An Investigation of EFL Undergraduate Students' Achievements in Identifying and Using Transitional Expressions

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Abstract:

Transitional words and phrases are very important connectors by which coherence of a text can be achieved. They are used to link ideas within a sentence, within a paragraph, or within a longer piece of writing. The text cannot be well organized unless coherence and cohesion are taken into consideration, and this is achieved through the proper use of transitions. Students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) must be taught these devices properly because they are essential in improving their writing skill as well as their language. This research is confined to investigating students' abilities in identifying and using transitions properly. The research consists of two parts: the first part presents a theoretical survey of literature and the second part is the empirical one. To accomplish the requirements of the study ٤٠ third year students of the academic year ٢٠١٧-٢٠١٨ from the college of Arts, University of Baghdad are chosen to do the test. The students are given a test with two questions. In the first question, they are asked to recognize the proper transitions and in the second question the students are asked to use the transitions as connectors in a piece of writing. The students' answers are corrected according to Quirk and Grenbaum (١٩٧٣) approach. The final results show that most students have real problems in dealing with transitions.

Key words: Coherence, cohesion, transitional words

تقصي قابلية طلبة الكلية على تعريف واستخدام ادوات الربط

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الملخص:

تعد ادوات الربط الانتقالية احدى اهم ادوات الربط التي تتحقق بها لحمة النص. تستخدم هذه الادوات لربط الافكار في الجملة او الفقرة او اي قطعة انشائية مهما كانت طويلة. كما انه لايمكن وضع اي نص يشكله الصحيح دون استخدام اداة الربط المناسبة. وعليه يجب ايلاء الاهمية البالغة لهذه الادوات عند تدريس طلبة الكلية الذين يدرسون اللغة الانكليزية. يعنى البحث الحالي بتقصي قابلية الطلبة على التعرف والاستخدام الصحيح لهذه الادوات. ينقسم البحث الى جزءين نظري وتطبيقي. تم اختيار ٤٠ طالبا من كلية الاداب/ جامعة بغداد للعام الدراسي ٢٠١٧/٢٠١٨ لغرض اجراء الاختبار. تضمن الاختبار سؤالين. السؤال الاول اختبر خاصية التعرف على الاداة المناسبة لربط جمل مختلفة اما السؤال الثاني فكان عبارة عن اختبار لمدى امكانية الطلبة في استخدام هذه الادوات بصورة صحيحة. وقد اعتمدت نظرية كويرك وغرينبوم (١٩٧٣) في تصحيح اجابات الطلبة. اظهرت النتائج ان الطلبة لديهم مشكلة حقيقية في استخدام هذا النوع من ادوات الربط

١. Introduction

Transitional words (TWs) or phrases are tools used by authors to connect sentences and paragraphs to achieve the required coherence within the text. They are very important devices that work as a bridge between sentences and paragraphs in order to make the text more coherent. Because of their connective function they are mostly called connectives or linking words. Connectives act as a guide for the reader to follow the organization of the ideas and to comprehend a text. Moreover, the proper use of transitional words or phrases makes it easier for a second language learner to communicate and speak language successfully (Ribes, ٢٠١٤:١).

Plančić et. al. (٢٠١٤) demonstrate that selecting the right transitions also helps the reader to think about the way the author binds his or her ideas and whether the connections he uses make sense or not. The author has to choose suitable connectives to convey information in order to guide the reader to understand the relationships between the thoughts and the ideas given in a text. Using these expressions wisely will help the author develop his writing style. However, overusing them may distract the reader.

Plančić et. al. (٢٠١٤:٦٢) state that

the lack of cohesion (connectivity) and coherence (sense making) in writing is not only caused by disjointed thoughts   and ideas but also by the misuse of transitional devices such as connectives or linking words.

٢. Transitions, Nature and Definitions:

The term transitions is rarely used in linguistic studies. Most linguists prefer to use different terms to refer to these grammatical devices. Connectives is the most common term that is used by many linguists. They are also called pragmatic connectives, (Van Dijk ١٩٧٩), and sentence connectives (Halliday & Hasan, ١٩٧٦). Yet terminology is not that important since all the terms refer to the identical function they perform.

TWs have relational function that extends sentences and paragraphs to cover the whole text. A paragraph with clearly connected sentences is said to be cohesive. Hempel (٢٠٠٣) states that a well connected paragraph is more than just a collection of loose sentences. Those sentences need to be clearly connected so that the readers can follow and recognize how one detail leads to the next. This cohesive function is also adopted by Halliday and Hassan (١٩٧٦), who claim that to write a well organized text, both coherence and cohesion should be considered to make the relationship between sentences in a text clear. To achieve this relationship Halliday and Hassan (١٩٧٦:٢٩١) identified five cohesive devices; reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion and conjunction.

Among all the previous terms only the conjunction can refer to the use of transitions to connect words and sentences. According to Trujillo-Saez (٢٠٠٣) (cited in Ribes, ٢٠١٤: ٤) TWs don't work at the sentence level only, but they are also useful to understand the text as a whole, taking into consideration their "morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties". In other words, they should not be considered as elements of the syntactic structure of a clause, since they work beyond the sentence level. For this reason, the use of TWs is usually marked by a comma in writing and by a pause in speaking. However transitions should not be randomly used in written works since they are essential to connect sentences and paragraphs in order to make text forms more coherent (Plančić et. al.,٢٠١٤: ٢)

Once the nature of transitions becomes clear, it is important to provide a proper definition of the term. TWs are linguistic items used to create relationships among sentences, clauses and paragraphs within a text. According to Hemple (٢٠٠٣) a transition is an expression that shows how two successive sentences are related semantically. TWs are connectors that connect your sentences and paragraphs together and provide coherence to your writing. They help the reader to follow the flow of writers' thoughts. (Ribes, ٢٠١٤:١)

٣. Function of Transitional words:

TWs serve different functions when connecting ideas..For example, they signal or indicate the use of additional information, opposition or contrast, cause and effect, emphasis clarification, or relationship in time or sequence (Ribes, ٢٠١٤:١٤). Yet we can't say that each TW has a specific function ,because some TWs are used to give different functions, for example for can be used to give reason in a certain context, but it may be a preposition in another context , more over different TWs can be used to convey the same function.

She came late yesterday, moreover she refused to do her work.

She came late yesterday, in addition to that, she refused to do her work.

(Plančić et. al.,٢٠١٤:٢) state that TWs can have different functions: they inform about the real connections that exist between different utterances, or about the speakers' attitude, so that they make understanding and decoding of the message easier. TWs can be used for several reasons, to enumerate, to compare, to show contrast, to give examples …. etc. On other hand Fraser (١٩٩٠), who is interested in spoken language, focuses on the pragmatic function of the transitions or what she called discourse markers (DMs) She presented six sub classes of discourse marker

Contrastive DMs show contrast between two utterances: *but, however, although*, etc.
ii. *Elaborative* DMs indicate addition or parallel connection between sentences: *furthermore, also, besides*, etc.
iii. *Inferential* DMs express conclusion for what have been mentioned before: *so, thus, accordingly*, etc.
iv. *Reason* DMs are used to give reason for a preceding utterance : *because*, *since*, *for this reason*, etc.
v. *Conclusive* DMs provide conclusion at the end of aparagraph: *in conclusion, to sum up,* etc.
vi. *Exemplifiers* DMs are used to show examples of what has been previously stated: *for example, for instance*, etc

The classes mentioned above are adopted by many linguists with a slight difference. The function of each TW is summarized in the table below:

Table No. ١
The Function of TWs

١. To show addition	and, then, also, another, besides, too, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover
٢. To signal *contrast*	but, , however, yet, in contrast, nevertheless, conversely, still, on the other hand, on the contrary, in spite of this, or, actually, for all that, strangely enough
٣. To indicate *purpose*	For this reason, for these reasons, to this end, for this purpose,
٤. showing *results*	So, , hence, since, thus, accordingly, as a consequence, consequently, as a result, therefore, because of this, for this reason,
٥. To express *order* or s*equence*	first, second, third, (etc.), to begin with, then, finally, hence, next, from here on, , last of all, before, after, as soon as, gradually, in the end,
٦. To express *time*	Now, next, later, afterward, finally, last, lastly, at last, then, subsequently, when, a minute later, soon, thereafter, ultimately, meanwhile,
٧. showing *space* and *place*	Below, above, behind, , beyond, to the right (left), here, there, , nearby, on the other side, opposite, in the background, across the hall, at this point
٨. giving an *example*	such as, for example, for instance, to illustrate, similarly, in the same way , to be specific
٩. showing *exceptions, alternatives* and *objections*	Though, although, despite, , I concede ,while, , to be sure, doubtless, it is true, true, I admit, I grant, admittedly, , regardless
١٠. To show *comparisons*	like, similarly, in the same manner or way,
١١. To *argue*	no doubt, it isn't true that, in any case, deny that, many people suppose, by the same token, , many people claim, it used to be thought,
١٢. To *repeat or summarize*	To sum up, , briefly, in summary, in short, to repeat, finally, on the whole, , in conclusion, therefore,
١٣. To *exaggerate*	above all, as I have said, importantly, again, to be sure, indeed, in fact, as a matter of fact, first and foremost, as has been noted

Transitional Words and Phrases: Showing Relationships Within and Between Sentences rev. July ٢٠٠٥

٤. Problems in Teaching and learning Transitions

EFL students always face difficulties in using some of its terms properly, among these terms are the transitional expressions. According to my experience as a teacher of EFL students, I found that most students

avoid using these words. Actually they only use the most common ones such as; and, but and for example. This can be attributed to two reasons; firstly, the s are not given the required instructions that direct them to use these expressions correctly ; secondly, because of the opptionality of TWs, most students avoid using them because, they think that their omission doesn't affect the grammaticality of the sentence, neglecting the cohesive function of these expressions. In addition, Mashori et. al. (١٩٩١:١١١٩) state that students that are not qualified enough in writing English feel embarrassed when using expressions above their level. Then the teacher should have a central role in improving the students poor background depending on his experience ,training and knowledge.

Plančić et. al.(٢٠١٤) think that students must be motivated to read more and more as it is through reading they may comprehend and fully grasp these slight differences in the meaning of various TWs and phrases, as well as find other new ways to achieve the required cohesion of their texts. This will help them to stay away from the misuse and the overuse of TWs, which is one of the most common style errors in EFL students' writing assignments. Students must be taught that TWs give the reader hint about what follows . For example "and" and "but" are both used to link two clauses or more ,"and" links two clauses at the same level and it is very acceptable to omit it, while "but " is used to show contrast for example:

John played football,(and) Mary played tennis, but Alice stayed at home.

In the above example and is optional, while but is obligatory

Similarly, Quirk (١٩٩٠:٩٢٥) states that words and phrases like " "in addition to," "additionally" also," and "furthermore" indicate that two sentences are related to each other to signal addition. Other word and phrase groups give more details or examples about what has been mentioned previously ("for example," "that is," "more specifically"), logic ("therefore," "thus," "in conclusion"), contrast ("yet," "nevertheless," "on the other hand"). Furthermore, teachers should be aware that students aim at getting good marks, they almost try to save their texts from the criticism of their teachers. Accordingly, they avoid writing or using any word or phrase that may put them in a critical situation like transitional expressions. That is why they tend to use the most common TWs which they know well like and , but and because (Ronald,١٩٩٩:١٤٧)

The above discussion shows the role of the teacher in teaching TWs. Now, it is necessary to highlight the role of the student in learning these expressions. Since students have been instructed that a paragraph is

considered to be cohesive and coherent partly through using TWs, the student has to know how to use them. Sometimes when using transitional words and phrases, it seems attractive to connect one or two sentences without thinking about the meaning that result from this connection, but this can also result in confusion instead of flow of thoughts. Thus, make sure that the link you have created between your sentences is clear and logic. If you write "therefore," for example, make sure that the sentence that follows does flow logically from the previous one (Mustafa and Lal ٢٠١١). Besides that, the student has to examine the use of TWs in his writing. The following questions can be a good strategy that help you as a student to check your writing. If you answer the following questions with yes, then your writing is coherent and you use TWs properly:

- Did you make use of the TW to their best?
- Did you use enough TWs so the reader can follow you smoothly?
- Do the used TWs direct your readers to what is coming next?
- Did you use the TWs in their correct position?
- Do you think that all the related ideas are well connected or they need more TWs.

(Cohesion Strategies: Transitional Words and Phrases) retrieved from https://www.thoughtco.com ›

By following the above points, You've achieved coherence in your paragraph. Hemple (٢٠٠٣) states that agood paragraph that is coherent flows because it is arranged according to a definite plan, and as a result, all the sentences are not just about the same main topic, but they also "stick together" and lead readers smoothly from the topic sentence to the concluding one. This "stickiness" results from the well connected sentences that flow from one to another in a way that makes sense (Mustafa et.al, ٢٠١١)

٥. Quirk and Green(١٩٧٣)
Quirk ,and Greenbaum, (١٩٧٣:٢٨٨) present a long list of transitional expressions which are grouped under the term "logical connecters". They start with the most common connecter and . It is used to link sentences as well as clauses. It can also be used to link a sentence to a complete clause that contains various sentences as in the following example:
"It was a convention where the middle class and the middle aged sat. It was a convention where there were few blacks and fewer breads. And that remain the Republican problem".

They (١٩٧٣:٢٨٨) talk about the enumerative conjunct such as first(ly), second(ly), third(ly), finally, lastly, another, etc. These enumerative are used for listing items, events or actions. Sometimes expressions like far

more or first and foremost are added to the listing to indicate that the listing is a descending or ascending one.

They (١٩٧٣:٢٨٩) posit that other expressions like too, also, either, neither and nor. are used to convey addition. Too and also are additive adjuncts denote that one part of the sentence is an addition to what precedes . Either, neither and nor , on the other hand are used when the two sentences are negative.
We don't go for a walk, we don't watch a film either

Quirk et. al.(١٩٧٣:٢٩١) continued that conjunct like so, as a result, the consequences of… express a result of what is being mentioned previously.
They refused to give him the new job, as a result he sold his car.

For when comes in a sentence, indicates that what is said is a reason for what has been mentioned before:
Quirk et. al.(١٩٧٣:٢٩٢) say that contrast can be expressed by *but, on the contrary, on the other hand* . They indicate that the opposite is true:
He didn't hit her. On the contrary, he was very gentle with her.
But is mostly used when the contrast is with a complete preceding unit that consists of more than a sentence:

"…And it would be fair to say that a number of lives were shaped, to a degree, by the figures and fashions and personalities that flashed upon the screen. But years have a way of doing strange things to people …" .

Another group of transitional expressions introduced by Quirk, et. al. (١٩٧٣:٢٩٣) which includes though, although, besides, even, anyway and anyhow. These expressions are called concessive. They signal that what is said is unpredicted or surprising:

Although they have been married for only two months, they have got divorced this week.
Even can be used as a concessive and additive as in the following example:
"John will even sing a song if you ask him."
The above example can be interpreted in two ways; either singing a song is something unexpected from John or John will sing a song in addition to some other thing he will do.

The last group in this model includes like ; really, actually, of course , certainly and admittedly which are used to affirm the truth of their sentences:
"I wasn't called up by the army. Actually I volunteered"(Ibid, p. ٢٩٣)

٦. The Empirical Study:
This part of the study aims at investigating the undergraduate students' knowledge of recognizing and producing TW. To fulfill the requirement of the study forty undergraduate fourth year students are introduced to a test organized by the researcher in which the students are asked to answer

two questions : in the first question the students have to choose the correct TWs. In the second one they are asked to write a composition, concentrating on using proper TWs to connect their sentences and thoughts logically. The students ' achievements are corrected according to Quirk et.al. (١٩٧٣) .

٧. Result and discussion

While observing the students' answers, I noticed that the students knowledge of using TW varies according to the task they are introduced to. In the first question of the test, the students are asked to choose the proper TW from a list to connect two or more sentences. In this task most of the students succeeded in making the correct choice . They did not find difficulty in recognizing the proper TW (figure ١)
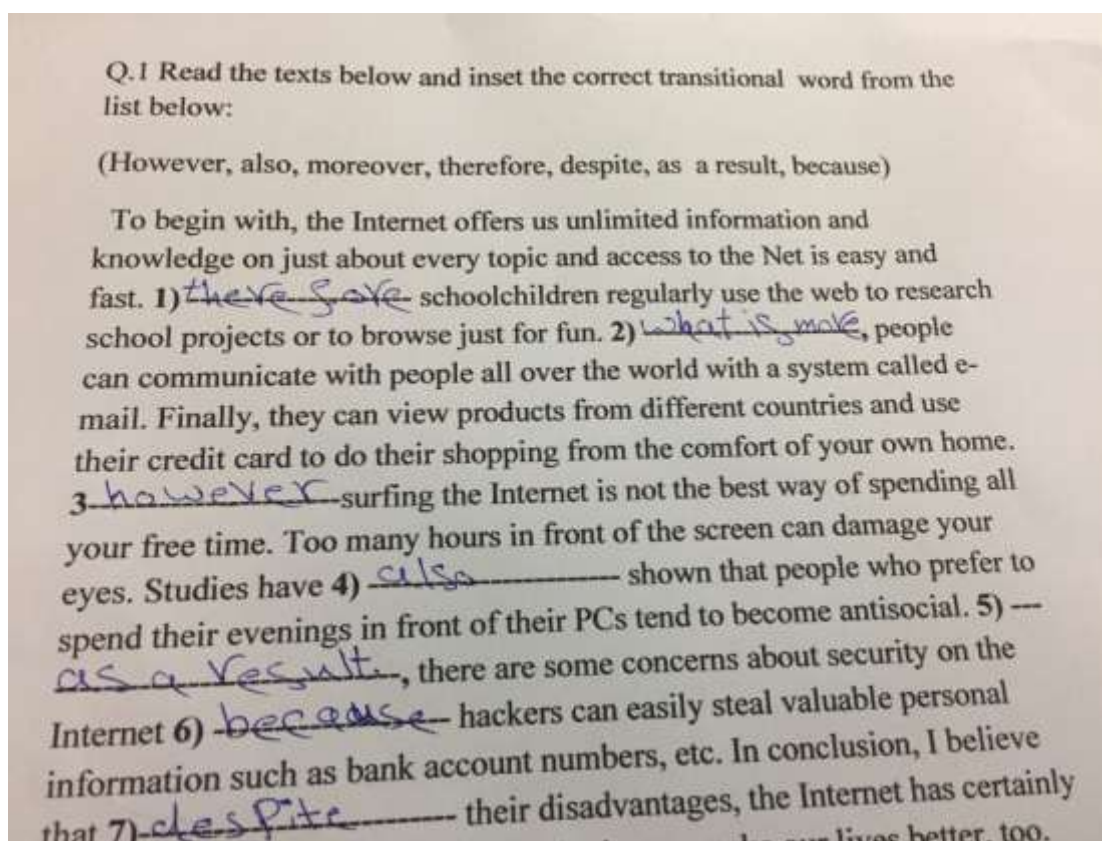

Q.1 Read the texts below and inset the correct transitional word from the list below:

(However, also, moreover, therefore, despite, as a result, because)

To begin with, the Internet offers us unlimited information and knowledge on just about every topic and access to the Net is easy and fast. 1) _there are_ schoolchildren regularly use the web to research school projects or to browse just for fun. 2) _what is more_, people can communicate with people all over the world with a system called e-mail. Finally, they can view products from different countries and use their credit card to do their shopping from the comfort of your own home. 3 _however_ surfing the Internet is not the best way of spending all your free time. Too many hours in front of the screen can damage your eyes. Studies have 4) _also_ shown that people who prefer to spend their evenings in front of their PCs tend to become antisocial. 5) _as a result_, there are some concerns about security on the Internet 6) _because_ hackers can easily steal valuable personal information such as bank account numbers, etc. In conclusion, I believe that 7) _despite_ their disadvantages, the Internet has certainly ... our lives better, too.

Figure (١) A sample of a test by one of the students

On the contrary when the students are asked to write a composition using TWs properly, nearly most students fail to use or misuse TWs. It has been noticed that most students tend to use the most common TWs like and, but, therefore and because and avoid using others like furthermore, even though, so and as a result even when these TWs are more appropriate in certain positions.

The results show that And is the most frequently used TW in all students ' writing (see figure ٢). Yet the high frequency does not indicate

that the students have a good knowledge about using it, because they omit or overuse it in many situations as in the examples below:

"She stayed with me. _ She brought me a hot drink."

"My uncle surprise me by his coming and I was shocked and I couldn't imagine I will be happier than that."
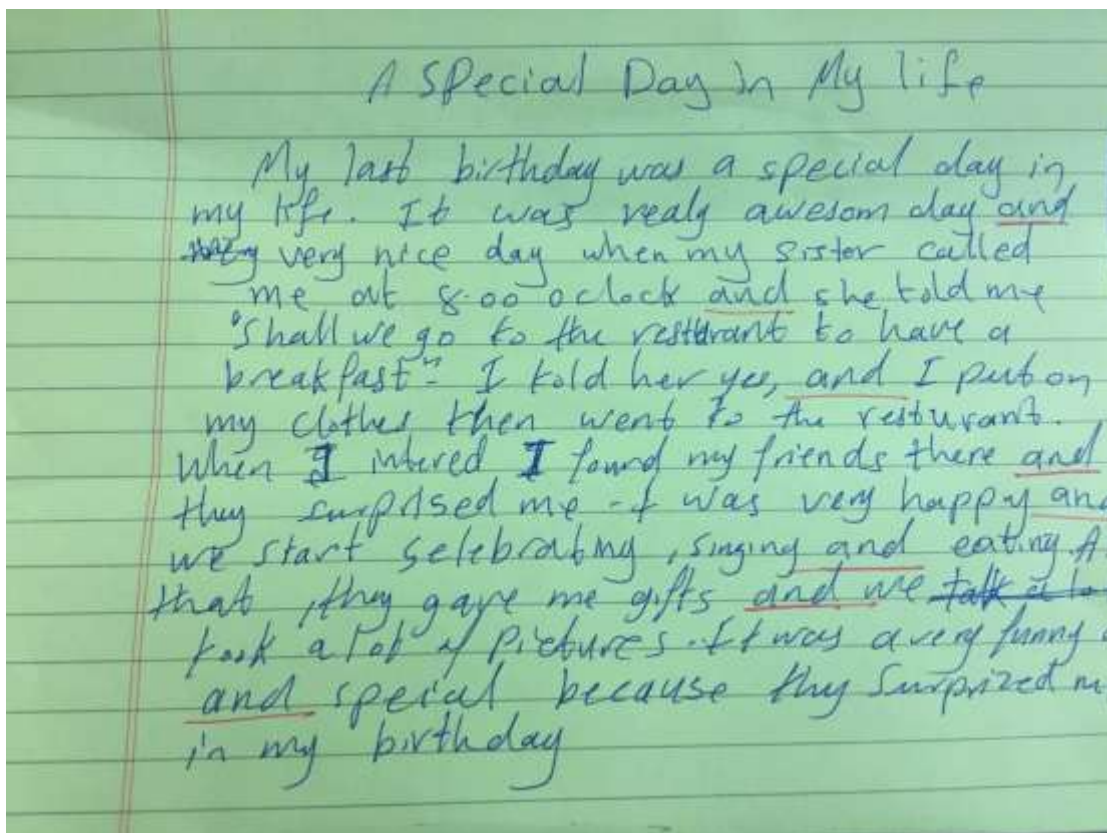

Figure (ᒥ) A sample of one of the students' paper shows the frequent use of (and)

Students use and for different purposes: some students use it to express addition.

"I was so nervous and afraid to drop her down"

Others use it for the purpose of enumeration.

"I received many gifts from my mother, father, sister and my friend Safa"

 Some students did not use TWs to connect the sentences. They depend on punctuation instead. For example they use full stop and begin new sentences where it is preferable to use and.

"MY birthday was a perfect day._ It was an awesome day"

The results also show that because is the only TW that is used to give reason. None of the students use as a result or so

Similarly, nearly all students use but to show contrast. No students use although or even though to serve this function.

The use of the most common TWs ensures what has been mentioned before about the poor background of students' knowledge of these words. This is attributed to the fact that students' goal is to get good marks, accordingly they avoid using words and phrases that they are not sure of' . Moreover, students hesitate to use words and phrases like However, furthermore , in conclusion or as a consequence because first, they feel that these words are above their level, and second, they are not sure of their use and afraid of misusing them needless to mention their poor feedback of TWs which result in various errors:

"My dream becomes true, however, I meet new friends"

In the above example the student has to use TWs of addition instead of however which is used to show contrast between two statements.

Also is very rarely used by students and it is wrongly used by some of them
"My mom went with me and also she was happy."
"She was very kind, also her husband was kind and gentleman."
Finally when students want to structure a text, they tend to use *firstly* or *first of all* to start their composition and ends with *finally*. No student uses *in conclusion* or *to sum up* to conclude her paragraph.

٨. Conclusion

The present study is conducted to investigate the students' knowledge of recognizing and using TWs appropriately and at the same time to bring students' attention to a group of expressions, namely TWs which has an important role in achieving text cohesion. The study aims at teaching students how to write a well connected and cohesive composition through the proper use of TWs .

٩. Recommendations

In the light of the results obtained, the following points are recommended:
١. The use of TWs is one of the problems that face students in learning English. Accordingly more attention should be paid for these words by both students and teachers.
٢. For syllabus designes to include a complete chapter concerning TWs within the text books of composition since they are very crucial in building the coherence of a paragraph.
٣. A pedagogical study can be carried out to develop a teaching method for teaching students TWs.
٤. A similar study can be carried out to investigate other cohesive ties like reference and ellipsis in students' compositions.

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Appendix
The Test

Q.١ Read the texts below and inset the correct transitional word from the list below:
(However, also, moreover, therefore, despite, as a result, because)

  To begin with, the Internet offers us unlimited information and knowledge on just about every topic and access to the Net is easy and fast. ١) --------------------- schoolchildren regularly use the web to research school projects or to browse just for fun. ٢) --------------------, people can communicate with people all over the world with a system called e-mail. Finally, they can view products from different countries and use their credit card to do their shopping from the comfort of your own home. ٣---------------- -------surfing the Internet is not the best way of spending all your free time. Too many hours in front of the screen can damage your eyes. Studies have ٤) ----------------------- shown that people who prefer to spend their evenings in front of their PCs tend to become antisocial. ٥) --------------------------------, there are some concerns about security on the Internet ٦) -------------------- hackers can easily steal valuable personal information such as bank account numbers, etc. In conclusion, I believe that ٧)----------- ---------------- their disadvantages, the Internet has certainly made life easier and, if used properly, it may make our lives better, too. (http://www.cflo.com.cn)

Q.٢ Write a composition of about ٨٠ words on a special day in your life. Use transitional words to connect your paragraphs logically