

THE IMPACT OF COORDINATING CONJUNCTION USE ON THE SENTENCE DEVELOPMENT OF THAI AND KHMER UNIVERSITY STUDENT WRITERS

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Abstract

The intent of this paper is to provide a contrastive analysis of Thai and Cambodian university students' use of coordinating conjunctions in English narrative writing essays. The narrative writings of 175 students at a university in Bangkok, Thailand were examined and compared to 79 related essays written by students at a University in Battambang, Cambodia. The data was used to explore the application of coordinating conjunctions as sentence extenders and propagators of constructs. The study found that although the Thai study subjects exhibited a higher distribution rate of coordinating conjunction types, the Cambodian study subjects employed coordinating conjunctions at nearly twice the frequency of Thai students resulting in a more than two-fold increase in sentence length and words per paper. The sentence length for the Cambodian subjects was within the recognized standard sentence length (15-20 words) for English academic writing while the average sentence length for the Thai subjects was nearly six words below average.

Keywords: coordinating conjunctions, sentence development, cohesion, transition words, discourse markers

Introduction and Background

Coordinating conjunctions are the most common conjunction form in English writing and discourse production. The term ‘conjunctions’ exists within a very broad set of grammatical categories and sub-categories that employ such terminology as connecting words, discourse markers, linking words, logical connectors, signal words, transitional devices, and others. Their use is essential in forming connections for cohesion, coherence, and textuality between words, phrases, clauses, and ideas (Provost, 1985; Schills & Dehan, 1993). Cohesion refers to the relationship of meaning that exists within a paragraph of sentences. Cohesion is therefore an interpretation of a clause that is dependent on the interpretation of either a preceding or proceeding clause. These elements can be referred to as the presupposing and the presupposed. For this study, the coordinating conjunctions known as *fanboys* (*for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*) were selected since their use is more frequent in the ESL/EFL writings of students below an advanced proficiency level than the more complex correlatives and subordinating conjunctions (Fry, 1988). Consequently, the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *or* showing addition, contrast, and choice of possibilities respectively are applied similarly within the sentence structures of the English, Thai, and Khmer languages and, in addition, share a comparable rate of recurrence than those of the more specialized conjunctions. Reynolds (2011: 106) states that most modern grammatical guides consider them prototypical coordinators

which share four significant factors; a) they cannot occur contiguously; b) they are not subject to modification; c) they can conjoin constituents of all sizes from word, to phrase, to clause; and d) they link coordinates that are typically communicative. The conjunctions *so*, *for*, and ‘*yet*’ are used at more frequent intervals in English than in the Thai and Khmer equivalents, while the conjunction *nor* is used sparingly in English and has no direct representation in either Thai or Khmer correspondence. Therefore, analyzing the use of coordinating conjunctions in the writings of Cambodian and Thai tertiary research subjects was considered a prime indicator of how the expansion of thoughts and events within a sentence differed between the study groups.

The website ‘speakspeak’ offers these condensed definitions for each of the seven ‘fanboy’s’ followed by examples as to how each may be represented in a sentence:

***so** - for showing the consequence of something.

He was very hungry, so he ate all the cake.

***but** - for contrast

I eat cake, but I never eat biscuits; I don't like them.

***for** - for explaining why [more formal and less common than because].

He's overweight for he eats too many cakes and biscuits.

***and** - the same, similar or equal; without contrast.

His favourite snacks are cakes and biscuits.

***nor** - for two non-contrasting grammatically

negative items (not + not)

He doesn't eat cake, nor does he eat biscuits.

*or - before an alternative

Would you like cake or biscuits with your coffee?

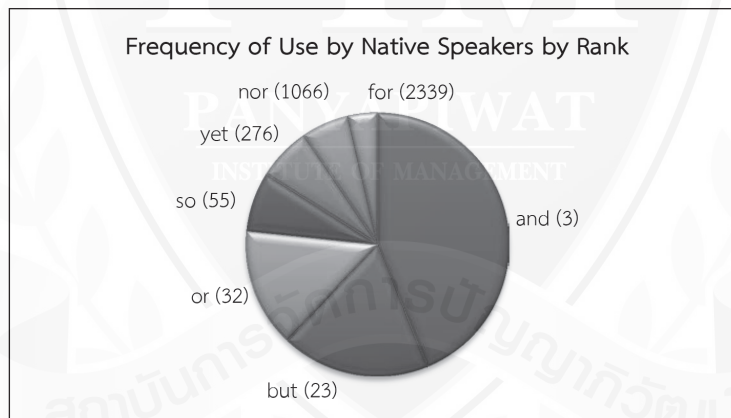
*yet - contrast, despite something [synonyms = nevertheless, but, still]

He's overweight and feels terrible, yet he continues to eat lots of cakes and biscuits.

[He's overweight, but still he continues to eat lots of cakes and biscuits.]

Compatible to the employment of these cohesive devices is their frequency usage in both spoken and written circumstances. The website 'Word Frequency Data: A Corpus of

Contemporary American English' offers a ranking of the top ten thousand most frequently used words in the English language. The extensive list is based on the five primary genres of English. The list includes spoken English, fiction writing, popular magazine articles, newspapers, and various forms of academic material. There are some discrepancies in the actual ranking number of words between one source and another, but the position of the subordinating conjunctions relative to each other on the list remains constant. The pie chart below displays the ranking of the 'fanboys' from a list of the top 10,000 most frequently used words in the English language by native speakers.



Research Design

The purpose of this study is to identify the use of coordinating conjunctions and to draw a distinction between the differences in the selection of conjunction types, frequency of conjunction usage, and accuracy of appropriate conjunction assignments. The contrasts in selection usage centered on which coordinating conjunction was chosen for a particular additive,

adversative, or casual cohesive need or was omitted when a sentence could have been expanded rather than broken in two. The frequency of usage was put through a descriptive statistics analysis to determine a central tendency on which coordinating conjunctions were employed and at which frequency, followed by an exponential ranking from highest to lowest frequency and notes on the contrastive

analysis between the frequency of particular conjunction equivalents in both the Thai and Khmer languages. The appropriate use of coordinating conjunctions was determined by their logical function within a given sentence relative to its necessity to facilitate cohesion with a preceding or proceeding clause.

Population and Sampling

The subjects of this study were 79 male and female Cambodian students (29 freshmen, 12 sophomores, 13 juniors, and 15 seniors) with a variety of majors from the Liberal Arts department at a University in Battambang, Cambodia and 175 junior level male and female liberal arts students from a University in Bangkok, Thailand. The research subjects from both universities had a combined age range of 18 to 26. The Cambodian subjects were given the writing task in February of 2011 as part of a larger research project that examined the use of various grammatical devices employed by English L2 learners in a narrative writing assignment (Gentner, 2015). The Thai subjects were given this task in November of 2013 with the sole purpose of examining their use of coordinating conjunctions. Both participant groups were given the assignment during one of their fifty minute classroom sessions. The papers were subsequently examined with an emphasis on the application and concurrency rates of coordinating conjunctions. The instructors at both institutions informed the research subjects of the basic format for the writing assignment. Students were asked to write a

four paragraph essay on the subject, 'What did you do during the vacation?' The research participants at both universities were advised to; 1) make their introductory paragraph roughly three sentences long; 2) make the two supporting paragraphs approximately four sentences each; 3) make the concluding paragraph approximately three sentences long. Participants at both institutes displayed an academically consistent range of proficiency levels varying from pre-advanced at the high end to pre-intermediate at the low end. No distractions or disabilities in regard to the venue or subjects who participated in the study were reported. No further requirements or suggestions were made concerning the composition of the paper. Students in each class were informed of the fifty-minute time frame prior to the start of the assignment. Each participant in the study gave consent to their participation in this project though they were not informed of the purpose or objectives of the writing since it would have, either consciously or subconsciously, led to inauthentic use of coordinating conjunctions or otherwise affected the natural flow of their thought processes which may have compromised the integrity of the research.

The 254 papers were then examined for coordinating conjunction use. First, the types of coordinating conjunctions used were tallied to find at which frequency they were utilized by the participants. Second, the number of words used per sentence were calculated and averaged to find the mean length of sentences

with or without coordinating conjunctions. Third, the resulting mean sentence lengths of both the Cambodian and Thai subjects were compared to the recommended standard average of 15-20 words per sentence (Garner, 2001; Cutts, 2007; Markel, 2010) for English academic writing. Lastly, the frequency of individual coordinating conjunctions was examined to discover the possible correspondence between coordinating conjunction usage and effect on the lexical length of a sentence.

Findings and Discussions

The research found that the Thai subjects of the study employed a more diverse range of coordinating conjunctions yet averaged only 4.53 coordinating conjunctions per paper while

the average coordinating conjunction use for Cambodian subjects of the study was 10.15 per paper. Though the average number of sentences used by each group varied slightly, the mean average of words employed per sentence and per paper by the Cambodian subjects more than doubled those of the Thai subjects. It was therefore determined that the higher recurrence of coordinating conjunction use to link ideas and clauses played a significant role in the overall length of their papers and the continuity of their deliberations in academic writings. The adversative conjunction *nor* was not applied to any paper by any of the subjects in either group and thus was eliminated from consideration.

Table 1 Mean Distribution of Coordinating Conjunction Types

Students\Conjunction type	<i>and</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>or</i>	<i>others combined</i>
Thai (juniors)	79%	9%	6%	6%
Cambodian (combined)	82%	8%	5%	5%

Table 1 shows a slightly higher dissemination of coordinating conjunction types by the Thai subjects. Both the Thai and Cambodian subjects utilized the additive conjunction *and* at the highest rate for all writings examined, followed by the adversative conjunctions *but*, with

the second highest frequency, then *or* at the third highest frequency. The remaining casual conjunctions *yet*, and *so* were employed at a nominal frequency by both subject groups and thus contributed negligibly to the overall objective of the research.

Table 2 Comparisons of Cambodian and Thai Students' Sentence and Paper Length

Students	Words per sentence	Words per paper	Sentences per paper
Thai (junior)	9.14	102.7	13.17
Cambodian (freshman)	13.43	187	14.73
Cambodian (sophomore)	12.88	165.8	13.35
Cambodian (junior)	15.49	250.8	16.75
Cambodian (senior)	15.6	286	18.2
Cambodian combined	14.35	222.4	15.75
Standard length	15-20	n/a	n/a

Table 2 shows that the Cambodian study participants fell slightly below the standard sentence length in English writing with a freshmen rate of 13.43 words per sentence and a sophomore rate of 12.88 words per sentence. The upper-classmen subjects were, however, within the standard sentence length with the junior-level subjects averaging 15.49 words per sentence and senior-level subjects averaging 15.6 words per sentence. The combined figure for all Cambodian research subjects of 14.35 words per sentence was marginally below the recognized standard. The Thai junior-level subjects employed significantly fewer words per sentence (9.14), than the recommended

standard length. In comparison, the mean number of sentences by the Thai research subjects (13.17) compared to the adjusted mean number of sentences for all Cambodian research subject groups (15.75) differed by only 2.5 sentences per paper, indicating, at least structurally, that the Thai subjects and Cambodian subjects followed the prescribed formula for number of sentences per paragraph and paper. The number of words per paper for the Thai subject group averaged (102.7) compared with the adjusted mean of all Cambodian subject groups with 222.4 words per paper, revealing a more than two-fold average word total.

Table 3 Frequency of Coordinating Conjunctions per Sentence and Paper

Students	Coordinating Conjunctions per Sentence	Coordinating Conjunctions per Paper
Thai (junior)	0.34	4.53
Cambodian (freshman)	0.63	9.37
Cambodian (sophomore)	0.51	6.83
Cambodian (junior)	0.60	10.15
Cambodian (senior)	0.59	10.8

Table 3 shows that Cambodian subjects employed coordinating conjunctions at a higher combined mean frequency per paper (9.2) than their Thai subject counterparts (4.53) exposing a nearly two-fold differential between the Thai research subjects and Cambodian subject writers. The following are sample comparisons of introductory sentences written by both Thai and Cambodian subject writing participants. Though there were instances of Thai participants writing at the recommended standard sentence length and beyond and Cambodian participants writing below the standard recommended length, the following examples were chosen to reflect the mean composite statistics shown in the tables above. Each excerpt below is presented verbatim:

Thai participant (junior year): “Last summer I went to Chiang Mai with my family. We went by car. Chiang Mai is the north of Thailand. We stayed in a hotel.”

Cambodian participant (senior year): “During the holiday my family and I went to visit Pallan city. It was not so far from my house and it was located near the Thai border. We took time for a holiday and came back in the evening.”

Thai participant (junior year): “I had a great time with family. We were all member. We drove to Pattaya. To relax of the work.”

Cambodian participant (junior year): “During

my vacation I mostly stayed home. I did many things such as housework and helped my parent in my family business. Some weekends, I and my family celebrated a party at home.”

Thai participant (junior year): “I went to Ampawa with my family last week. We have been there for two days. At night we stay at Ampawa. We called it homestay. It was very natural. It also very good weather.”

Cambodian participant (sophomore year): “I did a lot of indoor activities such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, and reading the book. I love to cook differend kind of foods and now my cooking is better than before. I can fried, boil, grill, and also can make sushi.”

These examples above show a correlation between the use of coordinating conjunctions and their effect on sentence length. Though the Thai research participants were more diverse in their selections of coordinating conjunctions, the Cambodian research participants’ ability to utilize coordinating conjunctions at nearly twice the rate of Thai participants allowed them to better combine and subordinate ideas that attributed to their overall fluency of expression and a more consistent and acceptable sentence length. Though there are a number of researchers (i.e. Smalley & Hank, 1982; Swan, 1997; Sherman et al., 2010) who suggest alternating longer and shorter sentences for a more rhythmical effect, consistently shorter sentences in whichever type of academic writing negates any benefit

an abbreviated sentence may add to a paper's dynamic. The low frequency use of coordinating conjunctions in the Thai subject's writing contributed to what LeGuin (1998) suggests are syntactically simple sentences with shorter and choppier thoughts that lead to unnecessary breaks in the flow of ideas. The Cambodian research subjects were more efficient in extending ideas and improving sentence cohesion with the use of other transition words such as correlative conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs though these types of sentence extender statistics were not incorporated in this study. Where first language interference is believed to be a contributing factor in ESL/EFL writing deficiencies, the use of the primary coordinating conjunctions *and*, *but*, *or* have run parallel, in terms of purpose, position, and rates of recurrence, in the Cambodian, Thai and English languages.

Conclusion

In this study both Thai and Cambodian subject groups showed a preference for those English coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*) equivalent in both meaning and frequency to coordinating conjunctions in their L1. The Thai subjects were slightly more diverse in their selections of coordinating conjunctions than the Cambodian research participants though both subject groups employed specific coordinating

conjunctions at a similar distribution rate. However, the more frequent use of coordinating conjunctions by the Cambodian university subjects when expanding and conjoining both ideas and events, led to the combined average sentence length of their writings to fall within the recommended 15-20 words per sentence for standard English academic writing. Thai junior-level university participants with the same writing topic, time frame, and procedural instructions had an average sentence length approximately six words below the average recommended length of a sentence. Since the most frequent coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*) appear and operate at corresponding levels in the Cambodian, Thai, and English languages, additional research is necessary to determine what specific factors contributed to these English sentence length disparities.

Several possibilities for additional research are apparent. First, an inquiry into the grammatical structures of both Thai and Cambodian and how the frequencies of *fanboys* compare in both languages to that of English usage. Secondly, a cross-cultural contrast analysis of coordinating conjunction existence and usage in other ASEAN countries is needed to identify patterns within one language and how such statistics could be analysed and juxtaposed to conjunction forms in other Asian countries and ASEAN languages.

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