AN ERROR ANALYSIS ON THE USE OF CONJUNCTIONS IN THE WRITING BY FRESHMEN AT PRE-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL OF ENGLISH AT THANG LONG UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: It is important to understand errors made by learners in foreign language teaching and learning process. However, there has been scantily any research on the causes of errors in students’ writing in English in Vietnamese universities. This study has been carried out to clarify the errors in the use of cohesive devices by the freshmen at pre-intermediate level of English at Thang Long University. Basing on the theoretical background of other error studies in the field and the statistic collected from the reality, the study has found out the frequency of each kind of errors, analyzed the causes of these errors. Then, some suggestions for teaching conjunctions and correcting these errors are made with the hope to upgrade the writing skills for the students right in their first year in university.

Keywords: Errors, Conjunction, Inter-lingual factors, Intra-lingual factors, Language acquisition.

1. Introduction

It is make mistakes, errors when writing in the target language. How to cope with and when to give feedback to these errors are vital in teaching language as it may either result in motivation or discouragement in language learning. Some teachers’ concern is directed to contrastive analyses of Vietnamese and English with hope to predict and prevent errors before they appear. This theory was supported by Lado (1957). However, Richards (1971) in his research found out that apart from the first language interference, there were other causes which are products of intra-lingual analogies such as overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules or ignorance of rule restrictions, false concepts hypothesized. “Cohesive devices are crucial in writing” (Zamel, 1983:1), they help to create the fluent flow of writing, among conjunction is one of frequently used cohesive devices. Therefore, I attempted to carry out a research study applying error analysis in clarifying learners’ errors in the use of conjunctions in writing at Thang Long University.

The purpose of this study is to obtain quantitative data to answer the following questions:

1. What are common errors in the use of conjunctions in the students’ writing?
2. What are the major causes of these errors?

The subjects of the study were three TASTC 1 classes with 114 freshmen at pre-intermediate level of English at Thang Long University. Free compositions were collected during the semester of 9 weeks as a mean of eliciting natural errors. These compositions selected did not include the writing tests as the students were affected by the psychological factors. During the semester under the study, the teacher was asked to set a rule in her writing...
classes: each student had to pass their final version to any other student in class before handing it in to the teacher, this rule helped to extract only errors from students’ writing.

This research was conducted as a quantitative study. The errors were measured in terms of the frequency of occurrence in various forms of cohesive devices and percentages of the different kinds of errors in the total number of errors were established from this occurrence frequency. The techniques employed in the analysis process are: identification, labelization, classification, and transferation to indexes applying the model of recognizing and identifying errors by Coder (1975) (Figure 1: Process of recognizing and identifying errors), the classification of conjunctions (additive, adversative, causal, etc.) by Haliday and Hasan (1976).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The notion of errors in language teaching

On the basis of theory, Behaviorists view errors as symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure. They also view it as being due to largely to the first language interference, when errors occur they are remedied by a bombardment of correct forms which can be achieved by the intensive drilling or over teaching. On the other hand, Mentalists, who following cognitive principles, suggested that learners process the new data in his mind and come up with a set of rules that produce new patterns in the target language. Consequently, errors are inevitable; in fact, they even become a part in learning process and developing competence. Errors are not regarded as a sign of failure, but evidence that the learner is working toward the correct rules. The attitude of Mentalists is positive toward errors in language learning, it removes the anxiety caused by the behaviorist in classroom.

Richards et al. (1974) believed that both children learning the first language, and children and adults learning foreign languages likely to produce errors of following types:

i) The omission of grammatical morphemes

ii) The double marking of a given semantic feature

iii) The over generalized application of irregular rules

iv) The use of one form for several required

v) The wrong word ordering

2.2. Errors vs Mistakes

The distinction between “errors” and “mistakes” has been given by many linguists though it is impossible to indicate any sharp differentiation. H. Douglas Brown considered errors as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. "According to Klassen (1991), the term “error” is used to refer to a form of structure that a native speaker deems unacceptable because of the lack of language competence. Chomsky (1965) initiated the distinction when he suggested that there were two types of errors: one resulting from verbal performance factors, the other from inadequate language competence. Later, Corder (1967) named the former mistakes and the later error. Mistakes are said to be unsystematic in nature and correctable when attention is drawn to its producers. Errors, on the other hand, refer to any systematic deviations from
the rules of the target language system. In short, errors are caused by lack of knowledge about 
the target language or by incorrect hypothesis about it; mistakes are caused by temporary 
lapses of memory, confusion, and carelessness and so on. If we are uncertain whether one of 
the learners has made an error or a mistake, the crucial test must be: can he correct himself 
when challenged? If he can, probably it is a mistake; if not, it is an error.

2.3. Causes of errors in foreign language learning

According to Corder (1967), errors traced to their sources are beneficial in different 
ways. Firstly, they help language teachers know how much progress a learner has made in the 
target language, in which area he needs help and what sort of help he needs. Secondly, they 
provide researchers with evidence in language learning process; therefore, researchers through 
errors discover strategies applied in acquiring a language. Apart from that, errors can serve as 
good feedback to learners for self-adjustment. For these reasons, this study should be 
conducted to find out types of errors, specifically errors in the use of cohesive devices in 
Vietnamese learners’ writing and what their causes are.

Basically, two types of causes are classified: (1) first language interference and (2) 
causes independent of the first language interference.

The notion of first language interference is understood as negative transfer from the 
first language to the target language, it is the way learning new habits is hindered by 
previously learnt ones. Lado (1957), Myles (2002), Ellis (1994) have proved the effects of the 
first language. Corder (1967) observed language learners make hypotheses about the language 
they are learning, tried to compare it with their native language, and then came to the 
conclusion that errors in foreign language reflected the first language’s features. Later in 1978 
he recasts interference as learners’ reliance on the first language as their strategy 
of communication, which means learners use literal translation as a learning strategy to 
overcome their ignorance.

Why do language learners apply their native language in second language acquisition? 
The answer lies in four major factors. Firstly, it is the performance pressure. Windowson 
(1990) realized that when learners write under pressure, they may rely on systematic 
resources from their native language for the achievement and synthesis of meaning. Secondly, 
the limited foreign language environment also contributes to errors in language learning. The 
lack of natural linguistic inputs with native speakers results in learners’ recourse on their 
language. Moreover, language tasks assigned for the learners have a significance affect on 
their verbal production. Among these tasks, translation is said to “increase the foreign 
language learners’ reliance on first language structures” (Dulay et al., 1982:110). Lastly, 
Dulay et al. (1982) considered the monitor as “an important factor associated with the 
learner’s use of foreign language acquisition” (1982:110). Learners tend to think in the first 
language and attempt to put the idea in the target language.

Myles (2002) defined the above four factors as social factors affecting writing in 
foreign language. “Research based on direct and indirect measures generally shows that 
learners with positive attitudes, motivation, concrete goals will have attitude reinforced if they 
experience success. Likewise, learners’ negative attitudes may be strengthened by lack of
success or by failure” (2002:2). He concluded that learners’ attitudes, motivations and goals can explain why some foreign language writers perform better than others.

Causes independent of the first language include: overgeneralization, false concepts hypothesized, incomplete application of rules, cross association, and fossilization.

Sometimes it is difficult to decide exactly which process is applied in a certain error. Littlewood (1980:29) concluded that many processes might operate simultaneously and reinforce each other in causing the learners to produce errors.

2.4. Conjunctions

Conjunction is considered as a type of cohesive devices. In writing, cohesive devices are crucial for they turn separate clauses, sentences, and paragraphs into connected prose, signaling the relationships between ideas, and making obvious and visible the writer’s “line of thought” (Boadhead and Berlin 1981:306). While native speakers of English generally learn to use these cohesive elements as they do other aspects of language, English language learners seem to have great difficulties in mastering them. Halliday and Hasan (1976) give the most comprehensive description analysis of cohesive devices five major types of cohesive ties: reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction and lexical ties. Conjunction is grammatical cohesion and the conjunctive relations are not logical but textual; they represent the generalized types of connection between sentences. These connections are classified according to the meanings expressed by the sentences. There are two kinds of meanings: experiential relation representing the linguistic interpretation of experience and interpersonal representing participation in the speech situation (Haliday and Hasan1976: 238, 240). According to the relationship they express, conjunctions are grouped in 4 categories: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. The can be explained as below:

Additives: The connectives that link units of semantic similarity. The additives introduce discourse units that repeat and emphasize the key points or add relevant new information to the prior expression (p. 244). Examples are further, or, moreover, etc.

Adversatives: The connectives that bring in the expressions which are contrary to expectation. The expressions indicate a contrary result or opinion to the content mentioned previously. In this sense, the adversatives signal the beginning of a different viewpoint (p.250). Examples are yet, either way, however, in contrary, etc.

Causal: The connectives are used to introduce result, reason or purpose. The clauses connected are related to each other either in the cause-and-effect relation or in the conditional relation (p.255). Examples are because, otherwise, hence, etc.

Temporals: The connectives that express the time order of events. In order to manifest the temporal relations of successive and simultaneous events, this category includes the preceding, sequential, and simultaneous connective (p.261). Examples are until then, at last, next, etc.

There is a residual category of the usual "miscellaneous" type used with a cohesive force in the text including 6 items: now, of course, well, anyway, surely and after all (p.267).

3. The outcomes of the study
Table 1: The number of errors in the use of conjunctions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conjunction</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adversative</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>32.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>28.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additive</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>17.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of errors</strong></td>
<td><strong>292</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Errors and their Causes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conjunction</th>
<th>Inter-lingual</th>
<th>Intra-lingual</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adversative</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additive</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>162</strong></td>
<td><strong>118</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**292**

Source of Errors

[Bar chart showing the distribution of errors by source: Inter-lingual, Intra-lingual, Mixed]
4. Discussion and Conclusion

The understanding of students’ common errors in the use of conjunctions and their causes serves as background knowledge which helps teachers to build sufficient error correction techniques, the focus of teaching as well as teaching strategies to prevent and eliminate these errors.

There is a connection between active correction of errors and improvement in writing skills. There are different approaches to written correction, which can be separated into two main categories: (a) explicit (direct): the teacher indicates the errors and provides the correction form and (b) non-explicit (indirect): the teacher marks the error in some ways such as underlined, highlighted, coded and the students have to decide the correction. The first strategy is not favorable by many researchers including Coder (1967); especially, for the errors that have been fossilized, providing the correct form in error correction can be ineffective as these errors have already become students’ habits, they need a lot of time on drilling, recognizing, eliminating errors and practicing the correct forms. The later seems of better effect as it encourages learning through problem-solving. Depending on the purpose and level of each writing course as well as of each writing lesson, teachers develop and focus on a particular fashion. Applying the strategy in the use of cohesive devices, the errors should be put in six main categories according to the level of difficulty and types of cohesive ties: article, other demonstrative references, comparative reference, personal reference, conjunctions and lexicon. Using these six categories, students are able to refer to the set of cohesion they are correcting. For the errors in the use of lexical cohesion, especially collocation, teachers should use direct correction when it is necessary as there is no set of rules that students can consult to avoid making this type of errors. Another way which can benefit students in feedback to errors in the use of collocation is that teachers can make exercises based on typical errors committed, students will not be sometimes as confused as when they are given direct correction and they also have chances to discuss their errors with others without being afraid of losing face. In conclusion, feedback to errors is of utmost importance to the writing process; without individual attention and sufficient feedback on errors, improvement will not take place. Teachers should have positive attitude toward students’ errors, it means that they must accept that students’ writing contains errors, and it should be their responsibility to help students with their errors, especially to develop strategies for self-correction.

The study has discovered the frequency of each error types so that teachers are able to draw focuses on certain conjunctions when teaching students the target language. Errors in the use of adversative and causal conjunctions are more problematic to the students than the others due to the frequent occurrence in the student’s writing. Therefore, much attention should be paid to this area so as to make an effective lesson plans on the use of these conjunctions. Focusing on the most typical types of errors does not mean that teachers leave aside the other conjunctions that no errors are found, exercises should be sometimes given to retain the already-acquired knowledge.

Students commit errors as they have not formed themselves a habit of using the target language correctly in terms of grammatical and lexical cohesion; and it should be language teachers who help them with forming the habit as such. Behaviorists believe that language
learning is a mechanical process; therefore, in their view drills should be designed to develop mechanically automatic, explanation or analyze is not necessary used in advance of practice. However, Corder (1974) argued that ‘the aim of a structural drill may be defeated if it become entirely mechanical’. In fact, this mechanism is tiring and ineffective in foreign language learning, for students find it boring to repeat the same patterns for several times, and the most problematic is that they hardly realize the meaning lying behind substitution tables or lists. Drills would be more effective and save time if they are made meaningful, this viewpoint is supported by cognitivism, the approach that focuses on the formation of language using habits on the conscious basic.

Basing on the above theory background, the types and sources of errors found, some teaching techniques are suggested to reduce the frequency of each type of errors.

Firstly, with the errors in the use conjunctions rooted from intra-lingual source such as errors in the use of causal and additive ones, students should be provided with clear explanation first then substitution tables and exercises such as recognizing the cohesive device or identifying errors and gap-filling. Teaching writing does not mean that only writing skills are involved, other language skills can be integrated in order to raise students’ awareness. Some speaking, listening and reading games can also be used in writing class so as to put students in real communicative situations in which teachers intend to focus on the correct use of certain conjunctions. For example, following the explanation and identifying error exercises on the use of causal conjunctions, the teacher may ask students in turn make the sentences/clauses using causal conjunctions, the sentence/clause by the previous student will be the cause for the sentence/clause by the next students. With this technique, students have chance to practice and memorize the use of causal conjunction, interference of other already learned items in the acquisition of the new one is reduced. The exercises and activities should be various so that students are motivated and they have chances to recognize the learned items in different contexts.

Secondly, with the errors come from inter-lingual source, an analysis of semantic and structural differences among particular features in English and Vietnamese should be made and introduced to the students; this strategy will raise students’ consciousness in the differences in the use of English compared with that of Vietnamese. Obviously, exercises are administered to form habits. Translation exercises can be a good remedy in the first stage of learning these devices; however, they should be replaced by other kinds of exercises focusing on correct patterns otherwise translation will be formed as a habit of language learning. The awareness on particular conjunctions, especially those of adversative ones, should be raised in this way and as context is a critical factor that guarantees effective learning it should be accompanied in exercises on collocation.

When applying these techniques, teachers should make detail lesson plans and be flexible depending on types of errors and level of classes. Most of the errors come from inter-lingual source and some from intra-lingual. This may be primarily due to the fact that the students had not been taught to identify and to use them correctly in their writing. When teaching conjunctions, teachers tend to handout a list reflecting the function of these cohesive devices. The following list is a representative example given by Bander (1980:8-10).
Transition that qualify: **but, however, though, yet, except for**

**Example**

1. **But** the clerk refused to answer.
2. **The letter came two days later, however.**
3. **We hope, though, that she should change her mind.**
4. **Yet there was still a chance that she would win.**
5. **Except for one girl, all the hikers returned.**

Such a list can be a misleading as the learners might not recognize the most important characteristic of cohesion which is the fact that it is a set of relation. Cohesive devices are closely related to discourse contexts where they appear, they cannot be understood without the contexts. However, lists of similar logical relationships of the conjunction like the example above fail to mention the context, to demonstrate how cohesive devices establish the logical relationship between ideas presented. Another problem which can be created with such a list is the fact that devices categorized together are not necessarily interchangeable: ‘**but**’ cannot be substituted for ‘**though**’, though they are usually classified together. If the students, when consulting the list, assume that they are syntactically the same, thus they are successful in connecting ideas but grammatically wrong. Classifying linking devices according to their grammatical functions can be a remedy to the errors such as ‘In addition to,...’, ‘**Despite of that,**...’. Classifying these devices according to grammatical function is not enough, it just helps to avoid the errors rooted from intra-lingual source; students then should be taught to differentiate the conjunctions found within each grammatical category semantically. They need to understand what happens, for example, when ‘in addition’ is used instead of ‘**however**’, when ‘**but**’ is applied but not ‘**and**’. At this stage, certain types of exercises including sentence completion, sentence combining and gap-filling exercises are helpful. These exercises assist students learn how a particular connective indicates a particular relationship between ideas presented.

Last but not least, students should be exposed to models of written texts. By examining these models, students’ awareness can be raised with regard to the way words and structures of conjunctions contribute to writing. Once they notice the role and use of these conjunctions in writing, they will prefer to apply more of the devices in their writing.
Figure 1: The process of recognizing and identifying errors


Is sentence superficially well-formed in terms of the grammar of the target language? 

YES

Does a normal interpretation according to the rules of the target language make sense in the context? 

YES

Sentence not apparently erroneous but may be right by chance 

Hold in store for possible further investigation 

NO

Sentence is overtly erroneous 

Is learner available for consultation? 

NO

Sentence is covertly erroneous 

YES

Can a plausible interpretation be put on sentence in context? 

NO

Obtain from him authoritative interpretation and make authoritative reconstruction of sentence in target language 

Make plausible reconstruction of sentence in target language 

NO

Translate sentence literally into first language. Is plausible interpretation in context plausible? 

YES

Translate first language back into target language to provide plausible 

NO

Compare reconstructed sentence with original erroneous sentence to locate error 

Translate first language back into target language to provide plausible 

YES

Hold sentence in store
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PHÂN TÍCH LỖI TRONG CÁCH SỬ DỤNG TỪ NỐI TRONG BÀI VIẾT CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT, TRÌNH ĐỘ TIẾNG ANH SỔ TRUNG CẤP TẠI TRƯỞNG ĐẠI HỌC THĂNG LONG

Tóm tắt: Việc tìm hiểu về lỗi trong quá trình dạy và học ngoại ngữ có ý nghĩa về nhiều mặt. Nhận thấy tầm quan trọng của phân tích lỗi và sở trường tòi của các nghiên cứu về nguyên nhân gây lỗi trong kỹ năng Việt bằng tiếng Anh của sinh viên tại các trường đại học của Việt Nam, nghiên cứu này đã được thực hiện nhằm làm sáng tỏ lỗi trong việc sử dụng từ nối trong kỹ năng Việt của sinh viên năm thứ nhất, trình độ Tiếng Anh trung cấp tại Trường ĐH Thăng Long. Dựa trên cơ sở lý thuyết từ các nghiên cứu về lỗi trong lĩnh vực dạy và học ngoại ngữ và số liệu thu thập được từ thực tế, đề tài đã tìm ra tận xuất của mỗi loại lỗi (lỗi nào đôi trường nghiên cứu mắc nhiều nhất, lỗi nào ít nhất) và phân tích được nguyên nhân của các loại lỗi (lỗi có nguồn gốc từ sự tác động của ngôn ngữ mà hay từ những yếu tố bên trong ngôn ngữ đang học). Những kết quả này được sử dụng làm cơ sở để đưa ra các đề xuất trong việc giảng dạy và chửa các loại lỗi khi sử dụng từ nối của sinh viên, góp phần nâng cao kỹ năng viết cho sinh viên ngày càng đầu tiên học Tiếng Anh tại trường đại học.

Từ khóa: lỗi, từ nối, nhận tó nối ngôn, nhận tó ngoại ngôn, Thự đặc ngôn ngữ.