

# A Study on Semantic Relations of “and” Used in Chinese EFL Learners’ Narrative Writing

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Studies on conjunctions used by Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners over the past ten years have focused mainly on the use of conjunctions in argumentative writing, and there is little empirical work on conjunction “and” in narrative writing. The purpose of this paper is to explore the characteristics of the semantic relations of “and” used in the narrative writing of Chinese EFL learners from the perspective of text coherence. Through analysis of narrative writing of 29 sophomores, this study investigates the characteristics of semantic relations expressed by the conjunction “and” and the differences in the use of semantic relations of “and” between high-score and low-score writing. The results show different frequencies of the use of semantic relations of “and”. ELF learners prefer to use the term “and” to build progressive relation and parallel relation more than any other relation. Both high-score and low-score writing use a sizable number of “and” to build progressive relation and parallel relation, but high-score writing obviously contains more guiding relations and fewer supplementary relations. These findings have some pedagogical implications for teaching transitions.

*Keywords:* Cohesion Theory, conjunction “and”, ELF learners, semantic relation

## Introduction

In China, “and” is taught at the very early stage of English learning in class. However, students do not have a comprehensive understanding of the conjunction “and”, leading to difficulties in using “and” in writing. Analyzing the characteristics of the use of conjunction “and” can provide guidance for second language writing and learning. Although a few studies on the use of conjunctions involves the use of “and” (Pan & Feng, 2004; Han & Gardner, 2021), there is little research targeted to the conjunction “and”. This study addresses this gap by examining the characteristics of the use of conjunction “and” by Chinese ELF learners so as to provide guidance to teachers to teach this conjunction effectively.

## Literature Review

### Textual Cohesion and the Role of Conjunctions

Cohesion has been defined as the relations of meanings in the text, and at the same time it helps independent elements integrate into a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), there are five

cohesive devices: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Conjunctions, which exist just for joining independent language units together, are widely used in writing to make texts coherent.

Some studies indicated that there is a positive correlation between the correct use of cohesive devices and the quality of writing (Golparvar & Abolhasani, 2022; Kim & Crossley, 2018). Studies (Appel & Szeib, 2018; Han & Gardner, 2021) have also explored the features of the use of some conjunctions by Chinese EFL learners. Appel and Szeib (2018) found that Chinese EFL learners tend to overuse “however”, while Han and Gardner (2021) found that when matching texts from Chinese and English students by discipline and genre, there is no significant difference in the total number of conjunctions.

### **Research on Conjunction “and”**

The conjunction “and” is the most frequently used conjunction in the writing of Chinese EFL learners (Pan & Feng, 2004). As the simplest form of conjunction, “and” could build two kinds of logic relations: one is structural relation (coordinate), the other is cohesive relation (additive) (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Research has found that young EFL learners frequently use “and” in their writing, but most of their writing, full of “and”, is considered incoherent because they fail to use “and” to build cohesive relation appropriately (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The complex functions of the conjunction “and” confuse EFL learners. According to Wang and Yang (2014), the conjunction “and” is not placed at the beginning of a sentence generally unless a special purpose is contained in this sentence. However, some studies have reported that the frequency of “and” placed at the beginning of sentences in Chinese EFL learners’ writing is more than twice that of native speakers (Pan & Feng, 2004), in which some “and” can be placed at the beginning of sentences ineffectively.

In summary, the findings of these studies have revealed some aspects of the use of the conjunction “and”. However, previous research on the conjunction “and” focused mainly on the structural relations built by “and”, with little attention paid to the semantic relations built by it. This paper aims to explore the feature of the semantic relations of “and” used in Chinese EFL learners writing from the perspective of text coherence.

## **Method**

### **Research Questions**

In order to better understand the use characteristics of the conjunction “and”, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) What semantic relations are expressed by “and” in EFL students’ narrative writing?
- (2) What are the differences in the use of “and” between high-score writing and low-score writing?

### **Data**

The data is comprised of 29 narrative essays by second-year English majors enrolled in a writing course at a comprehensive university. All participants have learned English for 10 years and they were asked to write a narrative essay on one of their important experiences in no less than 500 words.

### **Extraction of “and”**

AntConc and manual extraction were used to identify all the “and” and the semantic relations of “and” in writing. The Concordance and File View functions of AntCont were used in this part to extract all “and” in the corpus because automatic extraction is feasible, simple and convenient when the content, which needs to be

extracted, is single and clear. However, the semantic relations of “and” could not be analyzed by software because they could not be presupposed. Therefore, manual extraction, based on careful reading of all writing, was used to find the semantic relations of “and”. The full context, which contains “and”, was taken into account to analyze the semantic relations of “and”, as the context has an impact on the choice of conjunctions (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

### Analysis

According to research questions, this study was carried out in two steps. First, the frequency of “and” used to build each semantic relation was analyzed. Second, the differences between high-score writing and low-score writing were analyzed.

Upon extracting all the “and”, each “and” was assigned a semantic relation based on the classification of semantic relations of “and” introduced by Pan and Feng (2004). Then the proportion of “and” used for different semantic relations was calculated. Table 1 shows the classification and the definition of the semantic relations of “and” introduced by Pan and Feng (2004).

Table 1  
*Classification of Semantic Relations of “and” (Pan & Feng, 2004)*

	Semantic relation	Definition
1	Supplementary relation	Explain the previous sentence or sentence group
2	Causal relation	Indicate the causal relationship between sentences
3	Adversative relation	Expound two opposite propositions
4	Comparison relation	Compare the similarities or differences of propositions
5	Progressive relation	Describe the development of a proposition or an action
6	Guiding relation	Lead to a new topic or concept in the text
7	Explanatory relation	Supplement reasons for the former proposition
8	Parallel relation	Connect sentences that explain the same proposition
9	Summary relation	Lead to comments or summaries of the preceding sentences

Two experienced writing instructors assessed the quality of each essay. The interrater reliability between the two assessors was acceptable ( $r = 0.82$ ) and the mean score of the two raters was recorded as the final score of each essay. After that, the essays were divided into high-score writing (HS) and low-score writing (LS) according to the scores. The high-score group includes 14 essays, which score 8.7 or higher, and the low-score group contains 15 essays, which score less than 8.7. Then the occurrences of “and” used to build different semantic relations between different score groups were calculated.

## Results and Discussion

### General Features of the Semantic Relations of “and”

As can be seen in Table 2, parallel relation is the most frequently used semantic relation of “and”, with an average of approximately 14 occurrences per 1000 words; progressive relation is the second most frequently used, with an average of approximately eight occurrences per 1000 words; explanatory relation, adversative relation, comparison relation, and summary relation are not frequently used, with less than one occurrence per 1000 words. Table 2 shows the total number and the percentage of the use of each semantic relation of “and”.

Table 2  
*Frequency of Each Semantic Relation of “and” Used in Students’ Narrative Writing*

Semantic Relation	Total	Percentage	NF
Parallel relation	207	45.80%	13.70
Progressive relation	118	26.11%	7.81
Supplementary relation	44	9.73%	2.91
Guiding relation	41	9.07%	2.71
Causal relation	27	5.97%	1.79
Explanatory relation	6	1.33%	0.40
Summary relation	4	0.88%	0.26
Adversative relation	3	0.66%	0.20
Comparison relation	2	0.44%	0.13
Total	452	100%	29.90

(Note: NF refers to normalized frequency per 1,000 words.)

In this study, the three most commonly used semantic relations are parallel relation, progressive relation, and supplementary relation. However, the finding contradicts the study by Pan and Feng (2004), in which the three most frequently used semantic relations are guiding relation, parallel relation and summary relation. The genre of the corpus may play a role in this difference. Qin and Uccelli (2016) found obvious differences in the choice of cohesive devices between narrative writing and argumentative writing.

### Semantic Relational Categories of “and”

To more effectively explore the features of the conjunction “and” used by Chinese EFL learners, this study analyzed its semantic relational categories in detail. The three most frequently used semantic relations of “and” were analyzed with cases in context.

The students used a remarkably larger number of “and” to build parallel relation than to build any other relation. “and” was used to connect several parallel words, phrases, or sentences. When “and” was used to build parallel relation, it gave full play to coordination relation rather than cohesive relation. Moreover, “and” may sometimes construct multilevel parallel relation. For example, there are two levels in Example 1. “To set up tables and chairs and prepare tea” can be further analyzed as “to (set up (tables and chairs) and prepare tea)”.

**Example 1:** *As an assistant, I went to the meeting room in advance to set up tables and chairs and prepare tea. (LS-1)*

After analyzing the writing, I found that nearly one in four “and” was used to build progressive relation. “and” was used to connect a succession of events or the developing processes of one thing. In Example 2, “and” was used to express the meaning of “then”.

**Example 2:** *In the end, I wrote my dream on the balloon and let it go. (HS-2)*

As shown in Table 2, supplementary relation is the third most frequently used semantic relation of “and”. Students prefer to use “and” after a clause to add additional information in narrative writing to complete the story. In Example 3, the second clause is a supplement to the first sentence. The logical relationship in this sentence is complex. It could be “I didn’t answer because I didn’t know how to answer” or “it is not only I didn’t answer, but also I didn’t know how to answer”. In this case, “and” was placed between two clauses, making the second clause become additive information to express multiple meanings.

**Example 3:** *I didn’t answer, and I didn’t know how to answer. (HS-1)*

Students use “and” instinctively, trying to make their writing cohesive. They use more semantic relations of “and” that are familiar to them than those that are unfamiliar to them. Sometimes, when students are unfamiliar with a kind of semantic relation of “and”, they choose to replace it with other expressions. Marked differences in the frequency of the use of each semantic relation of “and” were revealed by analyzing students’ writing. Progressive relation and parallel relation built by “and” occupied more than 70% of the semantic relations built by “and”, with summary relation, comparison relation, and adversative relation occupying no more than 1% each.

### Differences in the Use of “and” between High-score Group and Low-score Group

Based on the former analysis, the frequency of “and” used in high-score writing and low-score writing was calculated to analyze similarities and differences between them. Table 3 shows the total number and percentage of the use of each semantic relation of “and”. The results showed that both high-score essays and low-score essays include more parallel relation and progressive relation than other relations of “and”. Explanatory relation, summary relation, adversative relation, and comparison relation are rarely used both in high-score writing and in low-score writing.

Table 3

*Differences in the Use of “and” between High-Score and Low-Score Writing*

Semantic Relations	Low-score writing			High-score writing		
	Total	Percentage	NF	Total	Percentage	NF
Parallel relation	101	43.35%	13.58	106	48.40%	13.81
Progressive relation	64	27.47%	8.60	54	24.66%	7.04
Supplementary relation	30	12.88%	4.03	14	6.39%	1.82
Guiding relation	18	7.73%	2.42	23	10.50%	3.00
Causal relation	11	4.72%	1.48	16	7.31%	2.08
Explanatory relation	3	1.29%	0.40	3	1.37%	0.39
Summary relation	2	0.86%	0.27	2	0.91%	0.26
Adversative relation	2	0.86%	0.27	1	0.46%	0.13
Comparison relation	2	0.86%	0.27	0	0.00%	0.00
Total	233	100%	31.32	219	100%	28.53

NF: normalized frequency per 1,000 words.

However, the third most commonly used semantic relation of “and” is different between low-score writing and high-score writing. The low-score group employs more supplementary relation of “and” than the high-score one. High-score writing uses more guiding relation of “and” than low-score writing. These figures preliminarily indicate that high-score writing or low-score writing has certain distinct options in the use of some semantic relations of “and”. The low-score group uses more supplementary relation to enrich one idea, while the high-score group employs more guiding relation to provide different ideas in one essay.

### Conclusion

This study examined the use of different semantic relations of “and” and analyzed the differences between high-score writing and low-score writing in narrative writing from 29 undergraduates. The results show that the frequency of each semantic relation of “and” used in Chinese EFL learners’ writing declines in order: parallel relation, progressive relation, supplementary relation, guiding relation, causal relation, explanatory relation, summary relation, adversative relation, comparison relation. But the frequencies of some semantic relations of

“and” are different between high-score writing and low-score writing. High-score writing obviously contains more guiding relation and fewer supplementary relation than low-score writing.

Many implications can be drawn from this study, an important one being that, by exploring the frequency of each semantic relation built by “and”, it theoretically provides some insights into the master of conjunctions by EFL learners, which may provide guidance to many EFL teachers. They can design their future teaching to help learners master conjunctions systematically. Future research could design interventions informed by the characteristics of the semantic relations of “and” used in the writing of EFL learners to explore how to effectively teach conjunctions. Research-based interventions could provide theoretical support for English teaching, helping improve EFL learner’s writing performance.

However, this study, being exploratory in nature, has some limitations. First, the sample under investigation is small in size. The findings could be verified by future studies, which include a larger sample size and samples from native speakers. Second, the errors in the use of “and” were not analyzed. Future investigations are expected to provide a detailed analysis of “and” related errors.

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