

Exploring EFL Students' Perceptions of Linking Words in Writing: A Case Study at Bali International Language Center

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Article Info

Keywords:

Coherence and Cohesion

EFL Students

Linking Words

Student's Perception

Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This study explores EFL students' perceptions of linking words in writing at Bali International Language Center (BILCEN). Linking words, essential tools for achieving coherence and cohesion in writing, are often a challenge for EFL learners. This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of how students perceive the importance of linking words and how their use influences their writing skills. A qualitative approach was employed, with 15 EFL students enrolled in the English course at BILCEN as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and writing samples, which allowed for an exploration of students' personal experiences, thoughts, and challenges when using linking words in their written work. The analysis of interview responses and writing samples revealed that students recognized the significance of linking words in making their writing clearer and more organized. However, many students expressed challenges in using them correctly, often due to limited exposure or understanding of their varied functions. The findings suggest that while linking words are essential for enhancing writing coherence, students may benefit from more focused instruction and practice in using these words effectively. This research highlights the need for EFL programs to prioritize teaching linking words as part of developing students' writing proficiency.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background

In the current globalized environment, English has become a universal language for communication, especially in international business, academia, and the hospitality industry. As a result, proficiency in English is increasingly seen as essential for students, particularly those enrolled in vocational programs. Effective communication in English, both written and spoken, has become a key requirement for success in various professional settings, including those in the hospitality sector (Hyland, 2013b). This is especially true for students at BILCEN (Bali International Language Center), a course institution under the auspices of the Triatma Surya Jaya Foundation, where students from various study programs are required to take English courses in the first semester. BILCEN has

a unique mission to improve the English proficiency of its students across diverse academic disciplines. All students, regardless of their specialization, including those in hospitality and other vocational fields, are mandated to enroll in English courses. These courses focus on developing core language skills, particularly in writing, as students are required to produce clear and effective written communication in both academic and professional contexts. Writing, especially the ability to produce coherent and logical texts, is a key area of emphasis. However, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students often face challenges in organizing their thoughts and linking ideas effectively within their written work. Writing can be defined as an important productive skill that learners need to convey information (Cahyono, 2009). While, Lee (2003) pointed out, the emphasis on the good writing process in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context can be a major concern for most instructors, textbook authors, and syllabus designers

One of the most important tools for improving coherence and cohesion in writing is the use of linking words, also referred to as discourse markers. Linking words help to establish relationships between ideas, facilitating the reader's understanding of the writer's argument or narrative. These words and phrases serve as connectors between sentences, paragraphs, and larger sections of a text. Linking words/phrases are very useful devices for connecting ideas and, hence, for connecting sentences and paragraphs (Onwuegbuzie, 2016).

Teaching linking words as an important part of developing writing skills. Explicit instruction in the use of linking words aims to enhance students' ability to organize their ideas effectively, improving both the coherence and cohesion of their written work. The central role of linking words in writing has been emphasized in numerous studies. According to Liu (2016), Linking words play an important role in both language use and learning, especially in second language learning. Without these linguistic devices, students may struggle to structure their writing in a manner that makes sense to the reader.

Serrano (2012) also highlights the importance of coherence and cohesion in academic writing. Coherence refers to the logical flow of ideas, while cohesion involves the grammatical and lexical connections that make the text easy to follow. Linking words are key to both of these elements, as they help to connect ideas within and between sentences, allowing the text to flow seamlessly. By learning to use these words effectively, students can improve the clarity and organization of their writing, which is essential for success in both academic settings and professional environments.

Teacher at BILCEN, linking words are introduced systematically through a variety of teaching strategies. These include direct instruction, guided practice, and independent writing exercises. Students are taught how to use a range of linking words, including those for contrast (e.g., "however," "on the other hand"), addition (e.g., "furthermore," "moreover"), cause and effect (e.g.,

"because," "therefore"), and sequencing (e.g., "first," "next," "finally"). By incorporating these linking devices into their writing, students are able to enhance the logical flow of their ideas, making their writing more coherent and easier to understand (Altenberg & Tapper, 1998).

Moreover, Vocabulary knowledge and writing quality are closely bonded. Nation (2001, p. 178) claimed that "vocabulary plays a significant role in assessing the quality of written work."

Despite the importance of linking words, many EFL students struggle with their correct usage. Often, students are unfamiliar with the subtle differences in meaning and function between various linking words, which can result in awkward or incorrect use. Additionally, cultural and linguistic differences may contribute to difficulties in understanding the function of linking words in English writing (Erman, 2007). In many cases, EFL students from non-English speaking backgrounds are not exposed to the same level of academic writing in their native languages, making it harder for them to grasp the concept of cohesion and coherence in English writing. This is where targeted instruction at BILCEN becomes crucial, as it helps bridge these gaps in students' understanding and ensures they can use linking words correctly in their writing (Almurashi, 2016).

The teaching of linking words at BILCEN is not only limited to improving academic writing but also prepares students for professional communication, especially in the hospitality sector. In hospitality management, clear and effective written communication is essential for tasks such as writing reports, creating promotional materials, or drafting formal emails and proposals. For instance, a hotel manager may need to write a report outlining the results of a customer satisfaction survey, or a restaurant supervisor might be tasked with preparing a proposal for a new menu. In such cases, the ability to use linking words to structure the text logically and clearly is critical to ensuring the message is communicated effectively (Leki, 2007).

Research into the teaching of writing skills has shown that explicit instruction in the use of linking words can lead to significant improvements in students' writing. By focusing on the function of linking words and providing students with practice opportunities, educators can help students enhance the overall quality of their writing. For EFL learners, such instruction is particularly beneficial, as it allows them to develop a key skill that is often overlooked in more general language instruction. Studies have demonstrated that students who receive targeted writing instruction, such as learning how to use linking words, tend to produce more organized, coherent, and cohesive texts (Serrano, 2012; Zarei & Mansoori, 2011; Rahimi, 2011).

Additionally, the research conducted at BILCEN assessed the transferability of this skill from the classroom to real-world professional settings. The ability to write clearly and logically is a highly sought-after skill in many fields, including hospitality. As students from BILCEN move into the workforce, particularly in customer service and hospitality roles, the ability to produce clear, well-organized written communication can have a significant impact on their professional success.

Whether drafting reports, writing emails to clients, or preparing marketing materials, students' proficiency with linking words can contribute to their overall effectiveness as communicators (Park, 2020).

In conclusion, the instruction of linking words at BILCEN plays a vital role in developing students' writing skills, both for academic purposes and for future careers in hospitality. This research investigated the impact of explicit instruction on the use of linking words in improving students' ability to write logically and coherently. By examining how this instruction contributes to the development of writing skills, the study provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of targeted writing instruction in EFL contexts. Additionally, it contributed to the broader understanding of how specific language teaching strategies, such as the use of linking words, can enhance the writing abilities of EFL learners in vocational education settings.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative case study design. A qualitative approach is suitable for this study as it allows for a detailed exploration of students' experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding the use of linking words in their writing. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of how instruction in linking words affects writing skills, focusing on the nuances of student performance over time.

A case study design was selected to capture the intricate details of students' development and the effects of targeted instruction in a natural setting, rather than a controlled experimental setting. The research focused on the English writing performance of students enrolled in the first-semester English course, where linking words are explicitly taught as a key component of the curriculum.

Participants

The participants of this study are 15 students enrolled in the English course at BILCEN, a language centre under Triatma Surya Jaya foundation. These students come from diverse academic backgrounds, as BILCEN caters to students from various study programs within the foundation, including those in hospitality management, business, and other vocational disciplines. The diversity in academic backgrounds ensures that the findings of this research can be generalized to a broader student population in vocational education contexts.

The participants were selected based on a purposive sampling method, where students were chosen due to their enrolment in the English course and their willingness to participate in the study. The study focuses on first-semester students, as they are at the initial stage of their English language learning journey. This cohort provides a clear context for observing how the introduction of linking words instruction can impact their writing skills early in their studies.

Inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

1. Enrolled in the first-semester English course at BILCEN.
2. Willingness to participate in both pre- and post-instruction assessments.
3. No prior formal instruction specifically focused on linking words.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection in this study was conducted through several methods, combining both qualitative and observational approaches to gather comprehensive information about the students' use of linking words in their writing.

Pre- and Post-Instruction Writing Samples

To measure changes in students' writing skills before and after instruction on linking words, two writing tasks were administered. The pre-instruction writing sample was collected at the beginning of the semester, before any explicit teaching of linking words takes place. This task required students to write a short essay or paragraph on a familiar topic, where no guidance on linking words was provided.

After the instruction on linking words is completed, a post-instruction writing sample was collected. In this task, students wrote another essay or paragraph on a similar topic, where they are encouraged to use linking words in their writing. This allows for a direct comparison of their writing quality before and after the intervention.

Classroom Observations:

Classroom observations were conducted throughout the semester to document the instructional strategies used to teach linking words and the students' engagement during lessons. Observations focused on how the teacher introduces linking words, provided practice opportunities, and corrected errors. These observations helped to provide context to the students' written performance and offer insight into the effectiveness of the instructional methods used.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To gather deeper insights into students' perspectives on their writing process and their experiences with using linking words, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 15 participants. These interviews focussed on students' perceptions of how the use of linking words has affected their writing, their understanding of the role linking words play in writing coherence, and any challenges they may have encountered in using them effectively. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility in probing for additional information based on students' responses.

Teacher's Feedback and Assessment

Feedback from the instructor were collected on the students' pre- and post-instruction writing samples. The instructor assessed the students' ability to use linking words to improve coherence and logical flow in their writing. The feedback focussed on the accuracy,

appropriateness, and variety of linking words used, as well as the overall organization of the text. This will help triangulate the findings from students' self-reports and writing samples.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected from the pre- and post-instruction writing samples, interviews, and classroom observations were analysed using thematic analysis and comparative analysis techniques.

Comparative Analysis of Writing Samples

The pre- and post-instruction writing samples were compared to identify changes in the students' use of linking words. A rubric was developed to assess several key aspects of their writing. First, the use of linking words were evaluated based on the frequency and variety employed throughout the text. Second, the coherence of the writing was examined, focusing on the extent to which ideas are logically connected and flow smoothly from one to another. Third, cohesion was assessed by analyzing the grammatical and lexical links between sentences and paragraphs. By comparing these elements in both the pre- and post-instruction samples, the study aimed to determine whether students' writing has become more coherent, cohesive, and logically organized following the intervention.

Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify key themes related to students' experiences with learning linking words. Thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns or ideas in the data, such as students' perceived challenges in using linking words, their understanding of the role these words play in writing, and their overall confidence in writing post-instruction. The themes were categorized and analysed to draw conclusions about the impact of linking words instruction on students' writing development.

1. Classroom Observation Analysis

Classroom observation notes were reviewed and coded to identify patterns in the teaching strategies used for teaching linking words. This allowed for a better understanding of how the instructional methods influenced students' learning experiences. The observations also provided insight into how students interacted with the material and whether they actively applied linking words during lessons.

2. Triangulation of Data

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study used triangulation, where data from different sources—writing samples, interviews, observations, and teacher feedback—were compared and cross-verified. This approach helped ensure that the results accurately reflect the impact of linking words instruction on students' writing skills.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Improvement in Students' Writing: Pre- and Post-Instruction Analysis

Based on a comparison of pre- and post-instruction writing samples from *fifteen* English as a Foreign language (EFL) students at BILCEN, a clear improvement in the use of linking words was observed. Before the targeted instruction, most of the students struggled with constructing coherent paragraphs. Their sentences appeared fragmented, lacking transitions that would logically connect ideas. For instance, many used basic connectors such as *and* or *but* repeatedly, with no variation or attention to the logical relationship between ideas.

Following the teaching intervention, students' writing showed enhanced use of linking words such as *therefore*, *however*, *in addition*, *as a result*, and *nevertheless*. The paragraphs became more organized, cohesive, and logically structured. Additionally, the range of linking words expanded, showing that students had not only memorized the words but also understood their function. The following table summarizes the comparison of students' writing performance before and after the intervention:

Table 1. Student Writing Comparison: Pre- and post-instruction

No	Indicator	Pre-Instruction (Average)	Post-Instruction (Average)	Improvement
1	Number of linking words per paragraph	1–2	5–7	+4
2	Paragraph length (words)	85 words	125 words	+40 words
3	Use of varied discourse markers	Low	Moderate to High	Significant
4	Coherence score (based on rubric 1–5)	2	4	+2 points
5	Logical flow and clarity (rubric scale)	Fair	Good to Very Good	Improved

The table above highlights the improvements in students' writing skills after receiving instruction on linking words. The number of linking words per paragraph increased significantly, from an average of 1-2 to 5-7, indicating that students were able to connect their ideas more effectively. Additionally, the average paragraph length grew by 40 words, showing that students could develop their thoughts in greater detail and coherence.

Moreover, there was a noticeable improvement in the use of varied discourse markers, moving from low to moderate to high. This suggests that students were more capable of using a variety of linking words to enhance the flow of their writing. The coherence scores also rose from 2 to 4, and the overall logical flow and clarity improved from "Fair" to "Good to Very Good." These changes reflect a significant enhancement in both the structure and clarity of the students' writing, demonstrating the effectiveness of the instruction.

Student Reflections and Awareness

In addition to the quantitative results, qualitative data from student interviews provided valuable insights into their metacognitive development. Before instruction, most students admitted they were unaware of the importance of linking words in organizing ideas. After the intervention, their responses revealed increased awareness of the function of linking words in enhancing clarity and guiding the reader. The table below summarizes key themes from the student reflections.

Table 2. *Summary of Student Reflections on Linking Words Instruction*

Student Reflection Theme	Before Instruction	After Instruction
Awareness of Linking Words	Unaware of their function; saw writing as placing ideas together	Recognized linking words as essential for coherence and reader guidance
Perception of Writing Process	Writing as listing thoughts	Writing as connecting ideas logically
Use of Linking Words	Rare or mechanical use	Purposeful use of words like <i>because, therefore, however</i>
Attitude toward Writing	Uncertain or neutral	More confident and motivated to write
Example Student Quote	"I just wrote what I thought."	"Now I try to connect my ideas so that the reader can follow me."

The table highlights the cognitive shift experienced by students. Initially, they lacked awareness of how linking words function in writing. Post-instruction, their reflections showed a deeper understanding of how transitions enhance reader comprehension. The students' statements reflect not only improved writing skills but also greater metacognitive control over their writing strategies.

Teacher Observations During Instruction

Throughout the teaching sessions, qualitative data were collected through classroom observations to evaluate how students engaged with the learning activities and how their use of linking words developed over time. These observations revealed increasing levels of participation, collaboration, and self-regulated learning. The instructional strategies such as visual prompts, paragraph reordering, and real-world writing tasks appeared to foster an environment that encouraged both critical thinking and active language use.

Table 3. *Summary of Teacher Observations on Linking Word Instruction*

Observed Aspect	Description
Student Engagement	Students actively participated in matching exercises and paragraph reconstruction activities.
Use of Linking Words in Context	Most students correctly inserted linking words into jumbled paragraphs based on contextual cues.
Peer Interaction and Feedback	Students began to assist peers by identifying weak transitions and suggesting improvements.
Use of Instructional Aids	Visual organizers and real-life writing prompts helped contextualize and reinforce learning.
Writing Fluency and Self-Correction	Increased fluency in joining sentences; students started self-correcting earlier transition errors.

The table outlines key behavioural changes observed during classroom instruction. Students gradually moved from passive learning to active engagement. The integration of collaborative learning and context-driven writing tasks helped foster both practical usage and conceptual understanding of linking words. These observations support the conclusion that instructional design played a significant role in the improvement of students' writing coherence and logical flow.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the impact of explicit instruction in linking words on the coherence and logical flow of EFL students' writing at BILCEN. The findings confirm that structured exposure to linking words significantly enhanced students' writing abilities across multiple dimensions, including the frequency of appropriate linking word usage, paragraph organization, and clarity of ideas.

The improvement in writing skills, as demonstrated in the pre- and post-instruction assessments, aligns with previous research that supports the importance of discourse markers in academic writing. According to Liu and Braine (2005), the ability to use logical connectors effectively contributes to the overall cohesion and coherence of a text. This study affirms that notion, as students showed not only quantitative gains (e.g., more linking words and longer paragraphs) but also qualitative improvements such as better logical progression and a more unified structure in their writing.

Additionally, classroom observations revealed heightened engagement during learning activities. Collaborative tasks, matching exercises, and visual prompts provided meaningful contexts for learning. These strategies align with sociocultural learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Peer feedback during group writing tasks encouraged reflection and self-correction, fostering deeper understanding of how linking words guide the reader through a text.

Students' self-reported reflections indicated increased metacognitive awareness. Before the intervention, many students did not recognize the function of linking words. However, after instruction, they acknowledged that linking words helped organize their ideas clearly for the reader. This shift highlights not only a technical improvement in writing but also a conceptual shift in how students perceive writing as a process of meaning-making, not just idea listing. Below summarizes the main areas of improvement observed through this study:

Table 4. Summary of Key Improvements

Focus Area	Pre-Instruction Condition	Post-Instruction Outcome
Use of Linking Words	Rare and inconsistent	Frequent and contextually appropriate
Writing Coherence	Disjointed and unclear transitions	Improved logical flow and clarity
Student Engagement	Passive participation	Active, collaborative learning
Metacognitive Awareness	Unaware of transition function	Conscious application and self-correction

Focus Area	Pre-Instruction Condition	Post-Instruction Outcome
Instructional Effectiveness	Not evaluated prior to intervention	Effective scaffolding supported writing development

The instructional program's success can also be attributed to its structured and interactive approach, which helped bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. The transition from minimal use of linking words to frequent and purposeful usage suggests that students were not only learning rules but internalizing them as tools for more effective communication.

In conclusion, the findings support the hypothesis that teaching linking words systematically can positively affect EFL students' coherence and logical reasoning in writing. The combination of explicit instruction, interactive classroom strategies, and reflection created a comprehensive learning experience that addressed both skill and understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the effectiveness of explicit instruction in linking words to enhance the writing skills of EFL students at BILCEN. Through a qualitative methodology that included classroom observations, student interviews, and pre- and post-instruction writing tasks, the research demonstrated a significant improvement in students' writing coherence, logical flow, and metacognitive awareness. The findings revealed that most students initially lacked understanding of the role and function of linking words in constructing coherent texts. However, after receiving targeted instruction and engaging in interactive activities such as paragraph reconstruction and collaborative writing, students showed measurable progress. Their writing became more structured, with increased use of varied discourse markers, longer paragraphs, and improved logical sequencing.

In addition, classroom observations indicated greater student engagement and growing independence in editing and peer feedback, reflecting a deeper grasp of writing as a communicative and organized process. The students' reflections further highlighted a positive shift in their attitudes and awareness towards writing. They came to view linking words not merely as grammatical devices, but as essential tools for guiding readers and constructing meaning. In summary, the integration of explicit instruction and practical application significantly supported the development of EFL students' academic writing skills. This suggests that focused teaching of cohesive devices like linking words should be an integral part of writing instruction in English language classrooms. Future research could explore long-term retention of these skills and their transferability to different types of academic writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to the English instructors and administrative staff at BILCEN for their valuable support and cooperation throughout the research process. Special thanks are extended to the participating students for their active involvement and honest reflections, which significantly enriched the findings of this study.

Appreciation is also given to the academic team and management under the educational foundation for providing the necessary resources and a supportive learning environment. Their contribution made it possible to conduct the instructional sessions and gather essential data in a meaningful context.

Lastly, heartfelt thanks go to colleagues and mentors who provided feedback and encouragement during the development of this research article.

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