater success in their writing tasks.

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On the other hand, there is also a need for several skills and resources to write effectively in English. First, learners must have a strong vocabulary base as this will enable writers to express their ideas accurately and efficiently (Olinghouse & Wilson, 2012). Second, grammar, which is about grammar rules, is necessary to make well-constructed sentences and ensure clarity in writing (Andrews et al., 2013). Third, being aware of writing strategies, such as brainstorming, outlining and drafting, is significant for planning and organizing writing effectively (Raofi, Binandeh & Rahmani, 2017). Additionally, learners should have knowledge of the cultural context in which the writing is taking place (Kachru, 1999), get some feedback from teachers and peers to improve their writing skills and practise writing to increase their confidence in writing. The final requirement is access to resources such as dictionaries and grammar books for learners to be able to improve their writing skill.

Writing might be regarded as the cornerstone of a language, so considering one of the cornerstones of writing skills might be helpful here. Conjunctions are the critical elements of a successful utterance both in written and oral language. Various scholars have defined conjunctions in different but similar ways. For example, Malmkjaer (1991) stated that conjunctions are the indisputable parts of speech connecting other parts of speech meaningfully. Halliday and Hasan (1976) described conjunctions as "the linguistic devices that create cohesion" and Aidinlou and Reshadi (2014) wrote that conjunctions are "semantic connections between two clauses". As stated above, language consists of not only receptive but also productive skills, which are speaking and writing. Hence, recognizing and comprehending conjunctions well is of great importance for effective communication (Siddiqui, 2014; Unubi, 2016). Appropriate use of conjunctions leads to a better and more natural flow of communication both in written and oral language, whilst inappropriate use can cause absurdity, ambiguity, and contradictions in terms. They have a significant role in making meaning and creating relationships between expressions uttered and those to be uttered next (Zamel, 1983). Ultimately, therefore, conjunctions are absolutely crucial for writing (McCarthy, 1991) because readers can misunderstand a text due to the inappropriate use of conjunctions and there is no way to explain our intention in a written text again, unlike speaking interactions.

Several scholars have addressed the topic of conjunctions in their research. Rod Ellis (1994), a prominent figure in second-language acquisition research, studied the use of conjunctions in second-language writing. Another prominent scholar, a corpus linguist who studied the use of conjunctions in written and spoken language, including the use of conjunctions in EFL writing, is Susan Hunston. As a corpus linguist, she has conducted studies on the frequency of different conjunctions in written and spoken language, as well as the use of conjunctions in different registers and text types (Hunston & Francis, 2000; Hunston, 2010).

Putting importance on conjunctions, scholars have categorized the types of conjunctions in various ways. The most applied categorization was that done by Arthur (1996) and Lester (1990) into two types, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Coordinating conjunctions are used to combine clauses which do not depend on each other for meaning and are equal in rank. On the other hand, subordinating conjunctions are words to combine one dependent and one independent clause, relying on each other for meaning. Table 1 shows the most frequently used conjunctions according to Arthur's (1996) and Lester's (1990) categorization.

**Table 1.** The most frequently used conjunctions in English

<b>Subordinating Conjunctions</b>	<b>Coordinating Conjunctions</b>	
and	after	
but	although	since
or	as	unless
nor	as if	though
so	because	until
yet	before	when
for	how	where
	if	while

Studies have found that the use of conjunctions can be puzzling for language learners at any proficiency level due to the similarity of conjunction forms and functions and the interference from L1 (Chen, 2014; Doro, 2015; Jiangang, 2017; Simsek, 2018). Beyond these intriguing factors, the use of conjunctions by language learners in their writings should be enhanced. Addressing this problematic issue, the present study was designed to identify the use and frequency of conjunctions used by EFL learners in their final exam written mini-essays and to discuss the possible reasons behind their usage. To this end, the present paper is a product of a learner-

based corpus study. In the IGI-Global Dictionary Quinci (2015) says that corpus-based studies "involve the investigation of corpora, i.e. collections of texts that have been gathered according to specific criteria and are generally analyzed automatically". Here, a text refers to "a single, unified, meaningful event, an artefact; it is read and studied as such", and a corpus "is a multiple set of events and is studied for the similarities and differences among its events, and the component of its events" (Sinclair, 2005).

Previous studies investigating conjunctions have been carried out for a variety of purposes. A corpus-based study was carried out by Granger and Tyson (1996) in order to identify the connector usage in essays of French English-language learning students. They found that the French learners of English did not overuse conjunctions compared with the writings of native English speakers. Meisuo (2000: 87) studied the use of cohesive devices used by Chinese learners of English in their compositions and found that they overused and misused conjunctions, such as 'and', 'moreover', 'furthermore', 'however' and 'but'. Narita, Sato and Sugiura (2004) investigated the use of conjunctions by Japanese English-language learners in their English and native language essays with a corpus-based approach and found an uncertain effect of L1 transfer on their use of conjunctions in English. Lai (2008: 66) similarly investigated the use of conjunctions by Taiwanese English-language learners in their writing, comparing them with their proficiency. The results showed that competent language learners used conjunctions much less than incompetent language learners. Ong (2011) reported that the conjunctions used in expository essays by language learners were inappropriate; the learners misused some simple additive conjunctions such as 'and' or some adversative conjunctions such as 'however' in their writings.

Lauherta Martinez (2018) studied the relationship between syntactic complexity, including the frequency of conjunction use, and the writing quality of EFL learners. Data were collected from 188 secondary-school participants and the conjunctions which they used were counted and analysed with reference to the taxonomy devised by Halliday and Hasan (1976). The result showed a positive correlation between the frequency of conjunctions and writing quality. Halliday and Hasan (1976) stated that proficient writers show an advanced understanding of conjunctions, strategically using them to create logical connections and express the intended meaning. By making it easier for the reader to understand and follow the writer's thought process, they suggested that appropriate conjunction use can enhance a written text's clarity, coherence and general quality. Additionally, the results showed that the use of conjunctions has been a problematic issue for language learners in different educational contexts (Martinez, 2018). Kusyowo, Sujatna, Indrayani and Rido (2020) compared the use of conjunctions by native and non-native English speaker lecturers using a corpus-based approach. A corpus-based approach brings a more reliable and accurate framework for comparison, improves capturing the subtle variations between conjunction usage depending on the particular communication purposes and situations, and offers insights into possible variations in conjunction usage between two groups. Kusyowo et al. (2020) found no significant difference between native and non-native English-speaking lecturers' use of conjunctions.

In general, studies on the use of conjunctions in EFL writing have shown that different conjunctions are used with different frequencies and that the choice of conjunction may depend on factors such as the level of language proficiency, the type of text and the purpose of the writing. These studies have also shown that the use of conjunctions can affect the coherence and logical flow of written text and can influence the reader's understanding of the text (Geva, 1992). Based on the results of the previous studies and the gaps in the literature which are in investigating the use of conjunctions by Turkish EFL learners in their final exam writings, the present study focused on the identification of the conjunctions used by Turkish EFL learners and the discussion of the possible reasons for their use. The specific research question which drove the research was: 'Which conjunctions are used most commonly by Turkish EFL learners in their writing, and what are the potential reasons for it?' It is believed that the results and discussion of the topic might be beneficial for corpus-linguists who study EFL learning and teaching within the sub-field of writing skills; researchers and educators can benefit from the results to enhance EFL learners' writing skills and the appropriate and varied use of conjunctions.

## **METHOD**

The current study was a corpus-based study conducted with preparatory class students at a state university in Turkey. The age range of the students was 18-25 and their English proficiency level was B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages based on their syllabus. At the end of a yearly programme (two terms – autumn and spring), students are obliged to take a final exam which is at the B1

level. This corpus-based study collected the mini-essays written in the final exam by English-language learners. The students had two questions from which to choose one and write a mini-essay on it: (1) ‘Which one is better: hard-copy book or e-book?’, and (2) ‘What is the importance of time management?’ The analysis was carried using AntConc analysis software. The small learner-based corpus consisted of 17,230 file tokens in total. For the present study, word analysis was applied.

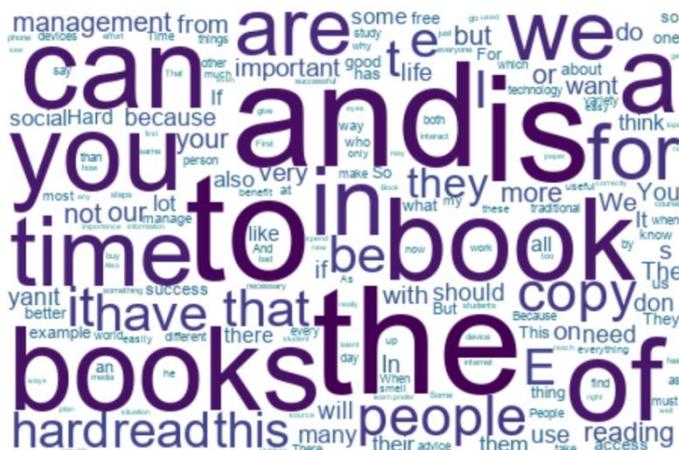
**RESULTS**

As a first step, word analysis was carried out and it was found that the most frequently used ten words in the learners’ mini-essays were ‘the’, ‘to’, ‘is’, ‘and’, ‘you’, ‘books’, ‘book’, ‘of’, ‘can’ and ‘a’. Table 2 shows the rank and frequency of the top ten words.

**Table 2.** The rank and frequency of the top ten words.

Type	Rank	Frequency
<b>the</b>	1	566
<b>to</b>	2	473
<b>is</b>	3	449
<b>and</b>	4	416
<b>you</b>	5	381
<b>books</b>	6	374
<b>book</b>	7	353
<b>of</b>	8	344
<b>can</b>	9	327
<b>a</b>	10	322

Figure 1 shows the word cloud created by AntConc to show the most frequently used words in the mini-essays (the maximum word limit of 200 was applied). At first sight, it is clearly seen that the most common words were ‘the’, ‘to’, ‘is’ and ‘and’. It was found that one of the most used words in the mini-essays (‘and’) is a conjunction.



**Figure 1.** Wordcloud

The main purpose of the present study was to identify the use of conjunctions by English-language learners in their essays. Word analysis was therefore carried out for each conjunction shown in Table 1 and the results are set out in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The frequency of conjunctions

Subordinating Conjunctions	Frequency	Coordinating Conjunctions	Frequency
<b>and</b>	416	<b>because</b>	102
<b>but</b>	127	<b>if</b>	101
<b>or</b>	98	<b>when</b>	59
<b>so</b>	79	<b>as</b>	40
<b>yet</b>	2	<b>how</b>	22
<b>for</b>	0	<b>while</b>	19
<b>nor</b>	0	<b>after</b>	16
		<b>where</b>	11
		<b>since</b>	6
		<b>although</b>	5
		<b>unless</b>	1
		<b>until</b>	1
		<b>as if</b>	0
		<b>before</b>	0
		<b>though</b>	0

Below is a list of concordances of some conjunction uses by the learners in their essays included in the present study.

"It does not matter where you are, you can read it	<b>and</b>	you can access it on your phone everywhere."
"I think copy-book is better than e-book,	<b>but</b>	I agree that the e-book is easier and more..."
"Reading improves our lives	<b>so</b>	we should benefit from it every way."
"... you have to decide about something	<b>or</b>	you have to do something."
"First of all, social media are harmful to children	<b>because</b>	they might lead to a variety of health problems."

## DISCUSSION

Conjunctions are a significant part of writing because they help to connect words, phrases, and clauses together, making the text more coherent and logical (Unubi, 2016). They help to indicate the relationships between ideas and make the text more readable and exciting. They also add variety to writing, making it more interesting and engaging for readers.

Before discussing the use of conjunctions in the EFL learners' mini-essays, we first looked at the top ten words in the essays and found that the word 'the' was the most frequent. This could have been due to its function as the definite article; 'the' is used to demonstrate a specific noun which is already known to the receiver (listener or reader), and it is considered one of the most common words in English (Thorndike & Lorge, 1944). The reasons behind the most frequent use of 'the' in the learners' essays might have been that they were trying to make their sentences more specific and more explicit by labelling a particular noun and it can also be used in many various contexts. Furthermore, learners might often have been exposed to 'the' in their reading or listening practice, which would make it more familiar and comfortable for them to use it in their own writing. The frequency analysis of the conjunction use of the EFL learners showed that they used 'and', which is a subordination conjunction, the most. This was presumably because it is a very common conjunction and is considered a simple and easy-to-use conjunction which helps to link words, phrases, and clauses. Additionally, 'and' is a conjunction which is used in a wide range of contexts, and it can be used to link both simple and complex sentences. It is also a conjunction which is widely used in the learners' first language; this can lead to them using it more frequently as they are more comfortable with it. 'And' was followed in terms of frequency of use by 'but', 'or' and 'so'; 'but' and 'or' are also common conjunctions indicating a contrast or alternative respectively, which might explain why they were used less frequently. 'So' is often used as a conjunction to indicate a consequence or result, which might explain why it was used more than 'yet'. 'For' and 'nor' are less common conjunctions and their absence from the mini-essays of the EFL learners could be due to a lack of appropriate context for their use. Additionally, 'nor' is a conjunction used to indicate a negative consequence or result, typically used in negative statements after 'neither'. It is therefore not used as frequently as 'and' and 'but' because it is less versatile and is not used in as many contexts.

In the second part of the frequency analysis of the coordinating conjunctions, the results showed that 'because' and 'if' were the most used conjunctions in the essays. 'Because' and 'if' are common conjunctions used to indicate cause and effect or conditions respectively. When writing, 'because' and 'if' might be used more than other conjunctions as the learners might have been exposed to them more; they are easier to use and are more appropriate for various contexts. 'Because' and 'if' were followed by 'when' to indicate the time when something happened, 'as' to indicate similarity or function, and 'how' to indicate the manner in which something happens. 'While', 'after' and 'where' are used to indicate time and location respectively and may have been used less frequently because they were less relevant to the student's writing topic. 'Since', 'although', 'unless', 'until', 'as if', 'before' and 'though' are less common conjunctions and their absence from the essays again could have been due to a lack of the appropriate context for their use or the proficiency level of EFL learners, or that they are less common conjunctions and learners might not have been exposed to them as much, or might not be familiar with their usage or meaning. Therefore, they might not feel confident using them in their writing.

Based on the results, it might be claimed that the most frequently used conjunctions by EFL learners can vary depending on their first language, proficiency level and the context of their writing. However, some of the most commonly used conjunctions by the EFL learners included:

- 'and': this is a simple and easy-to-use conjunction which links words, phrases and clauses together.
- 'but': as it is widely used to indicate contrast or exception in a sentence.
- 'or': as it is widely used to indicate alternatives or options.
- 'so': as it is widely used to indicate a result or consequence of an action.

These conjunctions are considered simple conjunctions and are widely used in the learners' first language; learners might use them more frequently as they are more comfortable with them. When learning English, some conjunctions are typically taught earlier than others because they are considered more uncomplicated and more commonly used. A general order of conjunctions which might be taught to EFL learners is as follows: (1) coordinating conjunctions: 'and' is usually taught first as it is the most common and straightforward conjunction; 'or' and 'but' are also frequently taught early on as they are used in basic language structures and provide simple ways to connect ideas. (2) Subordinating conjunctions: 'because' and 'if' are often taught next as they are used to connect subordinate clauses to main clauses and are essential for expressing cause and effect and hypothetical situations. On the other hand, conjunctive adverbs are typically taught later as they are less commonly used and can be more complex in meaning and usage. The order in which these conjunctions are taught can vary depending on the teacher, the curriculum and needs of the EFL learners. The most important thing is for EFL learners to learn the conjunctions which are most relevant to their language needs and to use them accurately and appropriately.

It is also worth noting that as EFL learners improve their proficiency level, they will tend to use more complex conjunctions, such as 'because', 'if', 'when', 'as', 'than', 'how', 'while', 'after' and 'where' and the less used 'since', 'although', 'unless', 'until', 'as if', 'before' and 'though'.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, if conjunctions are not used while writing, the text may become incoherent. Without conjunctions, it can be difficult for the reader to understand how different ideas are related, and the text can lack coherence and logical flow. Sentences will not be linked to one another and ideas will not be connected, making the text difficult to understand. Similarly, when conjunctions are misused, the text can become confusing and difficult to understand. This is because the conjunctions are not being used to indicate the correct relationships between ideas. For example, if 'although' is used when 'because' is more appropriate, the text might not make logical sense and the reader might be confused about the relationship between the ideas. Misusing conjunctions can also make the text seem ungrammatical and unprofessional.

Based on their importance, the present study set out to identify the most common conjunctions used by Turkish EFL learners in their final exam mini-essay writings and to discuss the possible reasons behind their use. It was found that learners mostly used 'and', 'but', 'or', 'so', 'because', 'if', 'when' and 'as', whereas they never used 'for', 'nor', 'as if', 'before' and 'though' in their essays. Possible reasons for this have been discussed in the Discussion section. The results of the study might be beneficial for language teachers, researchers, and syllabus makers to enhance their process of teaching writing skill.

For teachers and those who develop course materials, the findings of this study have a number of implications:

1. In class, teachers could explicitly teach pupils how to use conjunctions and how to use them appropriately. This could be accomplished through lessons, activities and examples emphasizing how conjunctions link ideas and support writing coherence. Students can better understand the function of conjunctions in writing structure by being given clear explanations and lots of practice opportunities.

2. The types and purposes of conjunctions, such as coordinating conjunctions (such as 'and', 'but', 'or') and subordinating conjunctions (such as 'although', 'because', 'while') should be explained to learners. Students should learn how these conjunctions signify distinct relationships between concepts and clauses in order to make wise decisions about their use in their writing.

3. Course material writers can create writing exercises which scaffold students' practice using conjunctions. These exercises could involve drafting paragraphs with specific conjunction usage guidelines, sentence combining exercises or revision tasks focusing on strengthening coherence through correct conjunction use and placement. If students are given opportunities for guided practice, they can gradually absorb the use of conjunctions in their writing.

4. Finally, course material writers can include exercises or corpus-based resources highlighting real-world examples of conjunction usage. This could assist students in gaining a better understanding of how conjunctions are utilized in various registers and text genres, as well as exposing them to real-world linguistic patterns.

This study was limited to a small corpus and even though it was conducted with Turkish language speakers, the language learning process is universal, and the stages are similar for all language learners. The results might therefore show similarities with other mother-tongue speakers' English-language learning processes. Another limitation is that this study only included the genre of opinion essay; for further studies, different writing tasks might be assigned to the learners, and their use of conjunctions could be analysed based on the writing type and their proficiency levels.

#### **Declarations**

#### **Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

#### **Ethics Approval**

No ethics approval was needed for the study.

#### **Funding**

No specific grant was given to this research by funding organizations in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

#### **Research and Publication Ethics Statement**

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

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