

# College-level L2 English Writing Competence: Conjunctions and Errors

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## Abstract

Learners' output of the target language has been taken into consideration a great deal over the past decade. One of the issues of L2 writing research is what problems learners may encounter in producing the target language. This study is to examine fluency, complexity and accuracy of college-level L2 English writing, analyze the errors produced by the subjects, and uncover the features of their writing. I also compare the data with learners' L2 monologic production. The significance of academic reading input is demonstrated, and at the same time, I encourage a large amount of intensive reading. Through analyzing the errors, I suggest the process of grammar acquisition can be separated into a receptive grammar stage and a productive grammar stage, and expect the discovery may bring some effective learning strategies and teaching approaches to the classroom.

**Key terms:** Conjunctive Items, Errors, Writing competence

## Introduction

It is well known that there are four basic issues in Second Language Acquisition research (Ellis 1994). (1) What do second language learners acquire? (2) How do learners acquire a second language? (3) What differences are there in the way in which individual learners acquire a second language? (4) What effects does instruction have on second language acquisition? (pp. 15-17). When we apply these issues to the writing of a second language, the characteristics of learners' writing can be considered as one of the basic issues of writing research (Oki, 2004). We can observe the features of learners' L2 writing by analyzing errors in their writing. Teachers can also give feedback to learners according to the errors examined in their writing. This is one of effective strategies for learners to improve their writing competence.

Cohesion and coherence are two factors in the English text. Learners need to make great efforts to develop their proficiency in these two aspects if they desire to be able to reach a good level of competence in their academic writing. Halliday and Hasan (1976) discuss how reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion create cohesion in the text. They indicate that reference, substitution and ellipsis are clearly grammatical; lexical cohesion is, as the name implies, lexical; conjunction is on the borderline of the grammatical and the lexical (p. 303). The conjunction they mentioned refers to not only conjunctions but also adverbs and prepositional phrases with conjunctive functions. They name these adverbs and prepositional phrases conjunctive adjuncts and categorize them into three kinds:

1. adverbs, including:  
simple adverbs ('coordinating conjunctions'), e.g. *but, so, then, next*  
compound adverbs in *-ly*, e.g. *accordingly, subsequently, actually*

- compound adverbs in *there-* and *where-*, e.g. *therefore, thereupon, whereat*
2. other compound adverbs, e.g. *furthermore, nevertheless, anyway, instead, besides*  
prepositional phrases, e.g. *on the contrary, as a result, in addition*
  3. prepositional expressions with that or other reference item, the latter thing  
being (i) optional, e.g. *as a result of that, instead of that, in addition to that*, or (ii) obligatory,  
e.g. *in spite of that, because of that* (p. 231)

Halliday and Hasan (1976) also divide conjunctive items into five categories according to their conjunctive relations: (1) additive, e.g. *and, moreover, also, additionally*; (2) adversative, e.g. *but, however, yet, on the other hand*; (3) causal, e.g. *because, as a result*; (4) temporal, e.g. *first, finally, then*; (5) others, e.g. *after all, now, well* (pp. 242-271). It is interesting to see that conjunction is one of the five kinds of cohesion because conjunction is also considered to be one of the important factors in learners' oral production (Li, 2008). Li points out that conjunction is an indicator of the quality of fluency and complexity of learners' oral production, and it is shown that learners have less ability to produce conjunction in their speaking. To compare with learners' production of conjunction in oral production, how conjunction is used in L2 writing production will be examined in this study.

To capture the ongoing emergence of complexity, fluency, and accuracy in learner language has been one of the challenges of SLA (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Larsen-Freeman examines the oral and written production of five Chinese learners of English in his study. He indicates that the emergence of complexity, fluency, and accuracy can be seen, not as the unfolding of some prearranged plan, but rather as the system adapting to a changing context in which the language resources of each individual are uniquely transformed through use (p. 590). Ortega (2003) evaluates syntactic complexity measures and their relationship to L2 proficiency. He concludes that the relationship between L2 proficiency and the syntactic complexity of L2 writing varied systematically across studies. He also suggests that one-year observation is probably needed for substantial changes in the syntactic complexity of L2 writing to be observed (p. 492).

Shaw and Liu (1998) report the changes in the development of second-language writing. They point out that the major changes were from features of spoken English to those more typical of formal writing. There was less change in complexity of construction or variety of vocabulary (p. 225). In their research, they notice that some of the features which appear more frequently are quite formulaic, and were probably learnt as lexical phrases (p. 246). This corresponds to how formulas function in learners' oral production (Li, 2008).

### **The Study**

This study is an attempt to identify effective writing approaches in learning and teaching through examining the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of learners' L2 writing, as well as the errors and characteristics observed in their writing. I expect that what learners write can lead us towards the development of approaches to learning and teaching in the classroom.

### **Subjects**

The subjects in this study were 20 Japanese undergraduate students studying in a Japanese university. They were between the ages of 18 and 20 years old. At the time when the data for the study was collected, all the subjects were taking a Fundamental English course in the university. Their average score in TOEFL/ITP was 439. The highest score among them was 477; the lowest was 413. Before they came to the university, they had

learnt English for six years in junior and senior high school. As college students, they had 12 hours of English each week studying all the skills of English, but there was not a particular writing course for them to take.

## **Method**

### Data Collection

The data used in the present study was collected from journals submitted by the subjects as homework. The topic of the journal was “My hometown”. They were required to write only one paragraph with 200 words, and dictionaries were allowed to be consulted when writing. Before the homework was assigned, the subjects had taken a workshop on paragraph writing.

### Data Analysis

Measures calculated for all the subjects were fluency, complexity and accuracy (See details below). These measures were mostly the same as those used in other studies (i.e. in Yuan and Ellis (2003), and Larsen-Freeman (2006)). In addition, to determine how conjunctions and adverbs are used in L2 writing, all conjunctions and adverbs produced in the subjects’ journals were marked and counted. I intend to discover how conjunctions and adverbs affect the complexity of learners’ L2 writing since they are indicators of the complexity of oral production (2008, Li). Whether there are any differences in the usage of conjunctions and adverbs between learners’ monologic oral production and writing production, especially the most frequently used conjunctions and adverbs, is another issue to be discussed.

### *Fluency measures:*

Fluency was measured in terms of number of words per t-unit. A T-unit is a minimal terminal unit or independent clause with whatever dependent clauses, phrases, and words attached to or embedded within it (Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

### *Complexity measures:*

1. Grammatical complexity: average number of clauses per t-unit.
2. Vocabulary complexity: To avoid the influence of text length on type-token ratio, Mean Segmental Type-Token Ratio (MSTTR) was used in this study. The subjects’ productions were divided into segments of 50 words, and the type-token ratio of each segment was calculated. Then the mean score of all segments could be obtained (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005).

### *Accuracy measures:*

1. Correct clause: the proportion of error-free clauses to total number of clauses. Error-free clauses are those which do not contain any error in terms of syntax, morphology and lexical choice.
2. Correct verb forms: the percentage of verbs which are used accurately in tense, aspect, modality, and subject-verb agreement (Yuan and Ellis, 2003).

## **Results**

### **Fluency/Complexity/Accuracy**

The means for number of words per t-unit, number of clauses per t-unit, MSTTR, error-free t-unit and correct verb form are shown in Table 1. They reveal the subjects’ proficiency in fluency, complexity and accuracy. The

average number of words per t-unit is 9, which is evaluated as being fundamental level. Subject 6 produced the longest t-units among all the subjects. The shortest average length of t-unit is 6.77, which is close to the t-unit length 6.18 (Table 2) in college-level learners' monologic production (Li, 2008).

The mean for the average number of clauses per t-unit shown in Table 1 is 1.17. Although subject 19 produced the maximum of clauses per t-unit among all the subjects, the average number of clauses per t-unit in all his writing is 1.47. It means he wrote three clauses every two t-units on average, which cannot be assessed as high complexity. On the other hand, subject 4 produced the minimum of the average number of clauses per t-unit. He produced only one clause in all the t-units in his writing. Table 1 also shows the MSTTR in writing in this study is 0.74. Table 2 shows the MSTTR in monologic production in Li's study is 0.70. It is evident that there is no big difference in MSTTR between monologic and writing production.

**Table 1:** Fluency, Complexity, and Accuracy Produced by the Subjects

	Fluency	Complexity		Accuracy	
	Number of words	Number of		Correct clause	Correct verb
	per t-unit	clauses per t-unit	MSTTR	percentage	percentage
S1	9.32	1.10	0.72	0.84	0.90
S2	6.77	1.24	0.78	0.57	0.85
S3	7.64	1.40	0.77	0.60	0.80
S4	7.36	1.00	0.68	0.52	0.88
S5	7.08	1.15	0.81	0.73	0.90
S6	12.33	1.22	0.80	0.72	1.00
S7	7.60	1.04	0.77	0.60	0.85
S8	7.70	1.15	0.77	0.59	0.94
S9	8.15	1.21	0.66	0.55	0.89
S10	9.84	1.05	0.66	0.63	0.96
S11	10.41	1.12	0.69	0.59	0.89
S12	10.14	1.29	0.69	0.86	0.94
S13	9.38	1.08	0.76	0.92	1.00
S14	9.42	1.11	0.69	0.58	0.90
S15	10.48	1.33	0.76	1.00	1.00
S16	7.78	1.04	0.69	0.70	1.00
S17	9.72	1.22	0.81	0.83	1.00
S18	7.08	1.17	0.71	0.71	0.96
S19	12.29	1.47	0.79	0.65	1.00
S20	9.60	1.10	0.78	0.55	0.87
<i>Means</i>	<i>9.00</i>	<i>1.17</i>	<i>0.74</i>	<i>0.69</i>	<i>0.93</i>
<i>SD</i>	<i>1.66</i>	<i>0.12</i>	<i>0.05</i>	<i>0.14</i>	<i>0.06</i>

As we mentioned above, Shaw and Liu (1998) report that learners made changes from features of spoken English to formal writing. However, the data shown in this study are so close to the data in Li's study that I suggest the writing production in this study is similar to speaking production. This means subjects in this study have not finished changing from spoken English to formal writing. How teachers lead learners from spoken English to formal writing is one of the issues we must address in our classroom teaching. In the aspect of accuracy, although the differences between oral production and writing production are not significant, high proficiency is shown in writing compared with speaking. This can be simply explained as speaking involves on-line processing, and writing is an off-line activity.

**Table 2:** Fluency, Complexity, and Accuracy in College Learners' Monologic Production (Li, 2008)

	T-unit Length (Words)	MSTTR	Correct Clause Percentage	Correct Verb Percentage
<i>Means</i>	6.18	0.70	0.57	0.75
<i>SD</i>	1.38	0.06	0.20	0.19

**Table 3:** Examples of errors in the subjects' writing

Error Types	Examples
Missing indefinite articles before noun	<i>Kobe is very big city in Japan.</i>
Missing plural forms of noun	<i>Many tourists from Asian country visit there.</i>
Missing preposition	<i>If you have interest this my hometown,</i>
Tense confusion	<i>I went to Kyoto everyday when I go to high school.</i>
Double verbs	<i>It is means "shoot Niagara" in English. I like go city and spend time.</i>
Wrong verb forms	<i>But my friends does not. I notice the Kyoto people who are walk so slowly. If you will go to Omuta, please search these things.</i>
Wrong subject-verb agreement	<i>There have different shops.</i>
No subjects	<i>In Fukuoka has famous foods of the other.</i>

### Errors

Table 1 also displays the percentages of error-free t-unit and correct verb form. The means for these are 0.69 and 0.93 respectively. Table 3 exhibits the examples of errors found in the subjects' writing. The examples given here can be regarded as being representative of the types of errors that frequently appeared in the subjects'

writing. In accordance to Table 3, we recognize that learners make more mistakes in the use of verbs.

**Conjunctive Items and Adverbs**

Table 4 lists all the conjunctive items and adverbs produced in subjects' writing. *Very* is the most frequently occurring adverb in the students' written work. The same tendency of using *very* has been identified in speaking (Li, 2008). The most frequently used conjunctive item is *but*. Subject 5 used conjunctive items and adverbs most frequently. Subject 20 is the learner who used conjunctive items and adverbs most infrequently.

**Table 4:** The Conjunctive Items and Adverbs Produced by the Subjects

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20
and	1				2					2	1			1						1
as	1									1						1				
but	1	2	1	2	4	2	1		1		3	1		2	2	1	1	1		1
before		2																		
when		1	2		1										2					
if		1	2					1												
once					1															
because					1	2			1	1		2				1	1	1	1	1
however												1								
even if								1												
so	1								4						2					1
also	1			1	1	1	2		1						1		1		1	
easily	1																			
near	1																			
especially		1					1			1					1					
ever		1																		
much		1			1	1		1	1											
very		1	3	5	2	5	3	4		1	2		5	5	1	4	1	1	1	1
well		1								1							1			
often		1							1											
almost			1							1										
more			1									1					1			
finally				1		1														
sometime				1	1															
sometimes																				
again					1															
still					1											2				
most						2						1					1	1		
lovely						1														
utterly						1														



frequently because they were probably learnt as lexical phrases. Accordingly, I expect learners will be able to produce academic written English through the input of academic written formulas. I assume that this can be carried out in the classroom by means of intensive and extensive reading, especially intensive reading. How intensive reading helps learners to improve their writing will be one of the issues for further study.

### **Receptive Grammar and Productive Grammar Stages**

According to Table 3, most of the errors that appeared in the subjects' writing are verb forms. The verb of English sentence is the most important part in terms of context and grammar, and additionally it is the most demanding part for learners to master, especially for learners whose native languages are in complete contrast to English. Articles are another complicated aspect of the language to grasp for learners whose native languages do not have such a concept. Consequently, it is predictable that learners make such types of mistakes. However, the subjects in this study have learnt English for at least six and half years, and their average TOEFL/ITP scores are 439. That is to say they have the knowledge of English grammar, and they are capable of reading those grammar points which they made mistakes on. I suggest this supports the idea that learners' acquisition of grammar can be divided into two stages: receptive grammar and productive grammar stages. Learners may read and understand some particular grammar points correctly or may even complete grammar tests accurately when their knowledge of those grammar points is at the receptive stage, but whether they can produce those grammar points properly in writing will be conditional on whether their knowledge of those grammar points is at the productive stage. I assume that it is not especially demanding for learners to reach the receptive grammar stage though it is extremely challenging for learners to achieve the productive stage. Further studies are needed to prove this hypothesis.

### **Richness of Language**

In this study, I did not identify many conjunctive items and adverbs produced in the subjects' writing. I only noticed that *but* is the most frequently used conjunctive item and *very* is the most frequently produced adverb. A similar tendency is disclosed in learners' monologic production (Li, 2008). This can be taken as further confirmation that subjects' writing in this study is at the *spoken stage*. In addition, I presume that learners' competence of L2 is not the only cause which affects the production of conjunctive items and adverbs. The richness of their native languages may be another cause. Certainly, a considerable amount of further research is required to uncover this mystery.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated college-level L2 English writing competence. The fluency, complexity and accuracy have been presented, and errors that occurred in subjects' writing and features of their writing have been displayed and examined. I also compared the data with learners' competence in monologic production. As a result, I encouraged a large amount of input of intensive reading by means of learning strategy and teaching approach. Through error analysis, I proposed that the process of learners' grammar acquisition can be classified as involving receptive grammar and productive grammar stages. Further studies on effective writing strategies in learning and teaching are suggested. In addition, I expect research to be conducted on how L1 richness influences L2 writing in the aspects of conjunctive items and adverbs in the future.

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