

The Impact of Teaching Conjunctions in English Writing Proficiency at the Sentence Level

(A Case Study: (University of Kassala)

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions by students enrolled in advanced academic writing course at University of Kassala. The data were quantitatively analyzed to examine the correct and incorrect usage of different conjunctions. Further examination of the incorrect usage of conjunctions revealed the difficulties encountered and the strategies learners used to deal with conjunctions. An understanding of such strategies would illuminate appropriate approaches for teaching conjunctions.

The findings supported the hypothesis that University of Kassala students' writing demonstrated weak performance in the writing skill at the sentence level due to lack of knowledge about coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in terms of meaning and functions. The results indicated that the subjects had limited conjunctions knowledge that did not enable them to express their ideas clearly, precisely, and made them prone to produce erroneous sentences. Such inadequate conjunctions knowledge did not enable them to produce well-structured sentences. Therefore, it seems that foreign language instruction needs to focus on expanding the conjunctions knowledge of foreign language learners. In addition, teachers of writing skills need to engage their students in conscious learning tasks that are designed to make them aware of the gaps in the conjunctions knowledge.

المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في استخدام ادوات الربط بواسطة الطلاب في كورس الكتابة الاكاديمية المتقدمة بجامعة كسلا. تم تحليل البيانات كميًا لاختبار الاستخدام الصحيح والخطأ لادوات الربط المختلفة. مزيد من اختبار الاستخدام الخاطئ لادوات الربط اوضح الصعوبات التي تواجه الطلاب والاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمونها عند معالجتهم للروابط. فهم مثل هذه الاستراتيجيات يقود الي الطرق المناسبة لتدريس ادوات الربط.

دعمت النتائج فرضية البحث والتي هي ان الكتابة لدي طلاب جامعة كسلا اوضحت ضعف الاداء في مهارة الكتابة علي مستوى الجملة لتقص معرفة ادوات الربط من حيث المعاني والوظائف. اشارت النتائج لمحدودية معرفة الطلاب بادوات الربط والتي لم تمكنهم من التعبير عن افكارهم بوضوح ودقة، وجعلتهم عرضة لصياغة جمل خاطئة. مثل هذه المعرفة الغير تامة بادوات الربط لم تمكن الطلاب من صياغة جمل صحيحة. لذلك يبدو ان تدريس اللغة الاجنبية يحتاج للتركيز على توسيع معرفة الطلاب بادوات الربط في اللغة الاجنبية. بالاضافة الي ذلك، يحتاج معلمو مهارات الكتابة لربط طلابهم بواجبات التعلم المباشرة والتي تصمم لتمكنهم من ادراك الفجوة في العلم بادوات الربط.

1.0 Introduction

Writing ability is one of the most important elements that determine students' success in the field of language teaching and learning. However, FL learners usually have difficulty in writing due to the lack of grammatical knowledge, namely in the area of English language tenses, unfamiliarity with appropriate rhetorical styles in English, and sometimes lack of experiences in writing.

Writing for English academic students requires writing well at the sentence level, the paragraph level, and at the organizational level. At the sentence level, students should be able to identify and write simple, compound, and complex sentences. At the paragraph level, students should be able to identify and write paragraphs including topic sentences and supporting details. At the organizational level, students should learn how to write

essays of the following genres: giving instructions, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and persuasion (Hyland, 2002).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The researcher has had an experience of teaching writing courses for many years. Here, he has noticed that lack of knowledge about coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in terms of meaning and functions is the most difficult area of English language for University of Kassala students in writing. The correct usage of connectors is one of the problems that students face. They seem to have serious problems with conjunctions. Thus, it seems reasonable to conduct this study to find out what the real problems are across different aspects of conjunctions among University of Kassala students.

1.2 Questions of the Study

This study is expected to answer the following questions:

1. What are the real problems students face in writing at the sentence level, using the concepts of coordination and subordination?
2. Which conjunctions aspects is the most difficult for students?
3. What are the main causes of difficulty in coordinating and subordinating ideas?

1.3 Hypothesis of the Study

It was hypothesized that University of Kassala students' writing demonstrated weak performance in the writing skill at the sentence level due to lack of knowledge about coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in terms of meaning and functions.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Investigate the conjunctions aspects in writing by determining the frequency of error occurrences.
2. Examine incorrect usage of conjunctions in FL writing at the sentence level.
3. Identify the strategies employed and the difficulties faced

by students.

4. Propose methods and techniques for FL writing teachers so they can help students produce meaningful and unified writing.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is necessary for the following reasons:

1. The research is useful to the English Language teachers. It makes them aware of the problematic areas concerning conjunctions for students.
2. It makes teachers improve and enhance their teaching skills and methods in teaching conjunctions
3. It is also useful to the planners and designers of English language syllabuses to put more emphasis on techniques and activities of teaching conjunctions aspects.
4. It is useful to the researchers in the area of English language teaching as a foreign Language to discover and identify the problems and difficulties that learners experience in conjunctions knowledge when writing.

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter deals with the literature review and the theoretical framework of the study.

2.1 Teaching Grammar

Grammar, as an essential component of a language, has never been absent from any teaching/learning syllabus/ curriculum throughout the world. Within the context of discourse analysis, the researcher would then introduce a core point of this study that is the importance of teaching grammar techniques in English writing within the Sudanese ELT context.

Teaching grammar or studying has become a <must> in spite of the reluctance of some and the disbelief in its efficacy or lack of enthusiasm for others. Hence, regardless of which approach or what methods are used, most foreign language students will find

themselves compelled to study grammar whether taught implicitly or explicitly. Here is a short account of how and why grammar is taught.

Traditional teachers of English considered grammar as an integral part of the language curriculum. They felt that it was not possible for a learner to speak or write English correctly if s/he did not know the grammar of English.

In recent years there has been a re-thinking about grammar teaching. While as a reaction to the structural approach, the learners in a communicative classroom were expected not <puzzle their heads with grammar>, it is being increasingly accepted that «language learning is essentially learning how grammar functions in the achievement of meaning.» (Widdowson: 1990). But instead of isolated sentences which were mostly used for drill and practice in the structural approach, the emphasis is now on providing suitable contexts to make the «learners realize the communicative value of grammar in the very achievement of meaning.»

In sum, grammar instruction, on the whole, should be tailor-made to meet ultimately the needs of students, and should weave both prescriptive and descriptive practices into relevant, meaningful instruction.

Finally, as grammar is closely related to discourse analysis, not to say they often complement each other, we feel it is necessary to deal with the term discourse as well as some of its aspects.

2.2 Coordination and Subordination

Subordination and coordination are two syntactic features that are employed in writing in both English and Arabic. It is often argued, however, that the two languages differ in their preference for either syntactic relation. English, it is said, makes use of more subordination than coordination, while Arabic favors the use of coordination rather than subordination.

2.3 Coordination and Subordination in English

In English, compound sentences (coordination) are used to express related thoughts which are more or less equal and carry

approximately the same weight; that is, when both clauses of the sentence are offered as new information; they are usually equal both syntactically and semantically. In other words, it is a paratactic relationship that holds between the clauses (Quirk et al., 1985: 918).

With subordination, unequal ideas are expressed. One clause carries more weight than the other. The subordinate clause is presented as given or known information rather than new (ibid: 919). The relationship at work here is hypotaxis; the super ordinate clause and the subordinate clause(s) are in hierarchical hypotactic relationship.

Somewhere else in Quirk's (ibid: 920) it is stated that the second unit in a sequence of coordinated units «gains focal prominence from its position», and that such prominence applies to the final element in a complex sentence. This prominence means higher «communicative dynamism» than there is in the initial part of the information unit (ibid: 13567-).

This argument does not, however, conflict with the discussion in the previous paragraphs regarding subordination. It is said above that a subordinate clause is semantically subordinate to the main clause, meaning that the information therein is often presupposed as given or known. Consequently, the normal position of a subordinate clause is initial rather than final, since the new information is often presented as we linearly progress along the information unit (i.e. sentence). When the subordinate clause is shifted to a final position, it gains more weight, semantically, than it is assigned by means of its syntactic level.

Quirk et. al. maintain that coordination is used when ease of comprehension is sought, but also hold that a compound sentence, «especially with and, is vague in that it leaves the specific logical relationship to the interference of the speaker» (ibid.:10401-). In a complex sentence, on the other hand, the sentence may be difficult to understand since the «content of the sentence may presuppose knowledge that is not generally available» (ibid.: 987).

Coordination and subordination deal with the relationships between sentences. Coordination places equal importance between sentences while subordination shows that one sentence may be less or more important than other sentences. Both coordination and subordination can be achieved through signal words and phrases, such as subordinating and coordinating conjunctions. The following links are intended to help you by giving information on both coordination and subordination. These links to interactive web sites are particularly beneficial for online, evening, and off-campus students who are unable to participate in face-to-face tutoring. You may also come to the writing lab to use print materials and seek additional help from the tutoring staff.

Conjunctions are composed of two categories: subordinating conjunctions and coordinating conjunctions. The function of conjunctions is to link ideas. Unlike subordinating conjunctions, coordinating conjunctions have not received much attention in second language acquisition, because it is generally believed that coordinating conjunctions are easy to acquire due to simplistic notions of parallelism. Given the overall frequency with which the word AND occurs in spoken and written English, it should be assumed that its function is both pervasive and essential. Francis and Kucera (1982) reported AND as the fourth most frequent wording the Brown Corpus of Written English, after THE, BE, and OF, occurring 28,872 times in 1,014,000 words, or 28.5 times per 1000 words (cited in Lazaraton, 1992).

To sum up, subordination as well as coordination are both used in English writing. Subordination, however, is preferred to coordination, and it is considered a sign of mature writing. A piece of writing with too many coordinators is seen as immature and requires rewriting.

Methodology

3.0 Methods and Tools

This paper is a descriptive and analytic study. It uses analytical

tools: the discourse textual analysis of literary samples from students' writing at the sentence level.

The aim of the test is to provide an analysis of the students' writing at the sentence level and shed light on the students' real level of knowledge about coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. The reason behind choosing tests lies in the fact that the tests will reinforce the purpose of the study. They will provide us with the necessary information which is relative to knowledge about connectors.

3.1 Description of the Population and Sample of the Study

The participants were (120) university students at University of Kassala. Tests were used to screen the required number of students who were supposed to take part in the main part of the study. Among (120) students taking the test, (100) students qualified to be classified into the control and experimental groups because their scores were between 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean scores of all the subjects.

The study was carried out through an experimental design with control and experimental groups, both randomly formed. While the former involved (50) students, the second group (50). The advantage of such groups is that, the students possess the same educational background which will be required for writing. The subjects are also homogeneous in terms of language.

3.2 Procedures

The test of sentence construction proficiency was given to the participants. In order to come up with a homogeneous number of subjects, the exam papers were scored and the scores were scattered over a normal distribution diagram with a mean of 37 and a standard deviation of approximately 12. After this, (100) out of (120) subjects were classified into Control (50) and Experimental (50) groups. As for the experimental group, the researcher administered a treatment which lasted for many weeks, two hours sessions per week. During the experiment, both groups had the same instructor, curriculum, and schedule of instruction, while in the control group, the students had conventional learning methods, as they worked

just with the writing exercises without any explicit instruction or without any awareness, by being underlined, about the connectors which were the target of the study. The experimental group received explicit instruction and was made aware of the concepts of coordination and subordination which were the target of the study.

Data Analysis and Discussion

4.0 Introduction

The researcher used the statistical methods so as to fulfill the objectives of the study. The (SPSS) program was used for data analysis. The frequency tables and percent were used to give general ideas in the students' test. Each table is followed by a chart to show the relationship between the aspects in terms of percentages.

4.1 Presentation of the Students' Answers to the Test

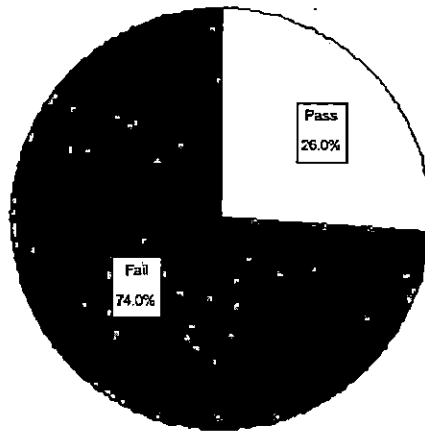
4.1.1 Coordination

The exercise on coordination contains groups of sentences to be combined.

Table 4.1 Frequency Distribution of Students' Answers on

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	13	26.0
Fail	37	74.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that in coordination (37) of the students failed to choose the appropriate coordinating conjunctions to combine groups of the sentences, whereas only (13) of them passed.



Graph 4.1 Students' Answers on Coordination Area

The graph above shows the number of students into percentages: (26%) of the students passed and (74%) of them failed.

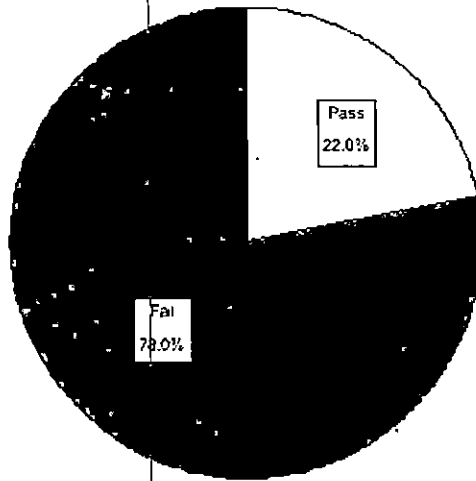
4.1.2 Subordination

The exercise on subordination area represents the largest group of sentences to be combined. It contains test questions on the adjective clauses, noun clauses, and adverbial clauses.

Table 4.2 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Adjective Clauses

Percentage (%)	Frequency	Result
Pass	11	22.0
Fail	39	78.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that (11) of the students combined the adjective clause correctly, whereas (39) of them failed to combine them correctly.



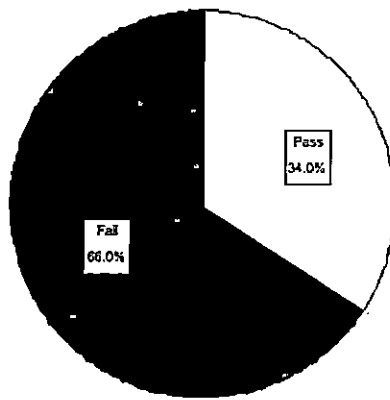
Graph 4.2 Students> Answers on Adjective Clauses

Graph 4.2 shows that (22%) of the students combined the sentences by using the adjective clause correctly, whereas (78%) of them failed to combine them correctly.

Table 4.3 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Noun

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	17	34.0
Fail	33	66.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that (17) of the students combined the sentences by using the noun clauses correctly, whereas (33) of them failed to combine them correctly.



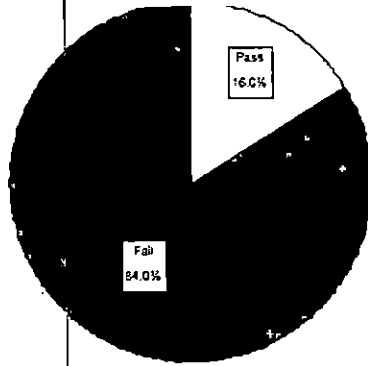
Graph 4.3 Students> answers on Noun Clauses

Graph 4.3 shows that (34%) of the students combined the noun clauses correctly, whereas (66%) of them failed to combine them correctly

Table4.4 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Time

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	8	16.0
Fail	42	84.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table reveals that the majority of the students (42) failed to combine the sentences by using adverb clauses correctly. Only (8) of them combined them correctly.



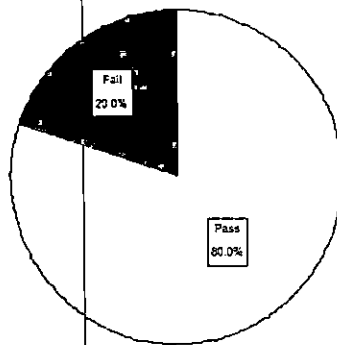
Graph 4.4 Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Time

Graph 4.4 reveals that the majority of the students (84%) failed to choose the appropriate subordinating conjunction indicating time, whereas only (16%) of them chose them correctly.

Table 4.5 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Purpose

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	40	80.0
Fail	10	20.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table indicates that the students who combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of purpose correctly were (40), whereas (10) of the students combined them incorrectly.



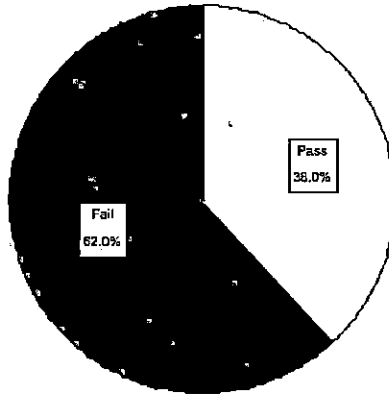
Graph 4.5 Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Purpose

Graph 4.5 indicates that students who passed in combining the adverb clause of purpose were (80%), whereas (20%) failed to combine them correctly.

Table 4.6 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Cause

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	19	38.0
Fail	19	62.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that (19) of the students combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of cause correctly, whereas (31) of them failed to combine them correctly



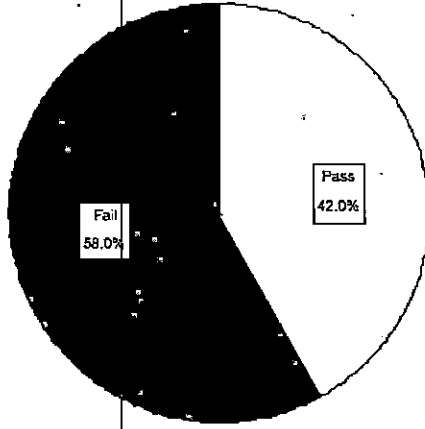
Graph 4.6 Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Cause

Graph 4.6 shows that (38%) of the students combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of cause correctly, whereas (62%) of them failed to combine them correctly.

Table 4.7 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Place

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	21	42.0
Fail	29	58.0
Total	50	58.0

The above table shows that (21) of the students combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of place correctly, whereas (29) of them failed.



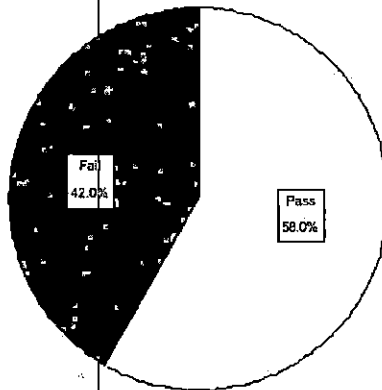
Graph 4.7 Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Place

Graph 4.7 shows that (42%) of the students combined the sentences by using the appropriate subordinating conjunctions indicating place correctly, whereas (58%) of them failed.

Table 4.8 Frequency Distribution of Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Result

Result	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Pass	29	58.0
Fail	21	42.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that (29) of the students combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of result correctly, whereas (21) of them failed.



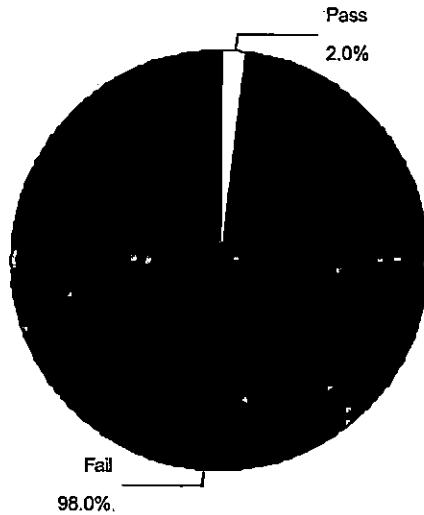
Graph 4.8 Students> Answers on Adverb Clause of Result

Graph 4.8 shows that (58%) of the students combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of result correctly whereas (42%) of them failed to choose the appropriate subordinating conjunctions indicating result.

Table 4.9 Frequency Distribution of Students' Answers on Adverb Clause of Condition

Result	Frequency	(%) Percentage
Pass	1	2.0
Fail	49	98.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that only one of the students combined the sentences by using the adverb clause of condition correctly, whereas (49) of them failed.



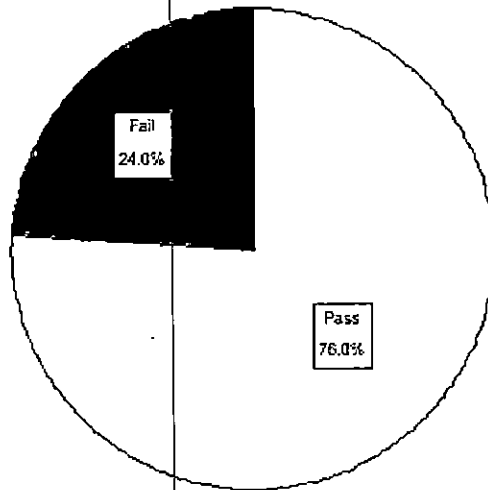
Graph 4.9 Students' Answers on the Adverb Clause of Condition

Graph 4.9 shows that only (2%) of the students combined the sentences by using the appropriate subordinating conjunctions indicating condition correctly, whereas (98%) of them failed.

Table 4.10 Frequency Distribution of Students' Answers on Adverb Clause of Concession

Result	Frequency	(%) Percentage
Pass	38	76.0
Fail	12	24.0
Total	50	100.0

The above table shows that only (38) of the students combined the sentences by using the appropriate subordinating conjunctions indicating concession correctly, whereas (12) of them failed to combine them correctly.



Graph 4.10 Students' Answers on Adverb Clause of Concession

Graph 4.10 shows that (76%) of the students combined the sentences by using the appropriate subordinating conjunctions indicating concession correctly, whereas (24%) of them combined them incorrectly.

Table 4.11 the means and standard deviation for Ex.2 on the coordination

Coordination Ex.	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-Value	d.f	P-Value	Note
Ex.2	50	5.520	3.291	-9.62	49	0.00	15

Table (4.21) shows that with a Mean =5.520, (STD =3.291) for a full mark of (15) on this, the performance of the students on this Exercise is a complete failure (an equivalent of about 37%).

Discussion of the results

Table 4.11 shows that with a Mean =5.520, (STD =3.291) and table 4.5 shows most of the students (37) failed to use the correct conjunction to combine the sentences, because they confused the coordinating conjunctions.

When the writer combine two sentences by using a coordinating conjunction, he/she drops the first period, change the capital letter that begins the second sentence to a small letter, and insert a comma before the coordinating conjunction (Escalas, 1999).

Donlane (1999) says missing introductory comma is one of the most frequent errors in student writing, any introductory phrase that comes before the main subject and verb combining should be followed by a comma.

Analysis and Discussion of Subordination

The Exercise on subordination area represents the largest group of sentences for combining. It contains test Exercises on the adjective clauses, noun clauses, and adverbial clauses which are divided into clauses for: time, purpose, causes, place, result, condition and concession respectively. Each group contained five groups of sentences for combining. Five marks have been assigned for each type of sentences.

Table 4.12 the means and standard deviation for Ex.3 on the sub-ordination

Subordination Exercises	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-Value	d.f	P-Value	Total of full mark
Ex.3.1Adj.cl.	50	1.550	1.183	-14.64	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.2Noun cl.	50	1.680	1.244	-13.18	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.3Adv. cl. of Time	50	1.500	1.020	-17.33	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.4Adv. cl. of Purpose	50	3.540	1.615	-02.01	49	0.05	5
Ex.3.5Adv. cl. of Cause	50	2.150	1.310	-9.98	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.6Adv.cl. of Place	50	2.280	1.389	-8.45	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.7Adv.cl. of Result	50	2.790	1.798	-4.76	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.8Adv.cl. of Condition	50	1.030	0.928	-22.63	49	0.00	5
Ex.3.9Adv.cl. of Concession	50	3.490	1.724	-2.09	49	0.04	5
Total	50	20.010	7.500	-15.08	49	0.00	45

Table (4.12) shows that apart from the adverbial clauses of purpose (mean 3.540, std. deviation 1.615) and the adverbial clauses of concession (mean 3.490, std. deviation 1.724); the Means of the other adverbial clauses are low. The Mean for the adverb clauses of condition of 1.030 (std. deviation 0.928) ushers a very weak performance in this area. Indeed, the Means total of 20.010 in the whole Ex. indicates that the performance of the students in subordination area

is much below the average (an equivalent of 44.4%).

4.2 Discussion of the Results

Table 4.12 shows that most of the students failed to use the correct

adverbs to combine the sentences, same reasons that caused them to choose incorrect coordinating conjunctions apply to this adverbials.

The researcher attributes these results to the fact that English adverbs are confusing to non – native speakers. Many difficulties face students with subordination. Many sentences have subjects and verbs, but the subject and the verb are in dependent clauses.

Findings

The findings of the data analysis suggest that particular consideration should be given to the teaching of conjunctions when teaching writing. The results discussed in chapter four indicated that despite many years of studying English, some students still may not be capable of producing well-written sentences in English.

More importantly, the findings suggested the necessity of teaching coordinating and subordinating conjunctions to improve students' writing. Since the learners' deficiency in the use of appropriate conjunctions at the sentence level has been identified, how students make use of these connectors while writing and how they deal with improper connector usages while writing are issues worthy of note.

An important finding from the present study is that lack of coherence and cohesion in the sentences results from inappropriate use of connectors.

The main aim of the study is to identify how University of Kassala students use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Conjunctions, an important determiner of establishing sentence coherence and cohesion, were investigated in terms of sentence combining. To comprehensively investigate the research questions and hypothesis, errors that appeared in the students' sentence construction were examined.

The findings confirmed the hypothesis and revealed that University of Kassala students faced difficulties in sentence construction resulting from insufficient knowledge of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. These difficulties were demonstrated

in the form of the lack of connector variety and inappropriate use of connectors.

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