A Study of Chinese University Students' Usage of Logical Connectors in English Argumentations, Descriptions and Narrations

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1 Introduction

The ability of constructing cohesive English texts is gaining academic importance for Chinese learners of English, especially when they compete for further oversea education and employment in the globalized world (Liu & Braine, 2005). However, Chinese English learners usually find it hard to organize a cohesive text, in which the difficulties normally occur at the discourse level, such as the inadequate use of logical connectors (Zhang, 2000). Among all semantic categories of English logical connectors, adversative, causal and temporal types are found to be the most difficult ones for Chinese learners to manipulate (Ho & Waugh, 2008).

Over the past two decades, many researchers have studied the patterns of logical connectors (Altenberg & Tapper 1998; Bolton, Nelson & Hung 2002; Field & Lee Mee Oi 1992; Narita, Sato, & Sugiura 2004; Shea 2009) through comparisons of logical connectors in English samples written by L2 students and native-English speakers. The findings revealed two patterns of connective usage exhibited by L2 learners that distinguished them from native-English writers. These previous studies have provided a starting point for further rigorous investigations into the reasons behind the patterns, particularly a space for a qualitative investigation into the innate process of L2 learners while using logical connectors in English writing.

2 Literature Review
2.1 Studies on Logical Connectors

Quantitative studies have taken dominance in the exploration of connective features in L2 learners' English texts (Castro, 2004; Dueñas, 2007, 2009; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Kiany & Nejad, 2001; Kormos, 2011; Mohamed & Omer, 2000; Mohamed-Sayidina, 2010; Ramos, 2010; Wang & Cho, 2010; Zhang, 2000). The researchers focused on comparison of logical connectors in English texts produced by L2 writers and native-English speakers and found that L2 learners presented the usage of logical connectors in two patterns that distinguished them from native-English writers: (1) for a given syntactic position X, an informal logical connector LC_A was used by L2 writers when a formal connector LC_B could be preferred by native writers of English, and (2) for a given number of words/sentences/T-units and a given genre, frequencies of logical connectors in L2 writers' English texts were higher than that in native-English writers' texts.

2.1.1 The First-Pattern Usage of Logical Connectors

Logical connectors in L2 writers' English texts often displayed an informal and speech-like nature. Chen (2006) noticed an extensive usage of informal logical connectors in Taiwan students' essays and asserted that the non-native-English writers were probably unaware of stylistic appropriateness of logical connectors. Li (2009) also found a high occurrence of simple conjunctive items in Japanese students' English essays, which made the conjunctive patterns in the written discourse similar with those in the spoken one. The findings were consistent with those in Liu and Braine's (2005) investigations of argumentations written by Chinese first-year university students. They found that simple items such as *so* were much more preferable in Chinese students' essays than the complex alternations learned at a later stage (e.g. *on the country* and *nevertheless*).

Reynolds (2002), however, did not report a spoken feature of logical connectors in L2 writers' (Spanish, Vietnamese and some East Asians) writing samples. Rather, he

presented a mixture of formal and informal connective patterns in either oral or written style texts, suggesting that L2 learners had no awareness of stylistic properties and (in)formality of connective usage.

2.1.2 The Second-Pattern Usage of Logical Connectors

The second pattern in L2 writers' texts was concerned with redundant connective usage. Bolton, Nelson and Hung (2002) compared the occurrence of logical connectors in texts written by Hong Kong and British university students as well as native-English professional writers. Both Hong Kong and British students used more logical connectors than professional writers did; however, the overuse was much greater among the Hong Kong students.

Narita, Sato and Sugiura (2004) compared logical connectors in argumentative essays from the Japanese component of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) with texts from the Louvain Corpus of Native-English Essays (LOCNESS). The findings indicated that Japanese English learners tended to use a larger amount of enumerative, additive and appositive logical connectors than their American counterparts did. Narita, Sato and Sugiura took a further step to compare their data with those in three previous studies conducted by Granger and Tyson (1996), Altenberg and Tapper (1998) and Milton (2001), which respectively focused on connective usage in French, Swedish and Chinese learners' English essays. This comparison among L2 learners with different L1 backgrounds revealed that, the average frequency of logical connectors, particularly of additive and appositive categories, was considerably high across the English texts composed by the four groups of English learners.

In this line of research, the outcomes are quantitatively desirable to confirm findings of early comparative explorations in which connective frequencies in L2 writers' English texts are often perceived as remarkably high in comparison with native-English speakers' norms (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Field & Yip 1992; Milton & Tsang 1993). The comparative scope can be transcended by incorporating texts composed by L2 English learners in their L1 into empirical design. The comparative findings between the English texts written by L2 learners and the texts written in their L1 may verify the existence of L1 influence, which is a manifestation of the interplay of L1 and L2 in writing process.

2.2 Research Gaps

Three research gaps have arisen from the existing literature. First, the previous studies have made abundant achievements on the connective patterns demonstrated in L2 learners' English texts, which, in turn, require further study to provide explanations for the phenomena. The two patterns of connective usage aforementioned in section 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 offer glimpses into the processes of L2 learners' minds that may not be accessible from the sole study of English writing samples.

Additionally, incorporating texts produced by English learners in their L1 into comparison allows for a possibility of looking at connective patterns in L2-learner-created English texts from the perspective of L1 influence and L1-and-L2 interaction. As language learners tend to utilize both L2 and L1 linguistic repertoires of connective devices associated with the specific L2 writing task demands (Kang, 2005), the manner in which the linguistic systems process in mind can be different

from that in an L1 writing task with much less participation of another language. The unevenly utilized linguistic systems in L2 and L1 writing tasks could be presented in a real-time written production which will supplement the quantitative data from the early studies.

A third gap is concerned with a methodological issue—genre. Genres distinguish themselves from one another in terms of the lexical and grammatical choices as well as communicative functions in accordance with topics and writers' purposes (Thornbury, 2005). Logical connectors of one particular genre tend to be different from those of others. For instance, descriptions and argumentations require different rhetoric patterns, in that the former is built on information supplement and interpretation whilst the latter is on reasoning and standpoints verification. This results in more consequence and contrast logical connectors such as *because of* and *but* in argumentations than those in descriptions (Ramos, 2010). The logical connectors conventionally situated in narrations also differs those in argumentations (Husain & Wahid, 2008). In this light, the three basic genres—argumentation, description and narration (Tankó, 2004)—were investigated in the study.

Two research questions have been framed.

1) What mental processes do Chinese EFL learners exhibit upon adoption of adversative, causal and temporal logical connectors while writing English and Chinese argumentations, descriptions and narrations?

2) What factors do affect Chinese EFL learners' choice of adversative, causal and temporal logical connectors while writing English argumentations, descriptions and narrations?

To answer the research questions, the following research methodology was adopted.

3 Methodology
3.1 Participants
Ten Chinese third-year undergraduates from seven disciplines of Henan University in Mainland China participated in the study. All students, four males and six females, were native Chinese speakers, aged between 20 to 23. The students had 7 to 12 years of English-learning experience in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context and none of them had stayed in English-speaking countries before. All the students had passed the College English Test 4 (CET 4[1]).

3.2 Data Collection Procedure
3.2.1 Phase One: Collection of Demographic Information, Warming-Up and Preliminary Interviews
One day before the study, the researcher asked each participant to fill out a form concerning demographic information, and conducted a warming-up session with each participant to familiarize them with the think-aloud method. After the introductory phrase, the researcher played a think-aloud recording of a student thinking aloud while writing on an English topic. Then each participant were asked to practice the think-aloud technique on a writing topic which was different from the three assigned topics they would write on in the study. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was subsequently conducted to acquire a better understanding of the

Chinese students' English learning history and experiences.

3.2.2 Phase Two: Three English Writing Tasks, Concurrent Think Aloud and Retrospective Reports and Interviews

Three English writing tasks were assigned for the participants: an argumentation, a description and a narration. The participants were asked to do each writing task and concurrent think aloud individually within 30 minutes. They could stop anytime when they completed the task or asked for extra time if they were unable to finish during the given time frame. The researcher observed the participants doing the writing tasks with concurrent think aloud in an invisible place to make sure that the participants continually verbalized thoughts coming into minds. The researcher did not interfere with the writing process or provide neither explanations nor assistance and the participants were not allowed to raise any questions in the middle of the think aloud but continuously verbalized the flow of thoughts. Whenever they fell into silence for any length of time, the researcher would prompt them to speak out loud by saying 'keep talking'.

Retrospective reports were carried out immediately after each think-aloud session. With the text that the participant had written as a stimulus, the researcher asked them to report all they could remember about their thinking upon selecting each logical connector at the moment of writing. Subsequently, the researcher conducted retrospective interviews in which questions concerning possible reasons for choosing a specific or a specific type of logical connectors were raised, particularly when the information that the participant had provided in the concurrent think aloud was obscure. Questions about the effects that the different natures of the writing tasks had on the selection of logical connectors were asked as well.

3.2.3 Phase Three: Three Chinese Writing Tasks, Concurrent Think Aloud and Retrospective Reports and Interviews

The participants were asked to do the same three writing tasks in Chinese with concurrent think aloud after a two-week interval. The procedures were similar to those of the English ones. Before the actual think-aloud, each participant listened to a recording of a student doing think aloud while writing a Chinese text and then practiced the think-aloud technique on a Chinese writing topic. Then, they were asked to complete each task within 30 minutes so that the data elicited from the Chinese writing tasks were comparable with those from the English ones.

Immediately after each think aloud session, with the Chinese texts the participant had just written as stimuli, the researcher asked the participant to report all s/he could remember about the thinking upon adoption of each Chinese logical connector and possible reasons for adopting it. Further, with the English texts the participant had written two weeks ago as stimuli, questions on reasons for employing a different/similar pattern of logical connectors in English and Chinese texts were asked.

In all the three phases, the participants were allowed to speak in the language most comfortable for verbalization to ensure that they acted naturally during the study. The whole sessions were audio- and video-recorded.

3.3 Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed verbatim after each meeting to facilitate the analysis of data. The transcription is based on the pin yin system (check the system for Putonghua). The conventions for transcriptions adopted in the study are based on the system employed by Murphy and Roca de Larios (2010) for their verbal data. Modifications were made when necessary. The conventions are listed as follows:

> Normal font: the think-aloud talk by the participants
> Boldface: the texts being written
> Underlined segments: linguistic choice being focused

The first step of analysis was to extract the English adversative, causal and temporal logical connectors from the Chinese writers' English texts. Various items that share the same lexical form but function as other parts of speech were excluded. For example, *first* can be used as a logical connector and an adjective as well. The *first* which is served as an adjective are excluded from the final list.

Likewise, Chinese logical connectors signaling adversative, causal and temporal relations between linguistic units (Lin, 2001; Yip & Rimmington, 2004) were extracted. Chinese logical connectors work either individually or in pairs with another logical connector (e.g. 因為 yīnwèi 'because'…所以 suǒyǐ'therefore') or with a conjunctive, an adverb in the form of monosyllables (e.g. 雖然 suīrán 'though'…卻 què 'but') (Yip & Rimmington, 2004). These co-occured items were extracted as one logical connector.

When the work of extraction was finished, the verbal data were analyzed in a three-step process. First, the transcripts were read through and the protocols that indicated any possible mental activities exhibited by the writers to make sense of logical connector selection were marked and grouped. Next, a coding system for the mental activities concerning logical connector usage was developed. Finally, the researcher assigned the appropriate labels in the established list to the mental processes identified in the protocols.

4 Finings and Discussions

4.1 Range of Logical Connectors in English and Chinese Texts

Thirty English texts and thirty Chinese texts were produced by the Chinese students. The logical connectors extracted from the English and Chinese texts are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: The logical connectors extracted from the English texts produced by the Chinese participants

	No.	Adversative	Causal	Temporal
Argumentation	1	*even though*	*cause*	*then*
	2	*but*	*because*	*first of all*
	3	*while*	*so*	*when*
	4	*although*	*therefore*	*while*
	5	*on the other hand*	*thus*	*firstly*
	6	*however*	*accordingly*	*secondly*
	7			*thirdly*

	No.	Adversative	Causal	Temporal
	8			*at the same time*
	9			*at first*
Description	1	*but*	*because*	*after*
	2	*however*	*so that*	*when*
	3		*for*	*while*
	4		*So*	*before*
	5			*as*
	6			*then*
	7			*first*
	8			*next*
	9			*last but not the least*
	10			*first of all*
	11			*at first*
Narration	1	*but*	*because*	*when*
	2	*even though*	*so as to*	*before*
	3	*though*	*so*	*at last*
	4	*however*	*thus*	*then*
	5		*because of*	*after*
	6		*so that*	*as*
	7		*For*	

Table 2: The logical connectors extracted from the Chinese texts produced by the Chinese participants

	No.	Adversative	Causal	Temporal
Argumentation	1	但是 dànshì 'but'	因此 yīncǐ 'therefore'	首先 shǒuxiān 'first'
	2	儘管...但是... jǐn guǎn 'though'…dànshì 'but'…	因而 yīn'ér 'therefore'	在...時 zài…shí 'when'
	3	但 dàn 'but'	以至於 yǐzhìyú 'therefore'	當...時候 dāng…shíhòu 'when'
	4	可是 kěshì 'but'	所以 suǒyǐ 'therefore'	第一 dìyī 'first'
	5		因為 yīnwèi 'because'	其次 qícì 'then'
	6		因 yīn 'because'	再者 zàizhě 'then'
	7		之所以...是因為... zhīsuǒyǐ 'therefore'…shìyīnwèi 'because'…	

Description	1	*但是* dànshì 'but'	*由 於* yóuyú 'because'	*之 後* zhīhòu 'after'
	2		*所 以* suǒyǐ 'therefore'	*然 後* ránhòu 'then'
	3			*... 時候* ...shíhòu 'when'
	4			*首 先* shǒuxiān 'first'
	5			*在 ... 時* zài…shí… 'when'
	6			*其次* qícì 'then'
	7			*最 後* zuìhòu 'finally'
Narration	1	*即 使 ... 但 是 ...* jǐshǐ 'though'… dànshì 'but'…	*因 此* yīncǐ 'therefore'	*的時候* deshíhòu 'when'
	2	*雖 然 ... 但 ...* suīrán 'though'… dàn 'but'…		*當 ... 的 時 候* dāng…deshíhòu 'when'
	3	*然 而* rán' ér 'but'		*當 ... 時 候* dāng…shíhòu 'when'
	4	*儘管...但...* jǐn guǎn 'though'… dàn 'but'…		*... 的 時候* ...deshíhòu 'when'
	5	*但是* dànshì 'but'		*於是乎* yúshìhu 'then'
	6	*但* dàn 'but'		*當 ... 時* dāng…shí 'when'
	7			*於 是* yúshì 'then'
	8			*然 後* ránhòu 'then'

4.2 Frequency of Logical Connectors

The overall frequencies of logical connectors were calculated (Tables 3-5). The figures exemplify that the occurrences of the logical connectors per 100 words in the English argumentations, descriptions and narrations are relatively higher than those in Chinese texts. An L1-transfer explanation for the overused pattern appears to be ruled out by the fact that the frequencies of logical connectors in the Chinese writers' English texts are approximately three times more than those in the Chinese texts.

Table 3: Frequencies of logical connectors per 100 words in argumentations produced by the Chinese participants

	English argumentations	Chinese argumentations
Number of words/characters	2,244	3,140
Number of connectors	69	32
Number of connectors per 100 words	3	1

Table 4: Frequencies of logical connectors per 100 words in descriptions produced by the Chinese participants

	English descriptions	Chinese descriptions
Number of words/characters	2,395	3,084
Number of connectors	74	25
Number of connectors per 100 words	3	1

Table 5: Frequencies of logical connectors per 100 words in narration produced by the Chinese participants

	English narrations	Chinese narrations
Number of words/characters	2,545	3,292
Number of connectors	85	31
Number of connectors per 100 words	3	1

4.3 Findings from English Writing Tasks with Concurrent Think Aloud and Retrospection

Four mental activities were elicited from the Chinese students' English think-aloud protocols. They were: (1) the writer stated a Chinese logical connector before selecting an English one, (2) the writer restated the Chinese meaning after writing down an English logical connector, (3) the writer stated a grammatical issue upon the selection of an English logical connector, and (4) the writer selected one English logical connector out of multiple availabilities.

Over the four categories, the most frequently occurred mental activity revealed across the three genres was "the writer stated a Chinese logical connector before selecting an English one" (Category 1) (51.7%). For example,

"然後是，儘管，儘管，although, though, though, 雖然，儘管，even, even if, even though,
even, even though, Though, t-h-o-u-g-h, though, I had prepared, p-r-e, prepare,

p-a-r-e, I had

prepared, prepared, prepared, prepared the class, um, the class, um." (Chinese participant 9,

verbal protocol, English argumentation)

*"**ranhou shi, jin guan, jin guan,** although, though, though, **sui ran, jin guan,** even, even if, even though, even, even though, <u>Though</u>, t-h-o-u-g-h, though, I had prepared, p-r-e, prepare, p-a-r-e, I had prepared, prepared, prepared, prepared the class, um, the class, um."*   *(Pinyin transcription)*

"Then, although, although, although, though, though, **although, although,** even, even if, even though, even, even though, <u>Though</u>**,** t-h-o-u-g-h, though, I had prepared, p-r-e, prepare, p-a-r-e, I had prepared, prepared, prepared, prepared the class, um, the class, um.   (English translation)

As shown in the example, the writer spoke 然後是，儘管，儘管: *ránhòu shì, jǐn guǎn, jǐn guǎn*, 'then, although, although' before she came up with the English logical connector *though*. The writer fostered the connective organization through the Chinese train of thought and reflected on the L1 knowledge before making decision on the choice of a logical connector which she thought was an English equivalence of the Chinese 儘管: *jǐn guǎn,* 'although'. The second-highly-ranked mental activity took place when the writers restated the Chinese meaning after writing down an English logical connector (Category 2) (36.8%).

In retrospective reports and interviews after the English writing tasks, three factors that affected the selection of logical connectors were identified. They are (1) influence of Chinese, (2) logical relationships between two linguistic unites, and (3) selecting one logical connector out of multiple availabilities.

Figures of the three factors reveal that the second one—logical relationships between the two linguistic units—ranks the top (53.8%) across the three text types. It indicates that the Chinese learners were aware of and able to use the logical and contextual resources available to situate logical connectors to fit the intended meaning in a given context, a factor which took superiority in their L1 writing process as revealed. However, when the third factor was further divided into four sub-classes, the situation became complicated. Whenever the writers had to make a choice among multiple availabilities, the four component factors including (1) avoiding repetition, (2) using the first logical connector coming into the head, (3) making the required word count, and (4) using a complex item, would compel them to select one item which they thought should be used in the situation rather than the logical connector which optimally fitted the logicality. Although the Chinese students might sense the importance of the logical link brought out by logical connectors, they might not achieve a natural process of utilizing them when the four component factors interfere.

4.4 Findings from Chinese Writing Tasks with Concurrent Think Aloud and Retrospection
In the Chinese witting tasks and concurrent think aloud, although few mental activities concerning the selection of logical connectors were revealed, the participants confessed two reasons for the selection of a particular Chinese logical connector in the retrospective reports and interviews: (1) showing a logical

relationship and (2) being influenced by the second language.

The writers utilized logical connectors in a way to achieve textual logicality when writing in their first and second language. Rather, the extent to which the writers' internal activities associated with realization of logicality in L1 and L2 writing are inconsistent. In addition of logicality, one other dominant concern of the Chinese writers when writing in English is grammatical constrains. The divergences exhibited in L1 and L2 writing seem to indicate that the logical construction of texts and selection of logical connectors are implemented subconsciously and automatically when writers are writing in their first language. This explains why the participants did not mention reasons for choosing logical connectors in the think aloud, but did so in retrospection when they were required to recall what they were thinking. In L2 writing process, problems concerning the usage of logical connectors often occurred, with sources interwoven in the solutions being grammar rules, experiences, etc. rather than the discourse and rhetorical requirements.

5 Conclusion

The internal processes revealed in the concurrent think aloud and retrospective reports interpret the mental activities involved in the process of writing; the data collected from the retrospective interviews offer explanations and evidence for the mental activities in the meaning-constructing process. The participants reported that in the retrospective interviews, when being asked for reasons of adopting a specific or a specific type of logical connectors in the texts composed in their L1, the dominant concern was with the logicality they were developing and the formality they were creating. Rather, the participants confirmed a different set of factors in L2 writing such as the exertion of L1, grammar rule and pervious learning and writing experiences on L2 writing which addressed a wider interpretation of the idea-organization in the process of L2 writing.

Writing is not only about a growth of grammatical sense, but also a concern of social convention, without which writing will not take place. It is the English teachers' responsibility to teach learners not only the usage of logical connectors, but also the convention, i.e. the social context in which they are supposed to be utilized. If the instruction of convention is not part of the pedagogy, L2 leaners may be disadvantaged in improving with skills of utilizing connective devices.

Notes:
1. CET 4 is the national English level test in Mainland China. Getting at least a passing grade is one requirement for non-English-major undergraduates to get a graduation certificate.

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