

## Libyan Students' Use of English Coordinating Conjunctions in Their Writing

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### Abstract

This study aimed at studying the use of English coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet* and *so*) by Libyan university students, as learners of English as a foreign language. The data was collected from (34) students who studied at the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts at Misurata University. They were tested by two questions; filling gaps in seven separate sentences and writing two paragraphs. The students' answers and compositions were analyzed by identifying students' recognition of the semantic functions of the seven coordinating conjunctions, the frequency of occurrence of these conjunctions in their writing, and finally appropriate and inappropriate use of these conjunctions in writing paragraphs. The findings revealed that the majority of participants were unable to recognize the semantic functions of some unfamiliar conjunctions in the given sentences, tended to use some common coordinators than other ones, and employed conjunctions inappropriately in their writing.

**Keywords:** coordinating conjunctions, writing, appropriate and inappropriate use.

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## استعمال الطلبة الليبيين لأدوات الربط في كتاباتهم باللغة الإنجليزية

### ملخص البحث

هدف الورقة البحثية دراسة استخدام كلمات الربط في اللغة الإنجليزية من قبل طلاب ليبيا يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم جمع البيانات من (34) طالباً جامعياً بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية الآداب، جامعة مصراتة. أُختبر الطلبة بسؤالين مختلفين: ملء فراغات وكتابة فقرة تعبيرية. تم تحليل البيانات حسب ثلاث جوانب: مدى معرفة الطلبة بالوظائف الدلالية لكلمات الربط في الجمل المعطاة ومدى استعمال أدوات الربط السبعة في كتاباتهم، وأخيراً، الاستعمال المناسب وغير المناسب لهذه الكلمات. بيّنت النتائج أن أغلبية المشاركين في الدراسة غير قادرين على معرفة الوظائف الدلالية لبعض كلمات الربط غير المألوفة لديهم، مع عدم ظهور كلمات الربط غير المألوفة لديهم في كتاباتهم. وأغلب المشاركين في الدراسة يميلون إلى استعمال بعض أدوات الربط بطريقة غير مناسبة لربط الجمل في كتاباتهم.

*الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة، أدوات الربط، استعمال مناسب وغير مناسب.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Study background and scope

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners need to practice writing different sentence structures to improve their writing skill. Learning how to combine clauses is a writing skill itself and can greatly improve EFL learners' writing style. One way to combine sentences is to use coordinating conjunctions.

Generally, conjunctions are joining devices. They connect words, phrases (a short group of related words), or clauses together. They are classified under two categories: subordinating conjunctions

and coordinating conjunctions. According to several grammar references (Walter, 2017; Juzwiak, 2009; Barkley and Sandoval, 2015), a group of conjunctions can be used with a comma before them to make two simple sentences one compound sentence. Such conjunctions are called coordinating conjunctions. Coordinating conjunctions are small words, but help to create smooth text with a neat flow without broken up and ungrammatical sentences that might affect the intended meaning. They are devices used to establish a connection between two or more equally important ideas (Hinkel, 2001). Thus, “The term *coordinating* is used because both complete ideas in the sentences are considered coordinate, or equally important, like a balanced set of weight, or an evenly balanced see-saw” (Walter, 2017:p.214).

The well-known coordinating devices are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*. Ruday (2013, p. 36) indicated that “Jeff Anderson (2005) used the pneumonic FANBOYS to help his students remember these coordinating conjunctions - each letter of the word FANBOYS refers to one of the coordinating conjunctions”.

Among the seven FANBOYS conjunctions, four of them: (*but, or, and, and so*), *BOAS* is a good abbreviation for remembering the most common coordinators (Juzwiak, 2009), occur more frequently than the others in both spoken and written English. Such a highly frequent occurrence is illustrated according to the lists provided by the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the Brown Corpus of Written English (Chiu, 2004).

## 1.2. Study objectives

As a concern and effort to identify writing problems in general and try to understand one of the key issues related to EFL writing, this study was an attempt to explore the use of English coordinating conjunctions by Libyan students in their writing. It focused on the reoccurrence of such conjunctions, investigated appropriate and

inappropriate use of coordinators in their writing. Therefore, some students' sample answers and writings were analysed to understand the issue under investigation.

### **1.3. Study significance**

As a well-written and accurate sentence is a matter of concern to EFL learners in writing, this study is just an attempt to create a general insight into and understand one of the challenges and difficulties regards EFL writing among Libyan students. Here some common issues concerning English coordinating conjunctions could be identified. Therefore, writing teachers may have a chance to invent alternative teaching approaches and instructions to cope with some writing challenges. Furthermore, students can be aware of the use of such conjunctions and try to decrease the number of most frequent written errors in the future. Moreover, a number of remedies for some writing problems to be suggested to help EFL students to overcome several difficulties they might come across in their composition tasks and assignments.

### **1.4. Problem statement**

It has been assumed that writing is one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a second/ foreign language and even for native speakers. As Prommas and Sinwongsuwat (2011, cited in Hamed, 2014: p. 108.) explained that writing skill is more difficult than speaking skill:

...in that in written communication there is no additional way helps in terms of nonverbal expressions, such as gesture, facial expressions, and head movement, to ensure that the message is accurately conveyed. Hence, it is important for ESL/EFL learners to write in a way that makes the message clear for the reader.

Generally speaking, a considerable number of Libyan students study several writing courses as a part of the requirements of the undergraduate program at the Department of English in the Faculty of

Arts and still have difficulties in writing. Even after successfully finishing the required writing courses in the department, many students are later found to fail in producing an appropriate piece of writing which should be academically and proficiently valued. Therefore, it is extremely significant to try to understand and address, at least, some aspects of the difficulties, challenges and problems Libyan students sometimes encounter in their writing skill.

Based on our humble experience in teaching English as a foreign language in the department of English, levels of Libyan university students, as EFL learners, are generally weak in writing courses, namely, Writing 1, Writing 2, and Academic Writing. Therefore, they often encounter several difficulties in their writing assignments, examinations, and even mini research papers required for their graduation.

### **1.5. Study questions**

The study investigated the use of coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) by second semester undergraduate Libyan students in their writing. In doing so, it attempted to answer the following questions:

- i. To what extent can they distinguish the different semantic functions of coordinating conjunctions?
- ii. To what extent do coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) commonly appear in paragraphs written by the participants in this study?
- iii. How often are coordinating conjunctions used appropriately or inappropriately in students' writing?

### **1.6. Related studies**

Generally speaking, writing is a quite demanding skill because a good piece of composition, by a native or non-native speaker, must

be balanced in different written issues; content, organisation, purpose, audience, and vocabulary. Moreover, using the appropriate punctuation marks, accurate spelling and capitalizations are all of importance in any written production (Abu Rass, 2015). However, writing in a foreign language is even more demanding because it is a complicated, challenging, and difficult process (Alsamadani, 2010).

In his investigation into difficulties university students face when they write in English as a foreign language, Ibnian (2017: p.197) found out that Jordan EFL students encounter the problem of lacking ideas, followed by the inaccurate use of mechanism of writing skill. However, “vocabulary restriction” occupied the sixth rank and “grammar difficulties” ranked ninth in the list of difficulties he explored in his research.

As Chiu (2004) indicated, “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” (p.2). However, several recognizable studies have been carried out to investigate different conjunction devices in general and coordinators in particular.

Individuals with writing problems in a foreign language may have challenges in one or several aspects of “writing skill such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling ...” (Ghabool, Edwina, & Kashef: 2012: p.132). It has been often argued that run-on sentences and comma splices frequently occurred as written errors committed by EFL writers because they might not recognize the relationship between the two ideas they express. Therefore, some misunderstanding might happen. (Cadbury: 2014).An issue, regarding using coordinating conjunctions by speakers of Arabic, was investigated in Hinkel’s study (2001). His research findings spelled out that Arabic speakers may concentrate “on avoiding redundancy and excessive repetition of parallel constructions such as noun and verb phrases” (p. 129).

Daif-Allah and Albeshar (2013) analyzed discourse markers, such as *and*, *but* and *so* used by a number of EFL students in different Saudi teaching contexts. According to “the descriptive quantitative and qualitative approaches” (p.219) they utilized in their study, the study findings revealed that Saudi students “overused the additive connectors followed by the causative, the contrastive and the illustrative ones. In addition, the students’ use of writing discourse markers was too limited and the ones that frequently used were *and*, *in addition*, and *for example*” (ibid, p.217).

In a similar context and relatively recent related study, Hamed (2014) investigated the use of conjunctions in the argumentative writing of Libyan students enrolled at Omer Al-Mukhtar University. The findings revealed that the study subjects used some type of conjunctions such as, additives and causals, “inappropriately in their writing and it thus weakened the logical connectivity between sentences and paragraphs” (p. 114). Based on his study findings, Hamed (2014) argued that the use of conjunctions is problematic for the Libyan participants because of “the negative transfer from the participants’ mother tongue (Arabic)”.

In another, yet in a completely different context and a more recent study, Martinez (2016) found out that her study participants “experienced difficulty in using conjunctions especially adversative and additive ones. Although, “inappropriate use of conjunctions was more frequent among non-bilingual program students when compared with bilingual program students” (p. 117).

Similarly, Ong (2011) carried out a study on Chinese undergraduate EFL students’ writings. The author found out that the most frequent conjunction errors made by the participants were in the use of adversative and additive conjunctions.

In their attempt to investigate the errors committed by Iraqi EFL students in using conjunctions in their writing, Darweesh and Kadhim

(2016) followed quantitative analysis to reveal that simple additive conjunctions *and*, *in addition* and *moreover*, “are used without their cohesive signification which connotes adding new or more information” (p.178). However, 70% of the study participants successfully used the conjunctions, many of them showed misuse of some conjunctions and incapability to turn ideas into complete and meaningful sentences.

Chiu (2004) emphasized that “EFL learners do not know how to parse chunks of elements, thereby leading to misunderstanding of sentences; the reason is ignorance of the function of conjunctions, especially coordinating conjunctions” (p.2). In her research, she tried to investigate the use of the coordinator *and* as it has “important functions in reading and written discourse and that it occurs so frequently...” (p.3). In Chiu’s research, an emphasis was put on the transfer of first language as a major reason of *and* misuse of the coordinating conjunction *and*. Moreover a high frequency of *and* in the narrative written samples was revealed.

With reference to the above literature review, this study is different from the studies mentioned above because it explored and focused on a certain and limited number of coordinating conjunctions used by a particular group of EFL students, .i.e. a Libyan context. Moreover, quantitative data was collected to answer the study questions.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study design

Quantitative approach was employed for analyzing the data. The SPSS statistics (version 21.0) and Microsoft Excel (version 97-2003) were used to obtain different types of descriptive statistics for the collected data.

## **2.2. Study context and participants**

The students sample was taken from second year undergraduates. (34) Libyan students (12 male students and 22 female students) participated in the study. Their major was English language. They were all native speakers of Arabic and their ages ranged between 19 to 22 years old. Additionally, they had studied English through regular Libyan education at school for at least 8 years before entering the university. The study took place in the student's regular writing class at the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts located in Misurata, Libya. At the time of conducting the study (the academic year 2016-2017) the students were taking Writing II subject. They were divided into two groups and they all passed the previous subject (writing I) to be allowed to register in Writing II Course.

## **2.3. Study instruments**

The data of the study were 34 exam scripts of Writing II subject. Two questions were given to the students. In the first question, students were asked to fill in the gaps in seven separate sentences with appropriate coordinating conjunctions. Three alternatives were given for each statement. Students were given one mark to each correct answer. The semantic use of FANBOYS in the given sentences were tested.

In the second question, students were required to write two paragraphs of about 120 words each, in a time pressure of one hour and half. The researchers analyzed the coordinating conjunctions used by the study participants in their written productions.

## **2.4. Data collection and analysis**

Data collection procedure took place in two writing classrooms. Two teachers distributed the examination papers among their students. After examination sheets were given to the students in classrooms, they were given one hour and half to answer the two questions

immediately. The scripts were immediately collected and then investigated by researchers

The data were analyzed quantitatively utilizing SPSS software package (21<sup>st</sup> version) and Microsoft Excel (version 97-2003). Descriptive statistics with frequencies and percentages were found and the results were reported in a form of tables and bar charts. Since the focus was on using FANBOYS conjunctions by the participants, researchers examined the students' scripts and analyzed the collected data as follows:

In the first question (filling in the gaps): two categories of the students' answers were identified: correct answer and incorrect answer. Moreover, the frequencies of students' marks (out of seven) were identified and presented by a form of bar chart to recap the students' answers to question 1.

In the second question (writing two paragraphs): analysis of the data process began by highlighting each single coordinating conjunction appeared in students' writing. The researchers then read the scripts again to specify:

- i. Coordinating conjunctions most used and not used by the students.
- ii. The appropriate and inappropriate use of coordinating conjunctions.

### 3. Results

The study examined the use of English coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) by second semester undergraduate students in a writing exam. According to the analysis of the collected data, the following results can be summarized as follows.

#### 3.1. Exam question 1

In question 1, the study participants were asked to fill gaps with correct given coordinating conjunctions in separates sentences.

Table 1: *students' answers to question 1*

	answer	frequency	percent	valid percent
but	correct	19	55.9	57.6
	incorrect	14	41.2	42.4
	missing	1	2.9	
so	correct	19	55.9	57.6
	incorrect	14	41.2	42.4
	missing	1	2.9	
or	correct	19	55.9	55.9
	incorrect	15	44.1	44.1
	missing			
for	correct	12	35.3	35.3
	incorrect	22	64.7	64.7
	missing			
nor	correct	5	14.7	14.7
	incorrect	29	85.3	85.3
	missing			
yet	correct	25	73.5	75.8
	incorrect	8	23.5	24.2
	missing	1	2.9	
and	correct	26	76.5	78.8
	incorrect	7	20.6	21.2
	missing	1	2.9	

Table 1 shows that (55.9%) of the study participants filled the gaps with the correct coordinating conjunctions in the sentences with *but*, *so* and *or* for each, while (41.2%) and (44.1%) of them failed to find the correct word (*but/so* and *or*). Furthermore, (73.5%) of the study participants wrote the correct choice of the word which was *yet*, while 23.5 % of them wrote the wrong word. Moreover, the majority of them, (76.5%), successfully responded to the last sentence by writing the correct coordinating conjunction which was *and*. However, only (20.6%) of the students failed to write the correct coordinator. The study participants showed their inability to recognize the semantic function of less commonly used coordinators: *for* and *nor*. However, some of them, (35.3%) and (14.7%), could write the correct choice for the sentences, while (64.7%) and (85.3%) failed to recognize the correct answers (*for* and *nor*).

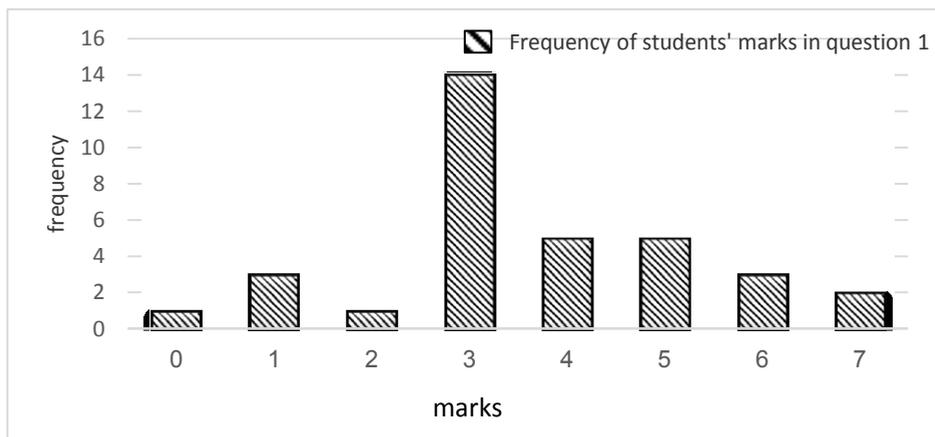


Chart 1: a summary of students' marks in question 1

In order to summarize the students' general performance in the first question, their marks are shown in chart 1. It is clear that (14) students got (3) marks out of the total score (one mark for each sentence), while 10 students could reach to the score of (4) and (5).

Moreover, the marks (1) and (6) were achieved by (3) participants for each, and 7 marks were achieved by 2 students only.

### 3.2.Exam question 2

In this writing question, the researchers analyzed the study participants' actual use of coordinating conjunctions in their writing. The collected data was classified according to two aspects: appropriate and inappropriate use of coordinating conjunctions in students' writing. Moreover, the most used and not used coordinating conjunctions were identified.

Table 2: *most used coordinating conjunctions*

conjunction	number of students	percent
and	34	100
but	14	41.1
or	10	29.4
so	9	26.4
yet	0	0
for	0	0
nor	0	0

As shown in table 2, it is obvious that the coordinator *and* was used by all the study participants (34). Moreover, the coordinators *but* and *or* were used by (41.1%) and (29.4%) of students participated in the study respectively. However, it seemed that all the students were not familiar with using the least common coordinating conjunctions (*yet, for* and *nor*) in their writing.

Table 3: *not used coordinating conjunctions*

conjunction	number of students	Percent
and	0	0
or	24	70.5
but	20	58.8
so	25	73.5
yet	34	100
for	34	100
nor	34	100

According to table 3, it is clear that *yet*, *for* and *nor* were not used by any of the study participants. Although, the students were slightly more familiar with the other FANBOYS conjunctions, (73.5%) and (58.8%) of the study participants did not use the words *so* and *but*, respectively. Moreover, the conjunction *or* did not appear in (24) students' writing composition.

Table 4 indicates that (7) students could use(3) coordinating conjunctions appropriately, while (6) students used only (1) coordinating conjunction appropriately. Moreover, (10) conjunctions were used correctly by (2) participants. Similarly, (7) conjunctions used appropriately by (2) students. Furthermore, (2) and (5) appropriate uses of coordinating conjunctions were achieved by (5) and (3) students respectively, and (4) appropriate uses were made by (5) students. Finally, (4) participants failed to use appropriately any coordinating conjunction.

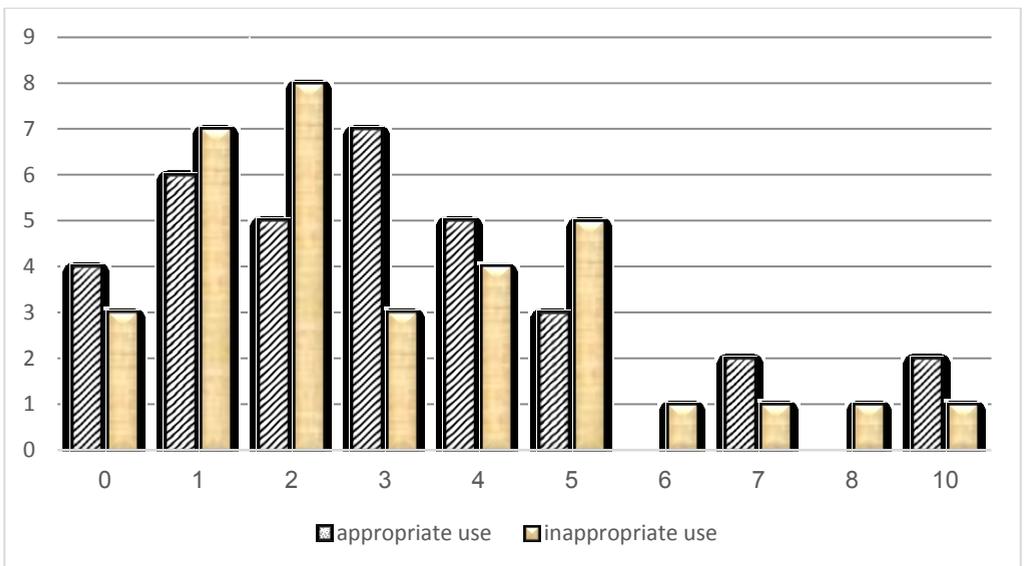
Table 4: *coordinating conjunctions used appropriately*

	Frequency	percent	valid percent
.00	4	11.8	11.8
1.00	6	17.6	17.6
2.00	5	14.7	14.7
3.00	7	20.6	20.6
4.00	5	14.7	14.7
<i>valid</i> 5.00	3	8.8	8.8
7.00	2	5.9	5.9
10.00	2	5.9	5.9
total	34	100.0	100.0

Table 5: *coordinating conjunctions used inappropriately*

	frequency	percent	valid percent
.00	3	8.8	8.8
1.00	7	20.6	20.6
2.00	8	23.5	23.5
3.00	3	8.8	8.8
4.00	4	11.8	11.8
<i>Valid</i> 5.00	5	14.7	14.7
6.00	1	2.9	2.9
7.00	1	2.9	2.9
8.00	1	2.9	2.9
10.00	1	2.9	2.9
total	34	100.0	100.0

As shown in table 5, (44.1%) of the students could use only (3) coordinators appropriately in their writing, while (14.7%) of them misused (5) FANBOYS conjunctions in their written productions. Moreover, (7) coordinating conjunctions were inappropriately used by (20.6%) of the total number of the study participants. Furthermore, only (4) students (11.6%) failed to use (31) coordinators appropriately in their writings. Finally, only (3) students (8.8%) successfully used the FANBOYS conjunctions in writing their paragraphs.



*Chart 2: inappropriate and appropriate use of coordinating conjunctions*

To summarize the study participants' actual use of FANBOYS in their paragraphs, chart 2 displays a comparison of appropriate and inappropriate uses by the study participants.

## 4. Discussion

The three questions presented in the study were answered as follows:

### 4.1 . Research question1: To what extent can students distinguish the different semantic functions of coordinating conjunctions?

According to the students' answers to question 1, it was clear that the sentence with coordinating conjunction *and* was answered accurately by the majority of study participants (76.5%). While the coordinator *yet* took the second place with a percent of (73.5), the three coordinators *but*, *so* and *or* were used successfully with approximately half of the total number of students (55.9% for each). The majority of study participants had an ability to recognize when such coordinating conjunction should be used according to the intending general meaning of the given sentences. However, some less common used coordinating conjunctions, i.e. *for* and *nor* were not chosen as correct answers by the majority of students (64.7%) and (85.3%) respectively. Generally speaking, a slightly third of the students could recognize the semantic function of FANBOYS conjunctions *and* and *yet*, in the given sentences and more than half of them had the ability to choose *but*, *so* and *or* as correct answers to fill the gaps. They still struggled in using the less common conjunctions such as *for* and *nor*. Their weakness was clear in the score achieved by the majority of students in this question (3 out of 7).

### 4.2. Research question 2: To what extent do coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) commonly appear in paragraphs written by the participants in this study?

According to the second question in the test, the study findings showed that the most commonly coordinating conjunction was *and* which appeared in all the study participants' writings. The less

commonly appeared coordinators; *but*, *or* and *so* were used by (41.1%, 29.4% and 26.4%) of the students respectively. However, the (34) study participants did not use the coordinators *yet*, *for* and *nor*.

Based on the study findings, it was noticeable that the coordinating conjunction *and* occurred more frequently than any other coordinators. Several researchers such as, Daif-Allah and Albasher (2013), Hamed (2014), and Chiu (2004) revealed similar findings. As Chiu (2004) confirmed that the coordinator *and* " does occur with a high frequency in the written narrative texts examined here, with a density of approximately 66.3 tokens per 1000 words" (p.18). Contrastingly, there was complete ignorance of using three conjunctions i.e. *for*, *nor*, and *yet* by students who participated in the study because students might find other alternative words which have similar meaning and function. For instance, they used *but* instead of *yet* and the subordinating conjunction *because* instead of *for*.

#### 4.3. Research question 3: How often are coordinating conjunctions used appropriately or inappropriately in students' writing?

Although the most common FANBOYS conjunctions, i.e. *and*, *or*, *but* and *so*, were used by the study participants in writing paragraphs, the majority of students could not use them appropriately.

The findings of this study showed that the majority of students used the most common FANBOYS conjunctions inappropriately, and did not use the less common ones in their compositions. As a result, they failed to compose cohesive paragraphs and create a logic link between sentences. These findings are similar to what was revealed in previous studies. As Hamed (2014) concluded, "learners of English as a foreign language have difficulty in using conjunctions in their writing" (p.108). Similarly, Martinez's study (2015) revealed that many students encountered difficulties in using conjunctions in their compositions.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of English coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) by 34 Libyan students enrolled in the second semester in the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts, at Misurata University. It mainly analysed students' ability to recognize the semantic functions of seven coordination conjunctions (FANBOYS), the frequency of using FANBOYS conjunctions in their actual written productions, and finally appropriate and inappropriate use of these conjunctions in their writing. According to the study results, the participants generally experienced difficulties in using coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS). To be more precise, they had ignorance of using some less common conjunctions such as, *for*, *yet* and *nor*, and they tended to employ the more frequent ones, as *and* and *but*, inappropriately in their writing.

## 6. Recommendations

This study was just a humble attempt to understand and analyse one aspect relating to written productions by Libyan learners of English as a foreign language. As Hamed (2014) suggested that "Identifying the conjunctive errors specific to Libyan EFL learners, in their second language writing, will help English language teachers take appropriate pedagogical actions to deal with such errors in students' writing" (p.118). Moreover, more attention should be paid to students' errors in using conjunctions in writing and more practice and exercise should be given to students to improve proficiency in writing skill.

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