

## Conjunction Relationships in College Student Writing — Why So Many?

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### Abstract

We tried to find why Japanese college student compositions display such frequent usage of sentence-initial conjunctions, such as *but*, *so*, *and* and *because* despite six years of compulsory English study in the secondary schools. The influence of high school textbooks revealed a skewed representation of these markers and inadequate coverage of different patterns. For L1 transfer, Japanese and English newspaper editorials in Japanese dailies as well as English editorials by native English speakers were examined. The findings revealed that the latter showed higher frequencies than the former. Also, students writing on the same topic in both Japanese and English showed a tendency to use fewer sentence-initial conjunction markers in their Japanese compositions. These observations indicate that high school textbooks need to pay more attention to the teaching of suitable usage of these markers in extended written discourse. Also, students need to build larger vocabulary banks and learn how to quickly access them in order to adequately express what they want to say. The very short essays observed with excessive use of conjunctions to superficially connect discourse very likely resulted from a lack of adequate vocabulary and structures for self-expression.

The misuse of conjunctive devices and connective markers by Japanese learners of English is a problem noted by many language instructors. Tanizaki (1991) examined "the relationship among cohesion, coherence and the quality of writing" and studied the problems involving how students use transitions. She points out the need to place more emphasis on the teaching of cohesive ties between adjacent sentences. Particularly important are transitional ties which need to be effectively taught in order to wean students away from excessive use of *and* and *but* in the sentence-initial position.

Tanizaki refers to the work of Yukiko Nishimura (1986) which states that Japanese students writing expository prose used *and* inappropriately or overused it, thus failing to achieving coherence in their precis writing despite confirmation that they understood the material they had been given to read and summarize. Nishimura (1986) found that students were not be able to properly use conjunctive devices signaling causal relationships, sometimes erroneously using the “all-purpose” *and* instead. Also, of the 47 students studied, only four used *for example* or *for instance*. Nishimura also points out the need to train students in the proper use of cohesive devices.

Another researcher, Yoshitaro Nishimura (1980), points out that *and* and *but* are carried over from Japanese expressions. Nishimura purports the existence of Japanese English which has linguistic, cultural and ethnic features that are so strong that they are even evident in the writing of second generation Japanese descendents living in the United States. Of course, as this latter claim is based on the analysis of one writer, further study would be necessary for confirmation, but Nishimura presents an interesting appeal for the acknowledgement that different styles of rhetoric exist and tolerance of them should be accepted. Of course, he does recognize that the formulaic expressions that are used to open paragraphs in Japanese writing is causing interference when the Japanese writer is using English as a medium.

In fact, this feature of Japanese writing in English is pervasive enough to have been pointed out by Petersen (1988) in his *Nihonjin no Eigo*, which is a popular book aimed at a general audience. It devotes several chapters to the many mistaken usages of conjunction markers such as *accordingly*, *therefore*, *because* and *so*.

At a more advanced academic level, there is a record of a communication problem arising from misuse of conjunction relationship markers. Easton (1982) conducted her doctoral dissertation research on the writing of a Japanese student working on a master's degree paper at the University of Hawaii. She identified patterned differences between the structure in which information was presented by her ESL subject and the expectations of the American readers, in this case, the subject's professors. Easton focused on the blending of linguistic codes, blending being “the lasting creation of new forms (or new uses of forms) by analogy with two different sources,” in this case between English and Japanese. Easton studied four drafts of the subject's paper whose oral fluency masked deviations from standard English. Problems arose when one of the five professors involved with the subject's work refused to read the paper because of the nonstandard usage of the language. One of the problems was that the subject used connectives in the way she would use them in her L1—Japanese. The evaluation of a connective by a native English reader often differed from the usage intended by the subject.

In the present study, we examined the conjunction relationships used by Japanese college students in English compositions. The student compositions were originally obtained for a study on the effects of rewriting and teacher feedback on L2 writing in the Japanese university situation. In evaluating the material, we noted remarkably frequent use of conjunction relationship markers at the beginnings of sentences. Here is one example of a 12-sentence essay that has 10 sentence-initial conjunction markers with the original spelling, punctuation and syntax retained:

I like big home better than small home.

**Because** big home has many room.

**And** country has nature and beautiful river and many flowers and mountains.

**But** it is difficult to go shopping and to take information.

**And** small room annoys me to take care noise.

**Now** I make both ends meet to live alone.

**So** I hate small room.

**But** big city has many good points.

**For instance**, it is easy to get on train.

**And** it has many stimulus and information.

**So** I am changing my mind.

It is difficult for me to select only one.

We wondered how these connective markers were presented in the high school textbooks and why there was excessive use of such a limited number of markers. We also decided to examine student writing on the same topic in L1 and L2 to determine whether the same student would show the same propensity to use conjunction markers. To establish current native speaker usage of these markers and thus be able to offer suggestions for teaching, we examined newspaper editorials which we considered to be the closest form of expository writing available to general public readers.

## Subjects and Methods

### Student L2 compositions

English compositions were elicited from 278 first- and second-year college students majoring in various fields at five different universities. The compositions were originally collected in a study to examine the effects of different types of teacher feedback and learner writing; the four treatments were (1) no feedback, (2) rewriting with reference to first composition, (3) rewriting with indication of error on first composition, (4) rewriting with indication of error location and type on first composition (Miyama et al., 1993).

Two types of compositions were elicited: one was an expository essay (E), a comparison and contrast one, on preference for city or country life and the other was a narrative essay (N) of a series of pictures (from Step Test—Jun Ikkyu, Fall 1991) showing a family that moved to the country in search of sunshine but encountered the inconvenience of long-distance commuting.

On the first day of classes in April, the students were given 30 minutes to write the essays and were also administered a 30-minute cloze test which was used to classify them into high and low groups (Miyama et al., 1993). To evaluate the compositions, quantitative and qualitative instruments were used, and initial quantitative tests of error-free clause units indicated that merely having students do a rewrite was effective as a “learning” strategy (Miyama et al., 1993). The students were divided into upper and lower levels based on cloze test scores. For the upper group, both accuracy and fluency were found to increase particularly for the E essay exercise while for the lower group, these factors increased particularly for the N essay exercise. Overall, both fluency and accuracy rose for both groups in the second attempt at writing with access to their previous work.

### Student L1 and L2 compositions

To examine the correlation between sentence-initial conjunction usage between L1 and L2 compositions by the same student, a separate group of ten third-year college students was asked to write for 30 minutes on “the role of Japan in the world in the 21st century.” They were asked to write first in English and then in Japanese on the same topic with a one-month period between the two samplings. The time interval was set to minimize the effect of the first composition on the second.

### High school textbooks

Fourteen high school textbooks from about the years (1987–1991) that these students were in high

school were examined for the frequency with which the connective markers appeared in them (Table 1). The English I textbooks cover multiskills while the English II B and II C are for reading and composition, respectively. The II A textbooks, which are for listening and speaking, were not included because the focus was on student writing. The text material was keyboarded into a computer and the corpus of 116,548 words was analyzed using concordance programs.

**Table 1.** High school textbooks examined for conjunction relationship markers

English I	New Horizon
	Unicorn
English II B	Crown
	New Crown
	Unicorn
English II C	Creative
	Crown
	Mainstream
	New Century
	New Wings
	Passport to English Writing
	Practical English Composition
	Speak and Write Better
Unicorn	

Searches were done for the conjunction relationship markers listed by Nation (1990) in his book "Teaching and Learning Vocabulary": 1. inclusion; 2. alternative; 3. time, arrangement; 4. explanation; 5. amplification; 6. exemplification; 7. summary/conclusion; 8. cause-effect; 9. contrast; 10. exclusion. The sixty markers searched for ranged from *and*, *also*, *or* and *when* to *thus*, *because*, *but* and *instead*. Particular attention was paid to the sentence-initial conjunctions.

#### Newspaper editorials

For authentic examples of expository writing read by the general public, we examined editorials from English-language newspapers. The samples from newspapers of late September to early October of 1993 included all of the eight main editorials of the *Mainichi Daily News (MDN)* for a one-week period and all of the syndicated or guest editorials (a total of 12) from the *Japan Times* that had bylines indicating that they had been written by native speakers of English. The *MDN* editorials are actually translations of those that appear in the Japanese version. We therefore also examined the Japanese originals for sentence-initial conjunction relationships.

## Results and Discussion

The student composition corpus consisted of the first and second compositions. There was a total of 14,718 words for E1, the first expository essay, and 15,764 words for N1, the narrative essay. The second essays consisted of a total of 17,456 words for E2 and 19,432 words for N2. Concordance analysis showed that the most common conjunctions were the four shown in Table 2. Of course, the student compositions were all on the same topic and thus included similar vocabulary items repetitively. Therefore, the percentages of sentences with conjunctions at the initial position were examined and are presented in Table 3.

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**Table 2.** Most frequently used sentence-initial conjunction relationship markers in student compositions

	Number of occurrences in corpus			
	E1	N1	E2	N2
<i>But</i>	198	177	196	186
<i>So</i>	89	105	92	101
<i>And</i>	61	80	92	98
<i>Because</i>	78	51	73	59

**Table 3.** Student composition corpus data

	Sen <sup>a</sup>	Wds <sup>b</sup>	Sen Len <sup>c</sup>	Conj Mark <sup>d</sup>	Conj <sup>e</sup>
E1 High	12.47	132.66	11.19	38.79%	27.11%
E1 Low	11.24	103.58	9.92	38.42%	32.35%
N1 High	12.10	110.51	9.47	31.31%	24.11%
N1 Low	10.80	93.01	9.12	37.49%	29.30%
E2 High	14.47	161.82	11.73	36.89%	26.52%
E2 Low	11.63	115.21	10.72	34.56%	29.49%
N2 High	14.26	135.12	9.95	26.75%	19.65%
N2 Low	13.40	117.47	9.24	26.32%	22.11%

<sup>a</sup>Average no. of sentences

<sup>b</sup>Average no. of words

<sup>c</sup>Average sentence length

<sup>d</sup>% of sentences with sentence-initial conjunction markers

<sup>e</sup>% of sentences with sentence-initial conjunction (including *but*, *so*, *and*, and *because*)

As reported by the researchers given in the Introduction, an excessive number of conjunctives were found in the student compositions at the sentence-initial position. To see whether the students had received training in the proper use of conjunctive relationships in their high school textbooks, the material in those textbooks was examined by concordance programs. As can be seen from Table 4, the inclusion, time/arrangement, cause-effect and contrast relationships were the most frequently used types. There was an astonishing lack of examples of other relationships, indicating the absence of examples from which the students could emulate.

**Table 4.** Frequency of conjunction relationship markers in Japanese high school textbooks (116,548-word corpus)

	Sentence initial	Sentence embedded/final	Total
1. Inclusion	101	1637	1738
2. Alternative	7	168	175
3. Time/Arrangement	268	522	790
4. Explanation	2	4	6
5. Amplification	5	4	9
6. Exemplification	5	13	18
7. Summary/Conclusion	3	0	3
8. Cause-Effect	56	249	305
9. Contrast	217	389	606
10. Exclusion	10	22	32

Particular attention was paid to the sentence-initial conjunctions and, as shown in Table 5, the most frequent ones were *but*(182), *when*(117), *and*(91), and *then*(73). The normalized frequencies [(actual word count/total no. of words)x 100] show the frequency on a per 100-word basis. Using the normalized frequency, the average number of times a student would encounter a word in textbook can be calculated. For example, the average number of words for an English I textbook is 11,000, 16,000 for a II B textbook and 4,900 for a II C textbook. Therefore, high school students taking all three classes would be exposed to an average of 31,900 words of written text. This would mean that sentence-initial *but* would have appeared an average of 50 times, *when* 32 times, *and* 25 times, and *then* 20 times.

**Table 5.** Sentence-initial conjunction relationship markers in Japanese high school textbooks with the highest usage frequencies

Marker	Number in textbooks			Total	Normalized frequency*
	I	II B	II C		
<i>But</i>	81	73	28	182	0.156
<i>When</i>	58	40	19	117	0.100
<i>And</i>	29	54	8	91	0.078
<i>Then</i>	46	23	4	73	0.063
<i>So</i>	6	16	9	31	0.027
<i>Because</i>	4	4	2	10	0.009

\*Normalized frequency=(actual frequency count ÷ total words in text) × 100(Biber, 1988)

To see what the averages are for authentic texts, the editorial pages of the *Mainichi Daily News* (MDN) and the *Japan Times* were examined for the percentages of sentence-initial conjunction relationship markers. The results are shown in Table 6. What was particularly striking was the frequent use of *but* in the sentence-initial position. Of the eight MDN editorials, five used it once each and one used it twice. However, the usage was even more common with the native-English-speaker editorials: two with five instances, two with four instances, three with three instances, and two with one each, for a total of ten out of twelve editorials showing a least one example. Also, the sentence-initial *and* and *so* were found in five of the native-speaker editorials in a total of nine instances. None of the MDN editorials used *and* or *so* in the sentence-initial position.

The rather frequent use of sentence-initial conjunctions such as *but*, *and* and *so* in native-speaker writing was a surprising discovery as such usage is usually frowned upon when composition is taught in American schools. A conjunction is considered to connect two clauses, and therefore starting a sentence with *but* or *and* means that the surface-form connection has not been properly made. As for subordination, Biber(1988), in a detailed study of the factors characterizing the different genre reports in agreement with Halliday (1976), that subordination, rather than marking greater elaboration and thus being characteristic of informational discourse, is actually associated with the production constraints characteristic of speech. Thus, *because* can be considered as one of the salient characteristics of speech. As a note in his book, Biber also states that while teachers of composition in Western schools may normally advocate the use of a certain style in school, study has shown that the values of society at large seem to dominate. This may be what is happening here. Here we would like to note that despite the common usage of *but* in the sentence-initial position, none of the explanations of the usage of *but* in the *Comprehensive Grammar of English* (Quirk et al., 1985) give the sentence-initial *but* as a written form. It does appear in some examples in the sentence-initial position but these examples are all of oral discourse. A search of other grammar books yielded only one explanation, that in *A Concise Grammar*

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of *Contemporary English* (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973) which states

“10.19 But

The relationships between sentences linked by *but* are the same as those between clauses linked by *but*, though the contrast may be a preceding unit consisting of more than one sentence”

Interestingly, the example given includes a sentence-initial *and*.

Despite the finding that the *Japan Times* (21.6%) editorials had a greater amount of sentence-initial connective markers than the *MDN* ones (14.5%), the student compositions had an even greater number ranging from 26 to 39%. This raised the question of why the students were using so many sentence-initial conjuncts—all compositions used them with 92.7% of the E1 essays using them more than once in an average of 12 sentences and 89.7% of the N1 essays using them more than once in an average of 11 sentences. The second essays cannot be directly compared because four different treatments were administered; the data are presented for reference only. The percentage of sentences with initial conjuncts reached a maximum of 84.6% with one student using 11 initial conjuncts in a total of 13 sentences.

Even Japanese books on the writing of Japanese point out care in the usage of connectives, such as *sate*, *soshite*, *sorekara*, *sonoue*, *oyobi*, *narabini*, *shitagatte*, *shikashi*, *tokoroga*, *tadashi*, *mata wa*, *moshiku wa*.<sup>12)</sup> It seems that this advice is beginning to be heeded. When we examined both the *MDN* editorials and their original Japanese versions for sentence-initial conjunction relationships, the data surprisingly yielded a low 12.8% for sentence-initial markers with an average of 3.75 being used in editorials that averaged 29.13 sentences. Also, there was no correlation between the sentence-initial conjunctions of the Japanese original and the English translation; many were not translated or a marker appeared in the English version but not in the Japanese one.

We also tried to see whether there was a correlation between sentence-initial conjunction usage between L1 and L2 compositions by the same student. Ten third-year college students were asked to write compositions in both English and Japanese on the same topic with a one-month interval between the exercises. The data showed that the students used fewer connective markers in their native Japanese compositions (34.8%) than in their English compositions (40.3%) and, of course, wrote much more; an average of 12.1 sentences in Japanese but only 6.8 in English. The total word volume of the Japanese composition was also about three- to four-fold that of the English version. Of course, this sample size is too small from which to draw any conclusions but this finding suggests an avenue for further research.

In summary, this study was initiated to examine why Japanese college students displayed such extensive use of sentence-initial conjunction relationships despite having had six years of English study before entering the university. We postulated that this was arising due to the lack of proper models in the high school textbooks and from L1 transfer. Examination of the high school textbooks the students were likely to have used showed that the inclusion, time, cause/effect and contrast relationships were rather well represented, but that there was a dearth of examples for explanation, amplification, exemplification and summary/conclusion relationships. These are the very relationships essential to expressing argument and opinion and are important in academic essays. The data also showed that *but* and *and* were among the most commonly used sentence-initial conjunctions—many of these instances were in spoken discourse examples.

A look into the possibility of L1 transfer revealed that current Japanese writing, at least that of editorials and the compositions by the students themselves, actually does not display exceptionally abundant usage of sentence-initial conjunctions. In fact, native speakers of English in the editorial examples studied seem to employ a much larger number of conjunction relationships in the sentence-initial

position.

Based on these findings, we would like to suggest that the Japanese high school textbooks should demonstrate proper usage of all varieties of connectives; they had not done this, very likely because of the nature of the texts covered—many narratives, dialogues and isolated sentences for grammar focus. More attention needs to be paid to exposure to extended written discourse, i. e., paragraphs and essays rather than only dialogues and isolated sentences. The new high school textbooks seem to offer more promise as there is more on paragraph writing, which is a step in the right direction. Also, at the college level, students need to be exposed to various types of text as different text genres differ in their use of conjunction relationships which play an important role in English writing. Finally, the impoverished vocabulary bank of the students or the lack of their ability to access what vocabulary and structures they do have may be preventing students from writing in enough volume to express themselves. This results in very short essays with excessive use of conjunctions to superficially connect discourse in order to present a surface form of a composition.

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