

Assessment of the Use of Connectives in Academic Writing by Burundi Undergraduate Students: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The present study sought to find out if undergraduate students use connectives in their academic writing and if they used them appropriately. Data were gathered through an online questionnaire and analyzed using Google Forms. A total of 25 English teachers from three universities in Bujumbura participated by completing the questionnaire. Results indicate the investigated students used a variety of connectors. In addition, results point to inability on the part of students to use connectives appropriately in academic writing. The learners' incompetence in the use of connectives may be caused by inappropriate teaching methods, French interference, fossilization, insufficient input, lack of practice, large classes and the lack of appropriate English learning environment. The following recommendations have been formulated to improve the teaching of connectives: 1) Teachers should revisit their teaching methods in relation to connectives to ensure that students understand their meaning and context of use; 2) students should be more attentive when using connectives and use dictionaries when necessary; 3) more research should be carried out on the basis of students' essays in order to reveal more students' features in the use of connectives in academic writing.

Keywords: Academic writing, connectives, preference, misuse

Introduction

Connectives, such as, *and*, *but*, *however*, *in addition*, *in conclusion*, etc. are used by writers in order to achieve coherence. They help join different text units, that is, words, phrases, sentences, clauses and paragraphs together. According to Leech and Svartvik (2013:177) cited in Tapper (2005: 116), "connectives function as 'cohesive signposts' in discourse that help guide the reader or listener through the message by signalling how successive units are related". In other words, connectives function as facilitators in the interpretation of a message by the hearer or reader. According to Halliday & Hassan (1976:6), connectives (called *conjunctions*) in their work constitute one aspect of cohesion defined as

the “relations of meaning that exist within text”. Specifically, these authors have distinguished five ways of achieving cohesion, namely, reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction as well as lexical cohesion.

Many terms are used in the literature, namely *connectives*, *connectors*, *discourse markers*, *cohesive devices*, *conjunctions*, to name but a few. For the sake of consistency, the term ‘connectives’ is used throughout this study.

Many studies have shown that the use of connectives in academic writing by learners, whether ESL or EFL is problematic. Tang & Ng (1995:105), for example, have pointed out that the misuse of connectives is an almost universal feature of ESL students’ writing. The present study seeks to find out how undergraduate students from the University of Burundi use connectives in academic writing.

Literature Review

A significant number of studies have been carried out in order to find out how non-native writers of English use connectives in academic writing (Granger & Tyson, 1996, Faruk & Barua, 2016; Güneş, 2017; Uçar & Yukselir, 2017; Mahendra & Dewi, 2017 and Al Mughrabi, 2017). Many studies have come up with the finding that non-native learners tend to overuse, underuse, and/or misuse connectives in their written productions.

Faruk and Barua (2016) investigated how Bangladeshi University students used connectives in their writing. They used the answer scripts of an English writing exam of 72 students from Bangladesh in order to find out the nature and extent of the use of connectives. They also tried to find out similarities and differences between the connective use of Bangladeshi non-native speakers and that of French, Japanese, Swedish, and Chinese non-native speakers. The study found that the most frequently used connectors are “*but*”, “*so*”, “*because*”, “*however*”, “*for example*”, “*on the other hand*”, “*another*”, “*moreover*”, “*in conclusion*” and “*firstly*”. Another finding is that Bangladeshi advanced EFL learners underused most of the connectors (e.g. *however*, *therefore*, *such as*, *also*, and *yet*). Still another finding from this study is that Bangladeshi students tended to use connectives mostly in sentence-initial positions. This last finding is also supported by Granger & Tyson’s (1996: 24) who looked at how French EFL learners used connectives in argumentative essays. This study shows that in most cases, there is a higher use of sentence initial position by learners and that it is especially striking in the case of *so*.

While most studies compared essays written by one group of non-native speakers and those written by (a) control group (s) of native speakers of English (e.g. Sabzevari, Haghverdi & Biria, 2016; Tapper, 2005; Granger & Tyson, 1996; etc.), Faruk & Barua (ibid)'s study compared the essays written by non-native learners from many language backgrounds as indicated above. This is obviously a great contribution in throwing light into how connectives are used by non-native learners of English. However, one weakness of this study is that it used a small sample (only 72 essays written by Bangladeshi learners).

Research has also suggested that non-native learners tend to overuse connectives in writing. Güneş (2017), for example, found that Turkish doctoral students overused connectives, called linking adverbials in the study; the most overused being the additive and resultative categories. Overuse of connectives has also been echoed by Granger & Tyson (ibid.). The study used argumentative essays written by French EFL learners and compared them with native speakers' essays. The study pointed to overuse of *corroborative* and *additive* connectives as follows "the learners use most frequently those connectors which add to, exemplify, or emphasize a point rather than those which change the direction of the argument or take the argument logically forward" (p. 20). The study also pointed to semantic, stylistic and syntactic misuse on the part of learners. A good example of misuse concerns *in fact* which was found to be used wrongly as the French phrase *en fait*. A similar finding was reached by Mahendra & Dewi (2017). They investigated how students from Ganesha University of Education used connectives. They also found out that "*in fact*" was among the most difficult connectives for the targeted subjects (other difficult connectives, as revealed by the study are, *however*, *moreover*, *also*", *either* and *as well as*).

There is some similarity in terms of findings between Güneş' (ibid) and Granger and Tyson's (ibid) studies: Both studies have found that the *additive connectives* are overused in the samples targeted. The studies reviewed above and others provide interesting insights into the way learners use connectives in their academic writing. It is generally agreed among scholars involved in the study of connectives in learner writing that more research is needed in order to reveal more features in students' writing. The present study, therefore, seeks to find out how undergraduate students from Burundi use connectives in their academic written productions by focusing on the teachers perspectives. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Burundi undergraduate students use connectives in academic writing?
2. Do Burundi undergraduate students use connectives appropriately?

Methodology

The participants of this study are teachers of English from institutions of higher education in Burundi, namely, University of Burundi (UB) and Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) and Université Lumière de Bujumbura (ULB). Teachers were asked to give their views concerning the way university students use connectives in their writing. The instrument for data collection was an online questionnaire that was designed by the researcher using “Google Forms” software, a product of Google. A link to the questionnaire was sent to all potential respondents via e-mail. In total, 25 teachers answered the questionnaire. The following table shows details concerning the number of teachers who participated in this study and which institutions they belong to.

Table 3.1: Sample size

Institution	Number of teachers
University of Burundi	15
Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS)	9
Université Lumière de Bujumbura (ULB)	1
Total	25

As the table above shows, 15 teachers are from the University of Burundi, 9 teachers are from Ecole Normale Supérieure while 1 teacher is from Université Lumière de Bujumbura. Concerning data analysis, the data from the questionnaire were analysed mainly quantitatively using percentages and graphs.

Findings

This study sets out to find out teachers’ views about how undergraduate students use connectives in their writing. It is important to note that most teachers who answered the questionnaire have a wide experience in teaching as shown by Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1. Teacher's Experience

Teaching experience in terms of years	Number of teachers	Percentage
One to five years	8	32 %
More than five years	17	68 %
Total	25	100 %

The table above shows that 68 % of the respondents have more than 5 years of experience. This shows that teachers have had enough time to observe their learners' performance in writing; they know their strengths and weaknesses in writing. The data collected also shows that the teachers who participated in this study are qualified as revealed by the following table (Table 4.2).

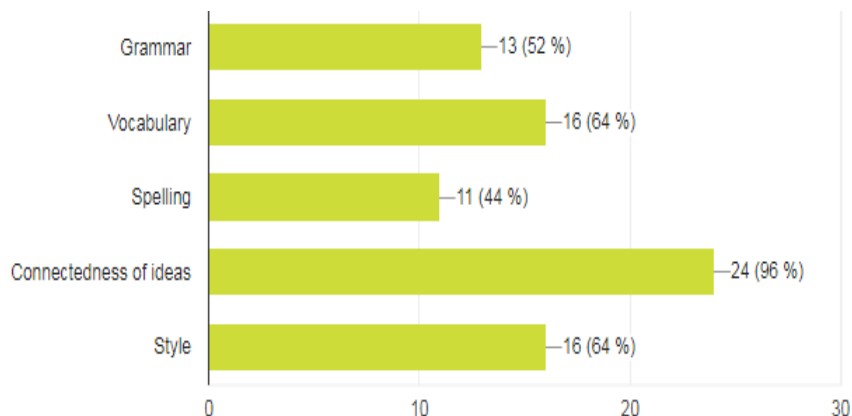
Table 4.2. Teachers' qualification

Degree	Number of teachers	Percentage
PhD	9	36
Master's degree	11	44
Bachelor's degree	5	20
Total	25	100

By analysing table 4.2, one realizes that PhD holders represent 36% while Master's degree holders represent 44%; which makes a total of 80 % (that is, 36%+44%). This percentage shows that the majority of the respondents of this study are qualified teachers. Turning to the analysis of the data collected, let us recall that two research questions were formulated to guide this study. In this section, the researcher analyses the data collected in relation to those research questions.

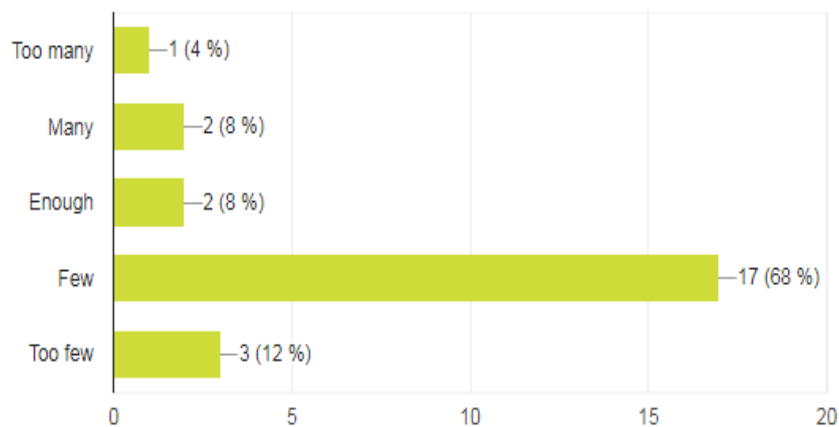
This research has found out that students are in general weak in writing and that they have difficulties at all levels, that is, in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, connectedness of ideas, as well as in style. From the teachers' answers, it is obvious that the connectedness of ideas, which is mainly achieved by using connectives, is the most difficult aspect for students. Specifically, 96% of teachers said that undergraduate students have difficulties in connecting ideas as shown in the graph below.

Figure 4. 1: Students' Difficulties in Academic Writing



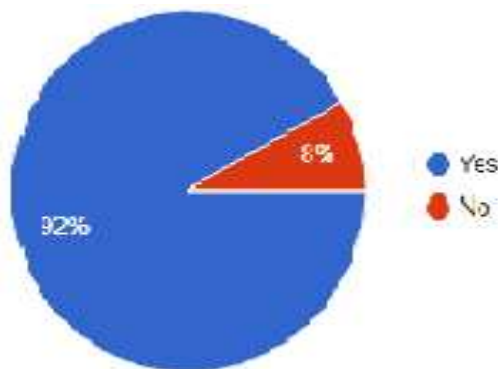
Despite their weaknesses in connecting ideas, students know that connectives are necessary in academic writing. This was revealed by the teachers' answers to the question to know whether students use connectives in their writing: 92% of the teachers' answered by "yes" while only 8% answered by "no". Though learners may not be competent in the use of connectives they know that these should be used in their pieces of writing and they have used them. Another question one can ask is whether students use enough connectors in their pieces of writing. Most writers are aware that at least different paragraphs of an essay are introduced by connectives such as *in addition* (if the writer intends to add an idea), *in contrast* (if the writer wants to change direction), etc. The choice of the connectives to use depends of course of the idea that the writer intends to express. On the quantitative level of connectives, the study shows that students use few connectives in their essays as shown in Figure 4.3 below:

Fig. 4. 2: The extent to which connectives are used in students’ writing



As shown in Figure 4.3 above, 80 % of the subjects said that students do not use enough connectives in their writing (that is, 68% (who chose “few”) + 12% (who chose “too few”). Concerning the preference of connectives by students, 92 % of the subjects indicated that there are some connectives which are preferred by students. Some examples are *such as, so, in fact, however*, etc.

Figure 4. 3: Students’ Preferences in the Use of Connectives.



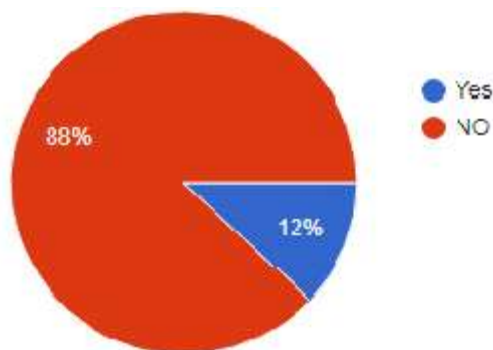
Following are the respondents’ details concerning preferred connectives along with some comments:

In fact (beginning of first paragraph)
As far as, however, so, and, in fact
Chronological, comparison and contrast
So (: “which they even use in the opening paragraphs”), *but*, etc
moreover, first-secondly-thirdly, in effect, therefore
Contrasting connectives.
and, however, but
Besides, in addition to, moreover
and, however, but,
and, also, then, however, "to make a long story short" instead of
in summary, etc.
but
so, in addition, however
Then, furthermore, moreover
as far as, about,
moreover, however, in addition
First, Firstly, Secondly, Finally, etc.
However
therefore, finally, to begin with, another, lastly, for example, in
fact, in spite of, etc
The connectors they prefer are mostly those they copy. It also
depend on student, it is mostly individual not common to all
students.
This depends on individuals, it is not common
"Therefore"
in addition to that, as far as, however...
So, that is why, then, etc
Therefore, in a nutshell, in sum

We can see from the respondents’ answers that students have a lot of preferences in terms of connectives. Examples are *such as, so, moreover, however, in addition*, etc. Some respondents seem to suggest that students’ preferences of connectives are somehow varied, which is quite understandable given the fact that they studied in different schools and were taught by different teachers, who probably had preferences which they spread over their learners.

Another issue investigated in this study is whether students of English use connectives appropriately. The results of this study are displayed in Figure 4.5 below:

Figure 4. 4. Assessment of the students’ ability to use connectives in academic writing



To the question to know whether students use connectives appropriate, Figure 4.5 above reveals that the majority of the respondents, i.e., 88%, answered by “no”, revealing that students do not use connectives appropriately. Only 12 % of the respondents said that students used connectives appropriately.

Discussion of Results

The present study sought to investigate how Burundi undergraduate students use connectives in academic writing. Concerning the first question formulated as “To what extent do Burundi undergraduate students use connectives in academic writing?” it was found that undergraduate students do use connectives in their writing. However, teachers revealed that students do not use enough of them. The study also revealed that some connectives are preferred by students (e.g., *in fact*, *so*, *therefore*, etc. This finding is similar to that of many other researchers who also found that students have preference for some connectives and overuse them. For example, Granger and Tyson (ibid: 22) pointed out that “learners use most frequently those connectors which add to, exemplify, or emphasize a point, rather than those which change the direction of the argument or take the argument logically forward”. Sabzevari et al’s (ibid) results also showed that both groups investigated (that is, the Iranian EFL writers and native speaker writers) had similar tendency to use a set of connectives (referred to as “conjunctive

adverbials” in their study). Tang and Ng (ibid: 113) indicated that students have their own favourite connectives which they use very often.

Regarding the second research question which reads “Do Burundi undergraduate students use connectives appropriately?” the study found that students do not use connectives appropriately. Teachers indicated that students misuse connectives mainly because they do not know their meaning and, therefore, make wrong choices. The causes of students’ inappropriate use of connectives may be due to the following factors: inappropriate teaching methods, French interference, fossilization, insufficient input about connectives, lack of sufficient practice in the use of connectives, large class size as well as the lack of appropriate English learning environment (English is used in class only). Similarly to this study, French interference was found to be the cause of learners’ misuse of some connectives by Granger and Tyson (ibid: 21). They stated that “overuse of *on the contrary* was (...) probably due to confusion with the French *au contraire* (...).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study aimed to investigate how Burundi undergraduate students use connectives in academic writing. Findings of this study point to inability on the part of students to use connectives appropriately in academic writing. On the basis of the findings of this study, the researcher would like to make the following recommendations. The first recommendation is addressed to teachers.

They should revisit their teaching methods in relation to connectives to make sure that understand their meaning and context of use. Students, on their side, should be more careful when using connectives and use dictionaries when necessary. Finally, more research should be carried out on the basis of students’ essays in order to reveal more students’ features in the use of connectives in academic writing.

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