Polo del Conocimiento

Interrelación entre enunciados en la producción oral de estudiantes de B1 de educación superior

Interrelation Between Statements in Spoken Production of B1 Learners of Tertiary Education

Inter-relação entre declarações na produção falada de alunos B1 do ensino superior

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Artículo de Investigación

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Resumen

Este estudio analiza cómo los estudiantes jóvenes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) utilizan conectores discursivos para estructurar ideas y establecer relaciones en el discurso oral. A través de una tarea de expresión oral sobre "¿Qué es un héroe?", se analizó a 50 estudiantes de nivel B1 por su uso de conectores aditivos, secuenciales, de contraste, causales y de ejemplificación. Los resultados muestran que, aunque los estudiantes demuestran una habilidad básica para usar conectores como and, but y because, su repertorio léxico es limitado. Conectores más complejos como for example y so se usaron con poca frecuencia, lo que refleja una dependencia de expresiones familiares. Los hallazgos revelan una etapa intermedia del desarrollo discursivo y subrayan la necesidad de una instrucción explícita para mejorar la variedad y eficacia del discurso oral en inglés.

Palabras Clave: Aprendices De EFL; Conectores Discursivos; Coherencia Oral; Producción Oral; Cohesión Textual.

Abstract

This study explores how young adult EFL learners use discourse connectors to structure ideas and establish relationships in spoken communication. Through a speech task on the topic "What is a hero?", 50 B1-level learners were analyzed for using additive, sequencing, contrastive, causal, and exemplification connectors. The results reveal that while learners demonstrate a basic ability to use connectors like and, but, and because, their range remains limited. More complex connectors such as for example and so appeared infrequently, indicating a reliance on familiar expressions. The findings highlight a developmental stage in discourse competence, where learners can construct coherence but require further instruction to diversify their connective strategies. This research emphasizes the need for pedagogical focus on cohesive devices to support more effective and varied spoken discourse in English.

Keywords: EFL Learners; Discourse Connectors; Spoken Coherence; Speech Production; Cohesive Devices.

Resumo

Este estudo examina como os jovens estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL) utilizam os conectivos do discurso para estruturar ideias e estabelecer relações no discurso oral. Através de

uma tarefa de expressão oral sobre "O que é um herói?", foram analisados 50 alunos do nível B1 quanto à utilização de conectivos aditivos, sequenciais, contrastivos, causais e exemplares. Os resultados mostram que, embora os alunos demonstrem uma capacidade básica de utilizar conectivos como e, mas e porque, o seu repertório lexical é limitado. Conectivos mais complexos, como por exemplo e assim, eram utilizados com pouca frequência, refletindo uma dependência de expressões familiares. As descobertas revelam um estágio intermédio de desenvolvimento do discurso e sublinham a necessidade de instruções explícitas para melhorar a variedade e a eficácia do discurso oral em inglês.

Palavras-chave: Alunos de EFL; Conectores de Discurso; Coerência Oral; Produção Oral; Coesão Textual.

Introduction

When achieving proficiency in English, the ability to organize ideas coherently during oral production is determinant for acquiring communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Hence, discourse connectors are the primary tool to guarantee cohesion and coherence in speech. These elements help to establish logical and semantic relationships between statements while guiding the listener through the speaker's intended meaning (Fraser, 1999).

Moreover, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) settled the basis for cohesion analysis in the English discourse. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) identified some categories of cohesion, which are divided into cohesion in grammatical and lexical components. Regarding the ladder, conjunctions play a crucial role; they are connectors divided into additive, adversative, causal, and temporal relationships (Schiffrin, 1987).

Furthermore, Blakemore (2002) claimed that discourse markers have a procedure function instead of propositional and tend to guide interpretation through an inferential process. This procedural function plays a decisive role in speech due to the linear and time-bound nature of oral discourse. Also, in spoken interactions, the timely and appropriate use of connectors helps to reduce ambiguity, increase listener comprehension, and facilitate fluent expression (Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

When referring to additive connectors they are used to indicate the inclusion of additional information. In EFL speech, the connector "and" is one of the first to be acquired due to its high frequency and functional simplicity (Tannen, 1989). It also facilitates linking two clauses or ideas

that are semantically similar or cumulative. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), additive connectors are essential for narrative progression and logical accumulation of ideas. On the other hand, "Also" is more syntactically versatile and occurs more frequently in formal or prepared speech. It is often used in the initial position to signal a continuation. According to Schleppegrell (2004), learners often underuse "also" in spontaneous speech due to its role in informal discourse, leading to higher syntactic demand.

Similarly, sequencing connectors indicate the chronological or logical order of events or ideas. These are essential in spoken narratives, procedural discourse, and explanations. McCarthy (1991) emphasizes the value of temporal sequencing in story-telling. "First" is often used to mark the beginning of a sequence, being pedagogically located in textbook dialogues and procedural tasks. Hence, learners' ability to use these markers correlates with their capacity to structure discourse temporally and logically (Biber et al., 2007). However, Foster and Skehan (1996) stated that young adult learners often omit or use them inconsistently, especially under cognitive load conditions during speech production. Also, their usage frequency has become more accurate and frequent as learners gain fluency and automatization in spoken language processing.

The adversative connector introduces contrastive or opposing information. This connector type is frequent in written and spoken discourse (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In speech, the connector "but" helps both a logical and rhetorical function, often demonstrating disagreement or refocusing a topic. Bolton et al., (2002) argued that EFL learners tend to overuse "but" while neglecting other alternatives such as "however" or "on the other hand". This tendency is connected to the accessibility and simplicity of "but" in real-time processing, particularly among intermediate speakers.

Regarding causal relations, this type of relation is central to explanatory discourse. "Because" introduces a reason, and "so" indicates a result. Learners use " because " more frequently than "so" because of its tendency to justify opinions and actions. According to Izumi and Bigelow (2000), cause-effect relations are cognitive processes for language learners, thus allowing its acquisition relatively early. However, learners often misuse these connectors by overgeneralizing their application or misplacing them syntactically.

Regarding the exemplification connector, the most common is "For example." It clarifies or supports a general statement, a crucial marker in academic speaking tasks, especially during presentations or debates (Hyland, 2005). Despite its importance, EFL learners often avoid using

769

"for example" in spontaneous speech, opting for vague references or incomplete elaborations. This avoidance may be due to a lack of pragmatic awareness or insufficient exposure to academic registers in speaking contexts. Bardovi-Harlig and Mossman (2016) suggested that teaching these connectors through discourse-based approaches enhances learner uptake and pragmatic competence. Hence, explicit instruction and modeling in classroom interactions have been shown to improve the appropriate use of exemplification markers.

Connectors help in linguistic coherence, cognitive organization, and communicative effectiveness. Therefore, classroom tasks that integrate sequencing, problem-solving, and storytelling provide natural opportunities for connector use (Willis & Willis, 2007). Considering that connectors are indispensable tools in the spoken discourse of EFL learners, especially those at intermediate levels like young adults, this study aims to identify the relations between statements established by young adult EFL learners when performing a speech and the mechanism used to present this relation.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What kind of relations between statements are established by young adult EFL learners when performing a speech?
2. What mechanisms do learners use to express this relation?

METHODOLOGY

This study is developed with a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative analysis to investigate the use of discourse connectors in the oral speech of young adult EFL learners. This design follows the interpretive paradigm of educational linguistics and aligns with prior studies focusing on linguistic performance in real-time speech (Foster & Skehan, 1996; McCarthy, 1991).

The participants were 50 adult EFL learners enrolled in an intensive English language program at a university language center in Ecuador. All participants are between 18 and 25 years old. Their language proficiency level corresponds to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The sample selection was done using purposive sampling. The learners have intermediate oral proficiency and previous exposure to oral performance tasks in

classroom settings. Additionally, all participants were informed of the study's objectives and procedures and signed a written consent form.

The data were collected through a controlled classroom-based speaking task. Participants were instructed to prepare and present a short speech in 3 to 5 minutes on the topic What is a hero?. The topic was selected because it elicits structured discourse involving definitions, examples, chronological narration, comparisons, and justifications. Students were given 20 minutes of preparation time to outline their ideas but were instructed not to write full scripts to encourage natural spoken production.

Each participant performed the speech individually in a quiet classroom setting, and all performances were audio-recorded using high-quality digital devices. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcription process marked pauses, repetitions, and filler words when relevant to discourse organization. Once transcribed, the data were imported into AntConc (Anthony, 2022), a corpus linguistics software tool that facilitates linguistic feature identification and frequency analysis.

The quantitative analysis involved calculating the frequency of each connector type per participant and across the entire corpus. Additionally, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to determine whether the differences in the usage of connector types were statistically significant, considering the non-parametric nature of the data (Field, 2018). Also, the qualitative analysis focused on the functional use and placement of connectors within speech segments.

RESULTS

During the speech, the learners used a variety of logical relations between utterances, such as additive, sequencing, contrasting causative, and exemplification. Additives present a higher presence among the other ones, achieving 38%. At the same time, sequencing relation also has the second position in its usage with 19%, while contrast, cause, and exemplification have almost similar results. Concerning to the most used connector "and" has 22% of preference, also 15%, but 15%, for example 14%, because 11%. On the other hand, the less common is "so" and "after that" with 2% respectively. Moreover, connectors such as first, then, and finally have limited presence during the speech activity (table 1). The results demonstrate that learners tend to use familiar connectors when speaking English, since most of them have been using by them since beginners stages of instruction.

771

Figure 1.

Logic relation between statements and connectors used in speech

Note. Gathered from speech activity.

Table 1.

Logic relation between statements and connectors used in speech

Type of connector	Connector	Frequency	%
Additive	And	100	22
Additive	Also	71	16
Sequencing	First	20	4
Sequencing	After that	10	2
Sequencing	Then	32	7
Sequencing	Finally	25	6
Contrast	But	70	15
Cause	Because	50	11
Cause	So	10	2
Exemplification	For example	65	14
Total		453	100%

Note. Gathered from speech activity

Based on the results, it can be observable that there are preferences for a particular type of connector and a specific one. However, it is necessary to determine if there is a significant difference between the gathered information and the other information. Hence, the Kruskal-Wallis Test for Independent Samples was applied, and the results are observed in Table 2. The results demonstrated that even when there is a marked preference for additive connectors, the difference between the means of all the types of connectors, like the additive, sequencing, contrast, causative, and exemplification ones, are not statically different. A similar test was applied to the list of connectors, in which the results demonstrate similarity with the type of connectors (table 3).

Table 2.

Summary of Hypothesis Contrasts for the type of connectors.

Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of Frequency is the same across categories of Type_of_Connector.	Kruskal-Wallis Test for Independent Samples	.131

Note. Asymptotic significances are shown. The significance level is .050.

Table 3.

Summary of Hypothesis Contrasts for the connectors

Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of Frequency is the same across categories of Connector.	Kruskal-Wallis Test for Independent Samples	.437

Note. Asymptotic significances are shown. The significance level is .050.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the way young adult EFL learners construct coherence and relational meaning in spoken discourse through the use of discourse connectors. While focusing on a specific set of ten connectors— additive, sequencing, contrast, cause, and exemplification functions—the study showed that learners use them as functional patterns, demonstrating their developing discourse competence.

The predominance of the additive connector "and," which is the most frequently used across the sample, is related to prior studies highlighting its high functional utility and early acquisition of

"and" among L2 learners (Biber et al., 1999). Tannen (1989) stated that it happens due to its versatility, which makes "and" as the default mechanism for linking ideas. However, it also suggests an overuse that may limit learners' ability to express more intricated relationships.

Moreover, the sequencing connectors—"first," "then," and "finally"—were observed in structured narrative segments, particularly when learners described chronological actions; this result is related to findings by McCarthy (1991) and Willis and Willis (2007), who argue that sequencing markers are especially useful in spoken recounts and procedural speech. On the other hand, the contrast connector "but" was also frequently used to introduce opposite arguments. This result reflects learners' awareness of the need for rhetorical balance, a determinant factor in persuasive and argumentative discourse (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Nevertheless, similar to the overuse of "and," the findings revealed that learners avoided more formal contrastive markers such as "however" or "on the other hand." This supports the claims by Bolton et al. (2002) and Granger and Tyson (1996) that intermediate learners tend to limit themselves to familiar connectors.

Regarding causal connectors, "because" was used more frequently than "so," this finding is similar to Izumi and Bigelow (2000), who emphasized that causal reasoning is cognitively salient and often foregrounded in learner output. Nevertheless, several learners struggled to maintain syntactic control when using these connectors, sometimes producing incomplete or fragmented causal clauses.

The connector "for example," represents the exemplification function, which was the least used. This underuse suggests a pedagogical gap, as learners may be unfamiliar with how to insert exemplification markers in oral contexts strategically. Bardovi-Harlig and Mossman (2016) argue that exemplification is often overlooked in speaking instruction, even though it is a vital strategy in academic speaking tasks such as presentations and debates.

The learners' use of connectors demonstrated an awareness of discourse organization, even when their choices were repetitive. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) emphasize that connectors serve as textual signals for managing interpersonal and ideational meanings. From this perspective, the learners' dependence on a few dominant connectors reflects an early stage of mastering the textual metafunction.

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that learners present a certain ability to organize discourse through connectors; however, their usage patterns suggest a developmental stage marked by both strengths and limitations in discourse competence. Also, the frequent use of familiar connectors like and, but, and because shows learners rely on accessible and familiar tools to build coherence. However, this dependence also indicates a limited range of expressions, which limit the depth and clarity of their spoken arguments.

Moreover, sequencing expressions such as first and then were generally applied correctly, especially in structured narratives, but their use occasionally lacked variation or flexibility. Connectors that serve more specific functions, such as so and for example, appeared less frequently, revealing possible gaps in instruction or confidence.

The learners' spoken production generally reflects a foundational understanding of how connectors link ideas. However, their discourse can benefit from more explicit guidance on how and when to use various cohesive devices. Promoting the use of diverse connectors and supporting learners in understanding their rhetorical roles can help learners to move from mechanical application to more persuasive communication

775

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