Investigating Cohesive Devices Used in Vietnamese EFL Students' Online English Writings

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Abstract

The rapid development of high technology and the Internet has made potential contributions to English language education for the past few decades. Many linguistic experts have conducted relatively intriguing research on online English writings abroad. Still, there have not been many studies of online English writings in the Vietnamese higher education context so far. This study investigates cohesive devices in one hundred and thirty-five English writings made by EFL students as taking blended-learning or online English writing courses at several universities in Viet Nam for the last five years. It finds three among four types of conjunctions (including coordinating, subordinating, and adverbial conjunctions) used in these online writings remarkably. They all tend to increase in terms of the typed-word quantity and frequency in the second writing version because the initial writing samples are shorter and have fewer complex sentences than the second ones. Besides, a few conjunctions (i.e., so that, because, or although) are sometimes used ungrammatically. Finally, it reveals that the writing topics and the student's English level partly influence using cohesive devices in their online English writings. The more specialized the topic and the higher the learner's English level, the more conjunctions appear and are used harmoniously in the students' online English writings.

Keywords

English writings, online, cohesive devices, conjuctions

JEL Classifications: J11, F43

1. Introduction

The rapid development of high technology and the Internet has made online learning increasingly popular across the globe, especially in the digital era of 4.0. In Vietnam, a few online learning courses have utilized updated technologies to

teach the English language online (Pham, 2020). However, there have not been many English writing courses and no research on blended learning or online English writings made by EFL students in Viet Nam and abroad so far.

Before the year 2019, conducting blended-learning English courses on free online English teaching platforms like Edmodo, Gnomio, Google classroom, or Padlet was optional, and teaching English or other subjects via virtual conferences like Zoom, MSteams, or Google Meeting was not as common as it is in the present time. Therefore, the researcher collaborated with some English teachers at the University of Foreign Language Studies to implement the blended-learning teaching model while teaching some GE courses at several member colleges or universities of the University of Da Nang, Viet Nam.

This study examines the use of cohesive devices in one hundred and thirty-five English essays or writings made by EFL students when taking blended-learning or online English writing courses at several universities in Viet Nam for the last five years.

The researchers set up two following research questions in order to target the aim of the study:

1) What types of cohesive devices are used remarkably in Vietnamese EFL students' online English writings?
2) Is there a significant difference regarding quantity or quality in the use of cohesive devices due to the writing topics or the writer's level of English?

2. Theoretical Bacground

2.1 Online English writing

The networked computer-mediated writing learning brings learners an online writing environment that comprises synchronous and asynchronous writing.

Synchronous writing is written communication in real-time via discussion software on Local Area Networks or Internet chat sites with all participants at their computers simultaneously. According to Richards (2003), a synchronous online environment offers real-time conferencing between students or between students and teachers in a virtual environment, which encourages greater peer involvement and interaction than in non-networked contexts. He indicates that synchronous online English writing classes provide users with synchronous writing discussions, online teacher feedback, and peer conferencing on texts. These communication contexts require specialized writing software such as CommonSpace, Interchange, Google Docs, or Google Class, allowing students to co-construct a discourse simultaneously. In contrast, asynchronous or time-delayed communication using networked computers includes email, newsgroups, and conferencing software. Its vital benefit for L2 writing teachers is that because communication is not synchronous, a text can be composed and modified slower before transmission rather than being co-constructed by participants. This procedure results in more

thoughtful and reflective responses and more participation from less proficient students. Topics change more slowly, and contributions do not come in a jumbled order, so responses are usually more considered, more carefully edited, and more nearly resemble written communication conventions.

2.2 Cohesive Devices

In English, cohesion is an essential feature of academic writing. Cohesion refers to the logical flow and connection in a written text. It is achieved by using cohesive ties or devices to logically link sentences together to flow between ideas from one sentence to the next. Halliday & Hasan (1976) classified cohesive ties into two major categories: grammatical and lexical. The former consists of reference, substitution, and ellipsis, while the latter consists of reiteration and collocation. Conjunction is a borderline case in mainly grammatical but with a lexical component. Therefore, this cohesive tie can sometimes be called a lexicon-grammatical feature. A word or group of words that connect two elements that have equal syntactic importance and grammatical rank is called conjunction. There are four types of conjunctions: coordinating conjunction, subordinating conjunction, correlative conjunction, and conjunctive adverbs, which are classified into two main groups:

- phrase-level conjunctions (including coordinating, subordinating, and correlative conjunctions) with the function of connecting phrases;
- phrase-level conjunctions (including conjunctive adverbs or transition signals) that connect independent clauses.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

The study employed descriptive and comparative research methods using quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate predicative adjectives-one of the important linguistic features in the EFL students' online English writings. The study used the qualitative descriptive method to describe the study context, the characteristics of the study subjects, and the participants. The quantitative descriptive method helped the researchers collect quantifiable information or quantitative data for statistical analysis and hence find the linguistic features remarkably used in the writing samples. The comparative method helped to compare the use of cohesive devices in the students' initial and final writing versions with different English levels.

3.2 The Subject of the Study

The subject of this study is one hundred and thirty-five asynchronous online writings made by both English major and none-English major students taking

different General English courses with different levels (A2-C1) at some member colleges or universities of the University of Da Nang (such as the University of Technology and Science, University of Economics, University of Education, and School of Medicine and Pharmacy) for the last five years. Each of these writings includes two versions: Version one (V1) is the EFL students' initial drafts composed at the synchronous online studying session without using any writing-assistant tools; Version two (V2) is the writings modified with computer writing facilities or some online English writing aids.

All the one hundred and thirty-five writing drafts were put into Corpus 1, and fifty-one V2s were put into Corpus 2. The Table below presents the total words and the mean number of words per sample in each corpus.

Table 1. Total Words and Mean Number of words per sample in Corpus 1 and Corpus 2

	Number of samples	Number of word types	Number of word tokens	Mean number of words per sample
Corpus 1	135	3145	24806	184
Corpus 2	135	3443	28088	208

In order to obtain the research data and carry out the data analysis systematically and effectively, the reachers applied software Antcounc in which some tools like Word List, Cluster and Concordance were used to figure out the number of word types, word tokens, the frequency of conjunctions in the students' online English writing samples.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Coordinating conjunctions

In English grammar, there are seven coordinating conjunction words: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet,* and *so* (FANBOYS).

Thanks to the tool Concordance of software Antcounc, the study found five coordinators with their frequencies and ranks in the students' online English writings (two versions), as described in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Frequency and rank of coordinating conjunctions in Corpus 1 and Corpus 2

.	Coordinating conjunctions	Corpus 1		Corpus 2	
		Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
1.	and	666	1	785	1
2.	but	68	3	47	3
3.	for	1	5	1	5
4.	or	89	2	119	2
5.	so	41	4	49	4
Total		865		1001	

The information in Table 2 showed that coordinating conjunction was a grammatical feature used in the students' online English writings rather frequently. Of the five coordinators, and appeared with the highest mean frequency, five to six tokens per sample. Even several samples (such as [5], [9], [10], [11], [37]) contained more than ten token *and* in each.

Ex:

[5] *CSR is important for companies, nonprofits, and employees alike. ...why CSR is so popular and attractive. ... in-kind donations of products and services, and strong partnerships and publicize their efforts and let the general public know about their philanthropy.... CSR brings nonprofits and companies together, ... more revenue and volunteer time for nonprofits. .... matching gift programs, and volunteer grant programs. ...because customers and partners will value them better if their production and business processes are ... . where employees can thrive and care about people's lives. Consequently, employees feel engaged and productive...   to   consider   social   and   environmental   issues.*
(Corpora 1& 2)

The second most common coordinator was *or* with two hundred- and eight-times occurrence in both corpora. On average, there were about two tokens or every three samples. Coordinators *but* and *so* stood at the third and the fourth positions with the mean frequency of nearly a third token per each sample. However, a few samples sometimes contained up to three tokens *or, but,* or *so* in each.

Ex:

[59] *... the photo can be sent to others via email, messaging, or Bluetooth; or posted on the internet. ... use their mobile phones to awaken them each morning or remind them of an action they need to take ... as well as listening to radio, podcasts, or music.*   (Corpora 1& 2)

[37] *... a difficult choice for many young people, but there are some reasons for people ... Beauty would fade away with time, but intelligence is eternal, ... but a beautiful idiot may not stand firmly in the race of life.*

(Corpora 1& 2)

Coordinator *for* with the function to explain a reason was the least common conjunction because it appeared only once in each entire corpus.

Comparing the frequency of coordinating conjunctions in two corpora, the study found the number of this grammatical features in corpus 2 was considerably higher (about 12%) than that in corpus 2. Among five coordinators, *and* and *or* had the sharp increase in the quantity in the final writing version.

Ex:

[56] *With the advancement of science and technology .. . It has 3 advantages like ... commercial and education purposes. .. With phone, we can take photos and save great moments.*

(Corpus 1)

[56] *With the advancement of science <u>and</u> technology ...... in their work <u>and</u> studying strongly. ..we can access <u>and</u> surf the web to enlarge knowledge <u>and</u> know more information. ... there is much different knowledge from literature, ... fashion <u>and</u> behavior, etc. It helps save our time, money, energy <u>and</u> finish our tasks ...* (Corpus 2)

This is entirely understandable because and is the most basic and common word in any syntactic structure. Besides, a writing V2 was usually longer than a V1 (i.e., the number of words in each writing V2 increased), and hence the frequency of this coordinator became higher.

In investigating three pairs of subcorpora, the researcher found a slight difference in using coordinating conjunctions in the writings made by the three student groups. The coordinators and their frequencies in each group are described in Figure 1 as follows.
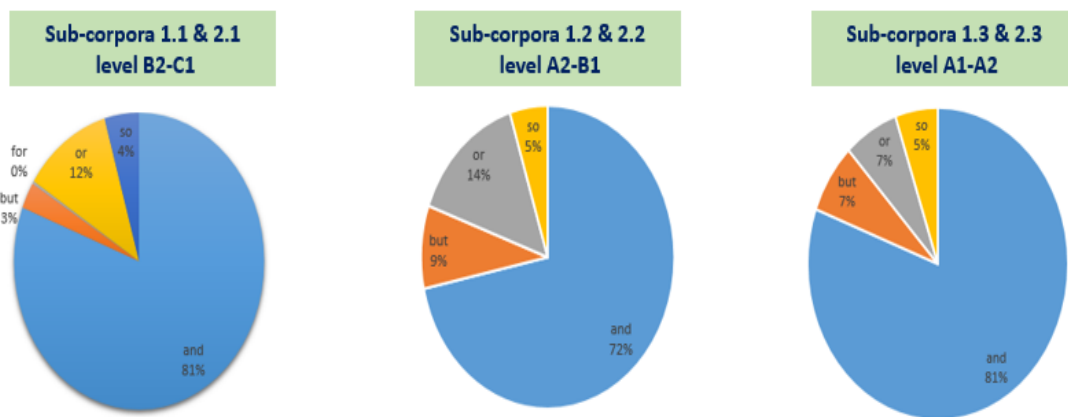

Figure 1. The use of coordinating conjunctions in three sub-corpora

In detail, the first group (levels B2-C1) had the highest number of coordinators (696), the second group (levels A2-B1) contained six hundred and twenty-one, and the rest (levels A1-A2) owned five hundred and forty-nine coordinating conjunctions.

The subcorpora 1.1&2.1 was the only group using all the five coordinators *and, but, for, or,* and *so*. In contrast, the second and third groups contained four of the five coordinators in their writings. Coordinator *and* was used majorly (with frequencies of 72% to 81%), while coordinator *so* was used the least (5%) in each group. Among three groups of students' writings, the second group (levels A2-B1) used this grammatical feature with less bias than the others.

4.2 Correlative Conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions are a kind of tag-team conjunctions. They come in pairs where they are in different places. In English grammar, there are five correlative conjunction words: *both/and, not only/ but also, either/or, neither/nor* and *whether/or*.

Thanks to the tool Concordance of software Antcounc, the study found four correlative conjunctions used in the students' online English writings with the frequencies and ranks presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Frequency and rank of correlative conjunctions in Corpus 1 and Corpus 2

	Correlative conjunctions	Corpus 1		Corpus 2	
		Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
1.	both .... and ...	16	2	20	1
2.	not only..but also ...	17	1	15	2
3.	either ... or...	1	4	1	4
4.	whether ... or.	5	3	5	3
	Total	36		40	

The results in Table 3 implicated that correlative conjunction was not common in the students' online English writings. On average, there was one correlative conjunction in every three samples.

Of them, conjunctions *both/and* and *not only/but also* were employed more frequently than the others. Sometimes, there existed two correlative conjunctions in one sample, such as [30], [95], [34], [57].

Ex:

[30] ... *the smoke flash* not only *exerts one's influence on the smokers* but also *annoys everyone* .... *We can see that it is* not only *bad* but *also harmful.* (Corpora 1& 2)

[34] *The rise in living in rental houses can be seen as positive for* both *financial* and *personal reasons. ... hiring a house could have* both *pros* and *cons to individuals.*   (Corpora 1& 2)

In contrast, *either/or* was rarely used with only one time of occurrence in each entire corpus.

[34] *Employers recruit students and assigned them to a task,* either *individually* or *as a team.*

(Corpora 1& 2)

In comparing the two corpora, the study found a very slight increase in the number of conjuctions in the second writing version. Besides, only correlative conjunction *both/and* generated this increase, the others (i.e. *either/or*, and *whether/o*r) stayed in the same quantity, or decreased a few tokens in the last version.

Ex:

[72] *When working part-time, student can earn money to help a part for their parent. Besides, it is great ideal to improve social skills ....*

(Corpus 1)

[72] *In addition,* both *going to school* and *working part-time while at university train for student's time management skills.*

[84] *Firstly, I don't have any time for my study, I can't pay attention, I spend many times for work part time.*

(Corpus 1)

[84] *I have to share my time for <u>both</u> studying <u>and</u> working, this means that I cannot spend much time and pay most of my attention to my studying any more.* (Corpus 2)

Obviously, the sentences in writings V2 using correlative conjunctions were more logical and coherent for readers than in their writing V1. Even the sentences with correlative conjunctions in the second writing version made the text more academic and stylistic than the first.

In investigating three groups of the students' writings at different levels, the study figured out forty tokens correlative conjunctions in the first group (levels B2-C1), twenty-seven tokens in the second group (levels B2-B1), and thirteen tokens in the third one.
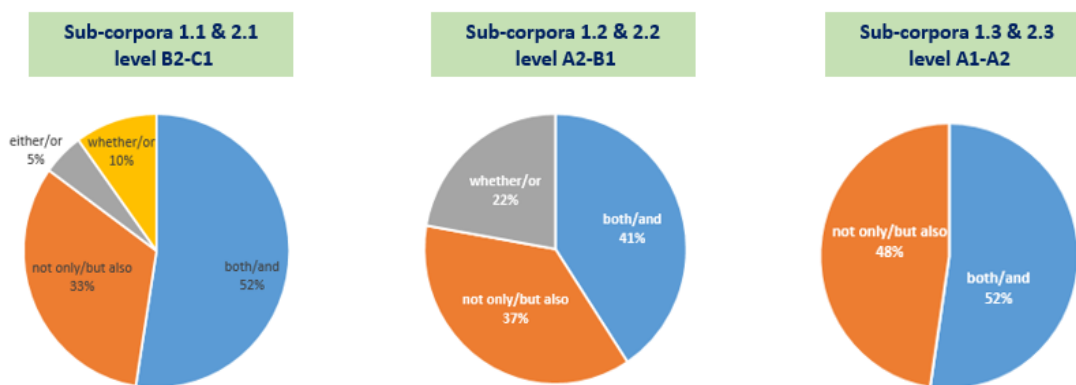

Figure 2. The use of correlative conjunctions in three sub-corpora

In detail, the number of *both/and* and *not only/but also* had the highest and the second highest frequencies, respectively. There were all four correlative conjunctions: *both/and, not only/but also, either/or,* and *whether/or* in the corpora 1.1&1.2. However, there existed three conjunctions: *both/and, not only/but also,* and *whether/or* in corpora 1.1 & 1.2. Moreover, the rest owned only two correlative conjunctions: *both/and* and *not only/but also*. From this fact, the study can conclude that the higher the students' English levels, the more types and number of correlative conjunctions were.

4.3 Subordinating conjunctions

Subordinating conjunctions join two independent clauses together and establish a relationship between them. A subordinating conjunction can signal a cause-and-effect relationship, a contrast, or some other relationship between the clauses. In English grammar, subordinating conjunctions are categorized by different meanings, such as *cause, concession, condition, place,* and *time*.

Tools Concordance and Cluster/N-Gram of software Antcounc helped the study find five groups of subordinating conjunctions in the students' online English writings with the frequencies and ranks described in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Frequency and rank of subbordinating conjunctions in Corpus 1 and
Corpus 2

	Meanings	Subordinating conjunctions	Corpus 1		Corpus 2	
			Freque	Rank	Fre.	Rank
1.	Cause	because, since, so that, in order that	44	3	58	3
2.	Concession	although, whereas, even though	14	5	19	5
3.	Condition	if, unless	67	2	74	2
4.	Place	where, in which, wherever	26	4	33	4
5.	Time	after, before, while, once, when, until, whenever	68	1	77	12
	Total		219		261	

As shown in Table 4, the study found nineteen subordinating conjunctions belonging to five groups with meanings of *cause, concession, condition, place,* and *time* in the students' English online writings. Of them, the group of subordinating conjunctions referring to time (i.e., *after, before, while, once, when, until,* and *whenever*) appeared the most in the two corpora. Following this group was the group 'condition' (i.e., *if* and *unless*), with the frequency slightly lower than the group 'time'; Group 'cause' (including *because, since, so that,* and *in order that*) stood at the third rank. Then, group 'place' (such as *where, in which,* and *wherever*) stood at the fourth position. Finally, group 'concession' stood at the last rank with the lowest frequency in both corpora.

On average, there was about a half subordinating conjunction of time or of condition per each writing sample. However, several samples contained more than three tokens *if* or *when* in each.

Ex:

[72] First*, when they are young, they need to focus on their study ... . Appearance becomes essential only when they need to make a good impression ... when they meet their fiance for the first time, when they meet their boss or when they are about to make a presentation, having a good-looking appearance will be a huge advantage for them. However, such encounters were not common when they were young.* (Corpora 1 & 2)

[48] If *somebody is looking for a job, intelligence will offer considerably more chances.... If someone says that smart people usually do not care about looks, that is probably inexact. ... if a person has good looks, that is all they have.* (Corpora 1 & 2)

The mean frequency of subordinating conjunctions referring to cause was quite lower than those with meaning *time* or *condition*. Sometimes, however, there were more than two tokens *because* in one sample.

Ex:

[36] Computer *games may harm children's characters because they contain much violent content. ... interactions with their family members or neighbors because they are always busy playing computer games ... they should advise their*

children to play sports, <u>because</u> it will teach them how to work ...

(Corpus 2)

In contrast, the other subordinating conjunctions *like since, so that,* and *in order that*, appeared less frequently than *because*. The frequency of these subordinating words was about once every three or four samples.

<u>*Ex*</u>:

[36] Companies *often favour suppliers who have responsible policies <u>since</u> this can reflect how their customers see them.*

(Corpora 1 & 2)

[10] ... *more and more people will get to know the brand <u>in order that</u> the business could appeal to potential customers and build sustainable brand loyalty.*

(Corpora 1 & 2)

Similarly, the subordinating conjunctions referring to place had a considerably low frequency (once every four or five writings). However, there were sometimes more than two tokens *where* in one sample.

<u>Ex</u>:

[2] This *can be achieved by offering pro-bono or similar services <u>where</u> a company can partner with ... to support their public value outcome, <u>where</u> funds or resources may be limited. ... delivers benefits for the community <u>where</u> they once did not.*   (Corpus 2)

Regarding the last group referring to concession, the study revealed that this type of subordinating conjunctions had the lowest frequency among the five groups (once in every eight writing samples) even though several samples owned two tokens *although* in each.

<u>*Ex:*</u>

[2] Although *these problems can be attributed to various reasons, some feasible solutions can be considered .... In conclusion, <u>although</u> a number of reasons can cause this trend, some workable answers can be taken...*

(Corpora 1 & 2)

[23] ... *the media is prohibited from revealing important information, <u>although</u> this is no longer enforceable .... In conclusion, <u>although</u> there are increasing hacking and cyber-attacks on the Internet ...*

(Corpora 1 & 2)

In comparing the two corpora, the study also found that the number of subordinating conjunctions in the final version was relatively higher than in the first one.

<u>*Ex:*</u>

[72] ... <u>*if*</u> *student work in a waiter, they will have to talk and smile very much with customer. Whenever, working part-time also increase health of student. <u>If</u> student work so hard, it will spend a lot of time ...*

(Corpus 1)

[72] *... <u>if </u>students work as waiters, they must learn to communicate and behave in a way that .... University students who have experience would have*

advantages in job hunting <u>once</u> they graduated from college. <u>If </u>students work too much, it will take a lot of time. <u>Although</u> it can adversely affect their studies, it can enable them to acquire skills ...   (Corpus 2)

[74] If *I have to choose between live in the country and live in the city, I will chose live in the city. ... I will have more advantages <u>when</u> I live in the city. ...In the city I will find a job easily. <u>When</u> I feel sadness, I will go there*

*(*Corpus 1)

[74] *<u>If</u> I had to choose between living in the country and living in the city, I would choose to live in the city ... I would have more advantages <u>when</u> I live in the city. <u>Because</u> big companies or international enterprises usually locate in big ... there are shops, supermarkets, and restaurants everywhere to satisfy everyone's demand <u>whenever</u> they need.*   (Corpus 2)

The increase could be caused by the average length of a writing V2 more than the V1's. Moreover, the mean number of complex sentences per writing V2 was also higher than that in each writingV1. Thus, there were more subordinating conjunctions in the final writing version than in the drafts.

However, although subordinating conjunctions seemed to be one of the students' favor grammatical features in their writings, there were some cases in which a few subordinating conjunctions (i.e., *so that, because,* or *although*) were used ungrammatically.

<u>*Ex:*</u>

[22] Besides*, it is necessary to apply the rules for bad students with deterrence <u>so that also show the dignity of the teacher</u>.*

(Corpus 1)

[56] Although<u> *living in different countries on the Earth*</u>*, we can also make friends through it ...*   (Corpus 1)

[57] ... *it is not only bad but also hamful. <u>So that, we must stop now the smoking habit and the cigaretees production to protect our future world</u>.*

(Corpus 1)

[96] Although<u> *poor,*</u>* we still try to rise up and constantly develop.*

(Corpus 1)

These mistakes could come from the habit of using spoken language and the time limit of synchronous online English writing study sections. Then, most of them were corrected in the second version in the asynchronous online studying stage.

[22] Besides*<u>,</u> it is necessary to apply the rules for bad students with deterrence to show the teacher's dignity.*

(Corpus 2)

[56] it *is not only bad but also harmful. <u>Therefore,</u> we must stop now the smoking habit and cigarette production to protect our future world.*

(Corpus 2)

[96] Although<u> *we are poor,*</u>* we still try to rise up and constantly develop.*

(Corpus 2)

In comparing the three pairs of subcorpora, the study found that the second group of writings (subcorpora 1.2 &2.2, level A2-B1) contained the highest number of subordinating conjunctions with 207 tokens (occupying 43% of the total number). The first group (subcorpora 1.1 &2.1, level B2-C1) had a bit lower number with 159 tokens (33%); and the rest owned 114 tokens (occupying 24%) of the total number of subordinating conjunctions in the entire corpora.
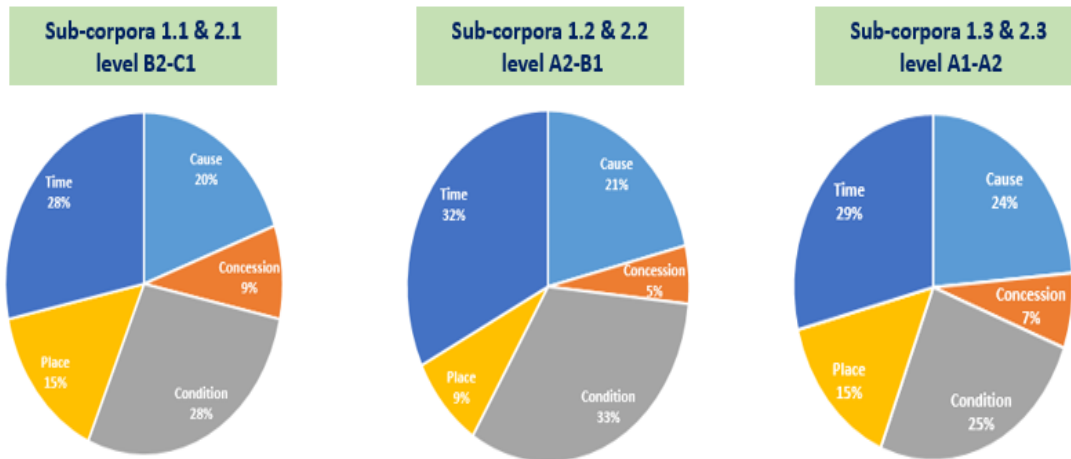

Figure 3. The use of subordinating conjunctions in three sub-corpora

In addition, each writing group had a relatively equal ratio of five subordinating conjunction categories. The subordinating conjunction of condition appeared the most frequency (28% -33%) in the first and the second writing groups, while the subordinating conjunction of time did in the third group (subcorpora 1.3 & 2.3). The subordinating conjunction of cause occupied 20%-24% and stood at the middle position of the five types. The frequencies of subordinating conjunctions of place in the first and third subcorpora were equal (15%). The rest type referring to concession occupied the tiniest space in each writing group with frequencies of 5%-9%.

In short, there were no considerable differences in using subordinating conjunctions in the three groups of students' online English writings despite their topics and the English levels not being the same.

4.4 Adverbial Conjunctions

Adverbial conjunctions are a type of transition words that function as both adverbs and conjunctions. They work as conjunctions because they link independent clauses, which is why they are also named sentence-level conjunctions. In English grammar, adverbial conjunctions are categorized by different meanings, such as *addition, contrast, comparison, example, result, sequence*, and *emphasis*.

Tools Concordance and Cluster/N-Gram of software Antcounc helped the study find six groups of adverbial conjunctions in the students' online English writings with the frequencies and ranks described in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Frequency and rank of adverbial conjunctions in Corpus 1 and Corpus 2

	Meaning	Adverbial conjunctions	Corpus 1		Corpus 2	
			Fre.	Rank	Fre.	Rank
1.	Addition	additionally, besides, in addition, furthermore, moreover	62	2	96	2
2.	Contrast	however, otherwise, in contrast, contrastly, on the other hand, instead, meanwhile, nevertheless	36	4	58	4
3.	Example	for example, for instance	27	5	39	5
4.	Result	hence, thus, as a result, therefore, consequently	51	3	74	3
5.	Sequence	first, firstly, first of all, second, secondly, thirdly, next, nextly, then, finally, last, lastly, after that, last but not least	118	1	131	1
6.	Emphasis	indeed, certainly, in fact, obviously	18	6	14	6
	Total		321		436	

Among the six groups of adverbial conjunctions, the group referring to *sequence* contained the highest number of conjunctions and the highest frequency, whereas the group with the meaning of *emphasis* had the lowest frequency.

In the group *sequence*, there were thirteen conjunctions (including *first, firstly, first of all, second, secondly, thirdly, next, then, finally, last, lastly, after that,* and *last but not least*) with the mean frequency of about one conjunction per writing. Five adverbial conjunctions: *first, firstly, second, secondly,* and *finally*, were employed much more frequently than the others in the groups. Sometimes, there existed three or four adverbial conjunction words in a writing sample.

<u>Ex</u>:

[2] First <u>of all</u>, *corporate social responsibility helps companies enhance relationships with clients....* <u>Second</u>, *keeping social responsibility allows business to act ethically ....* <u>Then</u>, *it helps attract more investors and partners to your company by illustrating that ... .* <u>Last but not least</u>, *the greatest benefit of social responsibility is that it generates a positive public image for companies.*

(Corpus 2)

The group *addition* followed group *sequence* with five conjunction words (*additionally, besides, in addition, furthermore,* and *moreover*) and had the second highest mean frequency (sixty-two times of occurrence in corpus 1, ninety-six times in corpus 2). Three conjunction words *in addition, besides*, and *moreover* were used more frequently in the students' writings than in the rest. Generally, there were about one or two conjunction words with the meaning of addition in one sample. However, a few writing samples had more than four tokens per each.

<u>Ex</u>:

[22] Besides *that, the teaching environment and conditions are increasingly degraded in remote areas ....* <u>Furthermore</u>, *less respect from misbehaving and unruly teenage pupils ... .* <u>Moreover</u>, *it also creates great pressure on teachers to*

be responsible for educating them. In addition, the teacher should apply their teaching methods ... . Moreover, educating personality for teenagers is the most important thing... . Besides, it is necessary to apply the rules for bad students ...

(Corpus 2)

On the other hand, the group referring to *contrast* had a frequency considerably lower than groups *sequence*, *addition*, and *results* even though it had more conjunction words. Among the eight words: *however, otherwise, in contrast, contrastly, on the other hand, instead, meanwhile, and nevertheless*, conjunction word *however* appeared the most frequently in the students' writings and occupied 70% of the total frequency of the group.

Ex:

[40] However*, I think intelligence is more important than looks for young people... . However, with intelligence, each of us can display intelligence in many different ways, in many fields ... . Meanwhile, if you only have looks, when you have problems, you won't always be able to rely on your looks to...*

(Corpus 1)

Especially, even though the group referring to *example* had two conjunction words *for example,* and *for instance*, they were employed in a third students' writings. Sometimes, there were two tokens *for example* and/or *for instance* in the same sample.

Ex:

[10] For *example, building healthcare centers and schools in remote areas provide residents, as a way of CSR intending to protect the environment. For instance, by installing electricity-saving and solar energy equipment, many offices have significantly contributed to reducing global warming...*

(Corpora 1 &2)

Unlike the conjunction group of examples, the group expressing *emphasis* had four conjunction words, such as *indeed, certainly, in fact*, and *obviously*, and appeared in a fifth of the writing samples. Of these four adverbial conjunctions, *in fact* and *indeed* appeared the most frequently. Sometimes, a few samples contained two tokens *in fact* and/or *indeed*.

Ex:

[1] Indeed*, its strong corporate social responsibility framework is essential to build and maintain trust ... In fact, people who have been supported by a company's activities ...*

(Corpora 1 &2)

[21] In *fact, when criminals can get your information like a password or credit card, they tend to steal your money... . In fact, writers release this kind of news in order to get more attention from people who care about it ...*

(Corpus 2)

In comparing the two writing versions, the study found that the number of adverbial conjunctions in the final version was considerably (one and a half times)

higher than in the draft. Except for the group expressing *emphasis*, the five others had more adverbial conjunctions in the final writings than in the initial.

Ex:

[74] *And the job conditions is more better. There are a lot of cinema supermarket, park, Moreover, in the city I have a lot of friends and my friend like living in the city too.*

(Corpus 1)

[74] Moreover*, the working conditions are better. .... Moreover, living condition in the city is really comfortable with modern equipment.*

(Corpus 2)

[31] Secondly*, there are no public transport in rural area or countryside, that is unconvenient for people who want to travel far.*

(Corpus 1)

[31] *Secondly, there is no public transport in rural areas or the countryside ... Consequently, they need to have private cars, but they cannot afford to pay the high tax.*

(Corpus 2)

Like the findings of the other grammatical features in the study, the quantity increases of adverbial conjunctions referring to *emphasis* in the second writing version was mainly caused by their length. As mentioned in chapter three above, the mean total number of words in the final version was considerably higher than in the initial. Furthermore, because the students had more time to edit their writings with English writing assistant tools during the asynchronous studying sessions, they replaced repeated conjunction words with other synonyms. And as a result, this could make the final texts more stylistic and less boring than the first. In comparing three pairs of subcorpora, the study found that both writing groups at levels B2-C1 and A2-B1 used six adverbial conjunction types while the rest used five. The writing group levels A2-B1 (subcorpora 1.2 & 2.2) used this grammatical feature most frequently, with three hundred and thirty-two adverbial conjunctions (occupying 48% of the total frequency). The writing group levels B2-C1 (subcorpora 1.1 &2.1) had slightly lower frequency with three hundred and twenty conjunctions (occupying 44% of the total frequency). The rest owned seventy-two conjunctions and hence had the lowest frequency (8%) among the three writing groups.
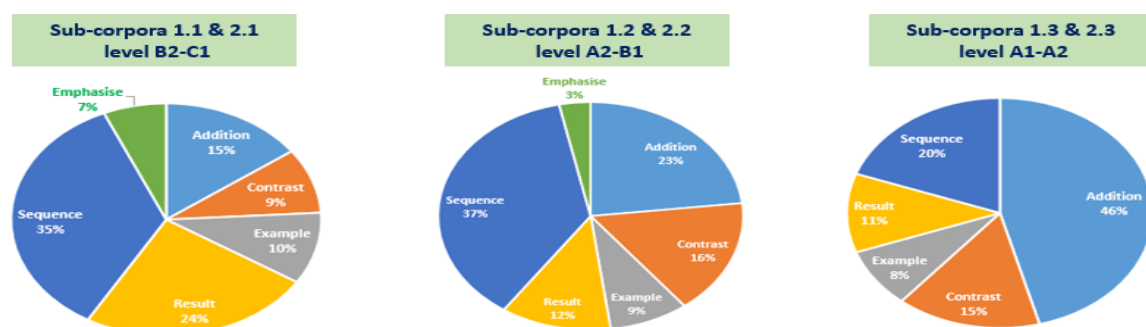

Figure 4. The use of adverbial conjunctions in three sub-corpora

In detail, using the types of adverbial conjunctions in subcorpora 1.1& 2.1 and subcorpora 1.2 & 2.2 was similar. In both writing groups, conjunctions of *sequence* were the students' favorite type, with a frequency of 35%-37%. Next, the conjunctions referring to *addition* and *result* were used quite frequently (15% -245%) in these two writing groups. The frequencies of conjunctions expressing *example* were nearly equal: 9% in the group at levels A2-B1, and 10% in the one with levels B2-C1. In addition, the conjunctions expressing *emphasis* occurred the least (7% and 3%) in both subcorpora. There were three reasons for the similarity in using adverbial conjunctions in the two writing groups: Firstly, the genre of all the writings in the two groups was argument or opinion essays; Secondly, the topics of these essays had some relevant content such as advantages and/or disadvantages of some social issues, technology, studying, jobs, lifestyle; Thirdly, most of the students were being at English levels B1-B2 while composing these writings. And as a result, there was a significant similarity in choosing and using adverbial conjunctions in these two writing groups.

On the other hand, the writings in subcorpora 1.3& 2.3 used adverbial conjunctions the least frequently and differently compared with the others. The adverbial conjunction type primarily used in this writing group was the type of *addition* (with 33 tokens occupying 44%). The type of *sequence* and *contrast* stood at the second (20%) and third (15%) ranks, respectively. The least common type in this group was the type of *example* with three tokens *for example*, three tokens *for instance*, and occupied 8% of the total frequency. This was because the writings in subcorpora 1.3 & 2.3 were not argument or solution essays but narratives with topics of describing a living place, thanking letters, or job application letters. So, the students seldom used adverbial conjunctions referring to *result* and *example*. In addition, the English level of the authors was low (A1-A2); hence they tended to use common adverbial conjunctions *besides, moreover, however* than other conjunctions of the same type.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates cohesive devices in one hundred and thirty-five English writings made by EFL students as taking blended-learning or online English writing courses at several universities in Viet Nam for the last five years. It finds three among four types of conjunctions (including coordinating, subordinating, and adverbial conjunctions) used in these online writings remarkably. They all tend to increase in terms of the typed-word quantity and frequency in the second writing version because the initial writing samples are shorter and have less complex sentences than the second ones. Besides, a few conjunctions (i.e., so that, because, or although) are sometimes used ungrammatically. Finally, it reveals that the writing topics and the student's English level partly influence using cohesive devices in their online English writings. The more specialized the topic and the higher the learner's English level, the more conjunctions appear and are used harmoniously in the students' online English writings.

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