

Analyzing Academic Essays Written by EFL Students Focusing on Transition Signals

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Abstract—The study’s sampling consisted of fifteen participants who majored in applied linguistics. The students took two *grammar* and *English writing* courses that exposed them to different types of cohesive devices to enhance the readability of written paragraphs. The authors collected three types of essays from the students: argumentative, compare and contrast, and cause and effect. This study uses a qualitative research methodology to understand EFL students’ recognition of the use of transition words by applying the Freeman theory in teaching grammar; it focuses on meaning, form, and usage. The authors collected fifteen written samples that illustrate different types of essays. The data are analyzed using the thematic method of reading the data and identifying three themes. The results show that EFL students apply a few of the most familiar transition signals in writing argumentative, compare-and-contrast, and cause-and-effect essays. Regardless of the type of academic essay, the data reveal that the EFL students needed help with using varied or unfamiliar transition words due to their limited knowledge of the meaning and the use of each transition signal in relation to each type of essay. Finally, this study offers various recommendations to develop an awareness of teaching and learning the transition signals from the perspective of Freeman’s three dimensions.

Index Terms—argumentative essay, cause-and-effect essay, compare-and-contrast essay, transition words

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic Writing Development

Academic writing is a kind of formal writing that requires specific grammar, vocabulary, organization, and formatting (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Academic writing is essential for creating professional papers, communicating knowledge one has learned, and accessing better career opportunities in the future (Hosseini et al., 2013). To produce academic manuscripts, writers must recognize the most important elements of writing, such as being familiar with various types of text structures. One essential component of academic written texts is essay organization, including the introduction, body paragraphs with supporting details, and conclusion (Irvin, 2010). Moreover, students should recognize how to use grammatical rules accurately, select appropriate words, develop relevant ideas, and use proper punctuation. However, students struggle to use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary, and cohesive devices when composing academic essays (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). This finding is in agreement with Duy and Trang (2022), who have indicated that, when constructing an academic text, most students have difficulties structuring their sentences correctly, using suitable vocabulary that matches the targeted context, and organizing written sentences logically by using proper cohesive devices. As Nenotek et al. (2022) have found, students made different types of errors when writing an essay, and the errors related to all the elements of writing, such as content, organization, and mechanics. One such issue was focusing on specific elements, such as grammatical structures or developing relevant content. Students must strengthen their knowledge of the most important aspects of writing, such as grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and cohesion, to build a well-organized essay (Febriani, 2022). Thus, this study spotlights how EFL students integrated and used transition signals while creating paragraphs by focusing on three angles: meaning, form, and usage. This study explores the following research question:

Q1. How do EFL students use transition signals when writing different types of essays?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Achievement of Coherence and Cohesion

Coherence and cohesion are crucial elements that writers should develop to improve writing quality. Coherence, as Kuo (1995) has argued, means tightly linking written sentences by connecting the main and supporting ideas in each paragraph. In contrast, cohesion means using reference words and different conjunctions to help unify and organize academic texts (Mallia, 2017). Thus, creating well-written paragraphs requires students to learn about coherence and cohesion and how to apply them effectively in their writing (Megawati, 2018). One relevant strategy that writers can use

to bind written paragraphs is the use of cohesive devices (Wirantaka, 2016). Students can use several types of cohesive devices to connect their ideas, such as conjunctions: “students used different conjunction devices in their written essays including additive, adversative, causal, and temporal” (Al Shamalat & Abdul Ghani, 2020, p. 298). Using various lexical or grammatical cohesive devices leads to the tidiness of the written ideas (Chanyoo, 2018). Using transition words can also foster a text’s coherence and cohesion (SARI, 2022). Thus, applying conjunctions and transition signals could build smooth, coherent text (Sari, 2022). Students’ understanding of coherent devices can be bridged by giving EFL students the necessary teaching strategies and quality writing textbooks (Alsarera & Yunus, 2023).

B. Transitional Signals

Transitional signals facilitate the process of connecting ideas within the targeted context. Transitions consist of signal words that show the relationships among ideas and paragraphs (Solikhah & Surakarta, 2017). Thus, transitions help readers recognize the links among written ideas. Ampa et al. (2019) have stated that writers can use various transition words to show the relationships among ideas, indicate contrast, display additional information, give examples, or indicate the chronological sequence. Such transitions unify ideas and support the readability of texts. According to Mantra et al. (2021), transition words create a natural flow to organize events and thought sequences. However, using transition words to connect ideas is difficult for EFL/ESL students. Ismail and Adjud (2022) have found that students commit extensive types of errors in applying transition devices when writing paragraphs because they lack knowledge of and practice with the grammatical rules of transitions and the function of each type of these learned transition signals. Using appropriate academic resources and implementing effective teaching strategies and approaches are additional factors that go hand in hand with EFL students’ challenges when choosing and utilizing the targeted transition words (Hama, 2021). Some transition words are rare in students’ writing, as they instead rely on using the most common ones (Wilfitri & Fatimah, 2020). Therefore, students require extensive instruction to develop strategies for constructing English paragraphs using transition signals appropriately (Mahendra & Dewi, 2017). Applying transition words accurately strengthens text readability and helps writers create well-structured sentences (Utami & Mahendra, 2021).

C. Three-Dimensional Grammar Model

Learning the target language effectively requires students to pay attention to language form, meaning, and use because language should involve all three dimensions (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). When students desire to learn the target language, they must learn the correct structure of a complete sentence, the meaning of the vocabulary words used, and how to use those words within discourse. EFL/ESL learners should receive English instruction to structure their sentences around the targeted purpose they aim to communicate (Savage et al., 2010). Thus, relating grammar to function is crucial to achieving communicative goals. In addition, it is important to focus on the targeted grammatical structures and their integrated meanings to develop students’ acquisition of the target language (Khansir & Pakdel, 2016). Teaching a language should focus on exercises that expose students to the targeted grammatical rules and help them recognize how to use transitions to create syntactically and semantically accurate sentences (Djurayeva et al., 2020). Based on these findings, language instruction should use a combination of grammatical competence, meaning creation and negotiation, and social-communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 1991). This study applies the three-dimensional grammar model to target language acquisition as a framework for analyzing the collected data by identifying students’ use of transition words in relation to those three angles.

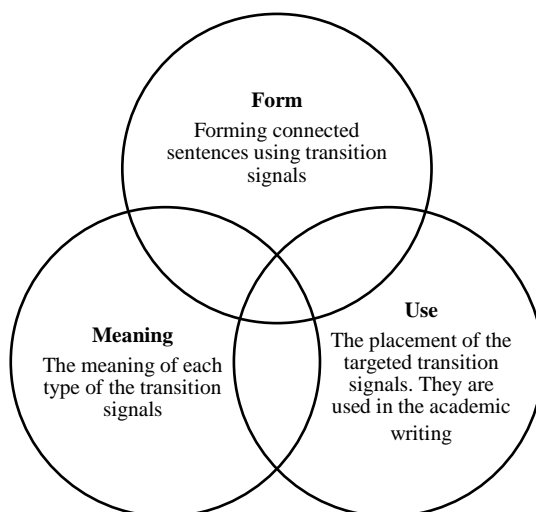


Figure 1. The Three Grammatical Dimensions of Diane Larsen-Freeman (2001)

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Sampling

This qualitative research study explores EFL undergraduate students' use of transition signals as they wrote three types of academic essays. The participants were at level one of English in the applied linguistics department. They had taken an English grammar course and an English writing course. The purpose of the latter was to develop EFL students' academic essays and improve their ability to differentiate them. For the English grammar course, the students were exposed to many grammatical structures that helped them understand how to form accurate sentences. The sample for this study was selected randomly from these two courses, and there were fifteen students in total. For ethical considerations, the author received the human subjects' approval to collect the targeted data. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and signed a consent form. They were also made aware that their identities would be hidden for their confidentiality.

B. Data Collection

In the data collection phase, the participants were asked to develop three types of essays—argumentative, compare and contrast, and cause and effect—in the English writing course. The course exposed the students to different transition signals related to each type of essay. The following table presents examples of the transition words they learned in both courses featured in this study. These examples were taken from Oshima and Hogue's 2014 *Longman Academic Writing Series* textbook (2014). As they developed their written texts, the students were asked to use the transition signals specified for each type of essay. The authors randomly collected fifteen samples of students' essays to examine how they integrated their knowledge of grammatical structures and academic essays to transfer their thoughts to written texts effectively. Five essays of each type were collected.

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF LEARNED TRANSITION SIGNALS

	Cause and Effect	Compare and Contrast	Argumentative
1	For	Similarly	Although
2	As	Also	While
3	Resulted from	Too	Despite
4	Because/because of	Just as	However
5	Consequence of	Not only..., but also	Even though
6	As a result of	Both..., and	But
7	So	Dissimilar to	On the other hand
8	Resulted in	The same	On the contrary
9	Cause of	But	Likewise

C. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in phases. First, the transition signals were highlighted in the five cause-and-effect essays. Then, the same process was performed with the compare-and-contrast and argumentative essays. After, themes emerged as the data were coded in Microsoft Excel sheets. The elicited themes were argumentative, compare and contrast, and cause and effect. After identifying the transition words students used, the data were read several times to analyze how the students applied the words in their written texts by focusing on meaning, form, and usage. These three dimensions revealed students' understanding of how to deliver their intended messages coherently. Lastly, the results are presented in tables based on the themes, as shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

IV. RESULTS

A. Argumentative Essays

The data highlighted the transition words that EFL students used most often in their argumentative essays: *but*, *also*, and *however*. It seems that they applied the most common and familiar transition words, as shown in Table 2. The participants used these familiar words in several ways. They used *but*, *also*, and *however* at the beginning and middle of the sentences. Using *but* at the beginning of the sentence is considered informal, although the students tried to write formal, academic essays, as shown in the table below. In addition, the data revealed that the students tried to use punctuation correctly, although in some cases, a necessary comma was missing. The data also showed that the students tried to develop overly long sentences. They often tried to complete their thoughts without adequately separating their ideas. In terms of meaning, the data showed that students successfully delivered the intended messages using appropriate transition signals. In Example 3, Table 2, the student used *however* to differentiate two points of view to support her argument.

TABLE 2
THE TRANSITION SIGNALS OF ARGUMENTATION EFL STUDENTS USED MOST OFTEN

	Most Common Transition Words	Examples
1	But	The rise of technology has made life more convenient, <i>but</i> it has also caused the world's health to get out of hand. <i>But</i> if we used it in the wrong way or we completely relied on it, Here it will be bad for human development.
2	Also	The study <i>also</i> showed that face-to-face communication has an additional advantage in terms of protection, empathy and understanding, that is, direct communication and simultaneous dialogue between the two parties, which is greatly reduced when using other digital means of communication in SMS. <i>Also</i> using technology every day may have an impact on developing kids and teenagers for sure.
3	However	<i>However</i> , some people think that this progress has made us lazy. Children nowadays can easily connect with their friends and family with just one click away, <i>However</i> , some people think children should not have any access to social media let alone using it on a regular basis, they think it might make them incredibly lazy or being fully dependent on their social medias, other think it's completely normal and okay to let them use it on a regular basis and it has no side effects as long as they're safe.

B. Cause-and-Effect Essays

The collected data showed students' attempts to use different verbs that were appropriate to cause-and-effect essays, such as *harm*, *affect*, and *cause*. Further, the students used limited transition words in these essays. The most common words that they used were *but* and *because*. The data in Table 3 shows how they used the transition words at the beginning and in the middle of the sentences.

TABLE 3
THE MOST COMMON TRANSITION SIGNALS OF CAUSE-AND-EFFECT EFL STUDENTS USED

	Most Common Transition Words	Examples
1	But	<i>But</i> it should be noted that diabetes does not necessarily mean that your sleep will be affected. It's even harder to understand why children would bully one another, <i>but</i> it happens more often than you might think.
2	Because	<i>Because</i> they have been bullied, some students miss school, have their grades decline, or even quit out entirely. It will be difficult to start their psychotherapy <i>because</i> they are children.

C. Compare-and-Contrast Essays

The data present the four most common transition words that this study's students were taught to use to write compare-and-contrast words: *but*, *however*, *on the other hand*, and *while*. The participants tried to use those transition words accurately and successfully deliver the intended messages. Their sentences applied the transition words to achieve understandability and accuracy; however, they sometimes made errors with the punctuation. In the example "Dogs *on the other hand* are more social as they play with everyone," the student should add commas before and after *on the other hand* because they used the phrase in the middle of the sentence. Although the participants used transition words that were appropriate to the essay type, each student used them one or two times per essay.

TABLE 4
THE MOST COMMON TRANSITION SIGNALS EFL STUDENTS USED IN COMPARE-AND-CONTRAST ESSAYS

	Most Common Transition Words	Examples
1	But	Both villages and cities have hospitals, <i>but</i> city hospitals are of high quality.
2	However	<i>However</i> , both have backbones, excellent eyesight and common defense mechanisms.
3	On the other hand	Dogs <i>on the other hand</i> are more social as they play with everyone. <i>On the other hand</i> , amphibians have moist, delicate skin which keeps them from up and help to breathe through their skin.
4	While	Cats hunt rats and mice with sharp instincts, <i>while</i> most dogs' breeds do not share that sharp vision like cats. <i>While</i> some people might say that all communities are alike, there are some clear and important differences between living in a city and living in a village.

In all types of essays that the participants developed, the students included their conclusion paragraphs to prepare their audience for the conclusion. Examples of transition words used were *at the end*, *to conclude*, *to sum up*, and *in conclusion*. The use of these transition words indicated the EFL students' awareness and knowledge. Additionally, it seems the participants used limited transition words in each essay; nevertheless, they still knew how to use them clearly and accurately.

V. DISCUSSION

The data highlighted students' applications of transition words in different types of essays, such as argumentative, cause-and-effect, and compare-and-contrast essays. The data show that the students could differentiate between each type of essay by using the proper transition words. In other words, the participants could focus on the three angles—meaning, form, and usage—while developing different academic essays. For example, they included *however*, *while*, and *on the other hand* to refer to comparisons. This result agrees with Alshamalat's and Abdul Ghani's (2020) findings concerning Jordanian students' understanding of the use of conjunctions and cohesive devices in argumentative essays. The data also revealed that EFL students used limited transition words in each essay. Students' use of a few numbers of transitional signals is related to their inability to construct a well-organized and coherent written paragraph (Chicho, 2022). All participants employed common, familiar transition words, such as *but* and *however*. They did not attempt to move out of their comfort zone; they preferred to use familiar transition signals, although they learned different types of transition words during the semester. This result is consistent with Purba et al.'s (2017) finding that students used a limited number of subordinating conjunctions despite having ample information about the topic. Aidinlou and Reshadi (2014) have suggested that instructors should motivate their students to use conjunctions to develop cohesion in emails. The participants used common transition words occasionally in their submitted essays. In other words, each essay included one to two transition words. It seems that the students tried to integrate the transition words they learned, but they needed to add them in different places in their essays. EFL students must develop their ability to know when and how to use various transition words. A study by Hamed (2014) presented functional pedagogical implications, such as providing EFL students with exercises that gradually move them from noticing the semantic function of unfamiliar transitions to recognizing their appropriate use within a complete text. For example, EFL teachers could initially ask students to join sentences with the targeted transitional words provided in brackets and then require them to reorder sentences from a specific context with transition signals. Alsarera and Yunus (2023) have provided another valuable pedagogical strategy regarding students' limited knowledge of ensuring coherence in their written compositions: encouraging students to read extensively to draw their attention to the importance of coherence and increase their awareness of the correct use of cohesive devices.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study investigated the types of transition words EFL undergraduate students used in argumentative, compare-and-contrast, and cause-and-effect academic essays. The collected data revealed the transitional signals the students applied most often and how they integrated them into their texts. The students preferred staying in their comfort zone, using familiar and limited transition words. The data indicated their understanding of the transition words' meaning, form, and use, but they were not ready to use unfamiliar connectors to connect their thoughts.

The following recommendations based on this study will contribute to teaching and learning languages:

1. Future studies should integrate other methods besides analyzing students' written tasks, such as interviews or writing conferences between instructors and students, to better understand their weaknesses and limitations.
2. Participants need adequate time to process information about transition words, and they need adequate training and practice before writing different essays to be evaluated.
3. Essay types other than argumentative, compare and contrast, and cause and effect should be considered to reveal EFL learners' usage of transition words by comparing the type of essay.
4. EFL instructors should integrate the three angles—meaning, form, and use—when teaching different types of cohesive devices to develop EFL students' awareness and abilities to deliver their intended messages clearly.

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