

EXPLORING CONJUNCTIONS AS TEXTUAL THEMES IN INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' ANALYTICAL EXPOSITION TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Maintaining textual coherence and logical flow remains a persistent challenge for Indonesian EFL students when writing academic arguments. This study examines the types of conjunctions used in students' analytical exposition texts and analyzes how they function as textual themes within the Theme-Rheme framework. Using a qualitative descriptive design grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), we analyzed a corpus of five collaborative essays comprising 83 clauses, written by fourth-semester academic writing students. The analysis identified 57 conjunctions, with additive relations being the most frequent category. Specifically, 20 of these markers operated as textual themes, directing the information flow and maintaining discourse continuity. These results demonstrate that conjunctions are not merely mechanical grammatical tools, but essential semantic resources for organizing a text globally. Consequently, writing instruction needs to shift toward functional linguistic principles to help students manage themes more effectively.

Kata Kunci:

Analisis teks eksposisi; konjungsi;
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ABSTRAK

Menjaga koherensi teks dan alur logis tetap menjadi tantangan yang terus-menerus dihadapi oleh mahasiswa Indonesia yang belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) saat menulis argumen akademis. Penelitian ini mengkaji jenis-jenis konjungsi yang digunakan dalam teks eksposisi analitis mahasiswa serta menganalisis bagaimana konjungsi-konjungsi tersebut berfungsi sebagai tema teks dalam kerangka Theme-Rheme. Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif yang didasarkan pada Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik (SFL), kami menganalisis korpus yang terdiri dari lima esai kolaboratif yang mencakup 83 klausa, yang ditulis oleh mahasiswa mata kuliah penulisan akademis semester keempat. Analisis tersebut mengidentifikasi 57 konjungsi, dengan hubungan aditif sebagai kategori yang paling sering muncul. Secara spesifik, 20 di antara penanda tersebut berfungsi sebagai tema tekstual, yang mengarahkan aliran informasi dan menjaga kontinuitas wacana. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa konjungsi bukan sekadar alat tata bahasa mekanis, melainkan sumber daya semantik yang esensial untuk mengorganisasikan teks secara menyeluruh. Oleh karena itu, pengajaran menulis perlu bergeser ke arah prinsip-prinsip linguistik fungsional guna membantu mahasiswa mengelola tema dengan lebih efektif.

INTRODUCTION

Writing proficiency serves as a fundamental pillar of academic success within higher education environments, demanding that university students produce systematic and logical texts aligned with scholarly conventions. According to Hyland (2003), writing extends far beyond the mechanical transcription of thoughts; it represents a dynamic process of meaning-making tailored to specific communicative purposes. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering this skill introduces substantial linguistic and cognitive complexities, as writers must simultaneously manage discourse structures and critical arguments (Harmer, 2004; Nunan, 2003). Crucially, effective academic communication relies heavily on a writer's capacity to establish explicit logical connections between ideas, transcending basic grammatical accuracy or lexical selection. While a text achieves structural and semantic integrity when its constituent elements are cohesively tied (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), empirical evidence reveals that Indonesian tertiary students frequently struggle with text cohesion. Their argumentative essays often display disconnected paragraphs and fragmented sentence linkages, indicating a clear need to investigate the precise linguistic mechanisms that drive text cohesion in student writing.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) addresses this structural challenge by conceptualizing language as a functional architecture for making meaning. Within this framework, cohesion represents the semantic network comprising reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, that binds disparate textual elements into a unified whole. Among these resources, conjunctions hold a highly critical position because they explicitly signal the logical relationships (e.g., additive, adversative, causal, and temporal) between clauses (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Martin & Rose, 2007). Recent empirical work in foreign language education has explored these connectors from various angles. For instance, Rodliyah and Liani (2022) observed that cohesive patterns in Indonesian students' expository texts are often restricted to a repetitive set of basic conjunctions. While Alawerdy and Alalwi (2022) demonstrated that proficiency in managing conjunctions correlates positively with overall writing performance, Romawi and Sundari (2024) reported that even when EFL students utilize a wide array of cohesive devices, they frequently struggle to maintain macro-level sentence coherence. These studies collectively indicate that conjunctions are active semantic resources vital for discourse organization.

Despite the substantial literature surrounding conjunctions, contemporary research has historically focused on syntactic classification, error analysis, or simple frequency counts within student corpora. These traditional, localized frameworks often fail to explain how such cohesive devices influence the broader structural organization of a text. From an SFL perspective, the textual metafunction governs the configuration of information, ensuring that a message is delivered in a coherent manner (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This operationalization is heavily embedded within the Theme-Rheme structure, where the Theme acts as the initial point of departure for the message and the Rheme develops that information. Within this arrangement, conjunctions frequently occupy the clause-initial slot, thereby operating as textual themes that explicitly bridge previous statements with upcoming information. Although strategic theme management directly underpins global text coherence (Mukhamirudin, 2025; Suharsono et al., 2024), empirical investigations detailing how conjunctions operate simultaneously as grammatical cohesive devices and as textual themes within the analytical exposition texts of Indonesian students remain scarce. Most existing literature prioritizes quantitative frequency tallies, leaving the intersection between cohesive conjunctions and thematic progression largely unexamined. To bridge this empirical gap, the current study synthesizes Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion model with the textual metafunction framework articulated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). This study aims to identify the specific types of conjunctions deployed by Indonesian EFL students in their analytical exposition texts and analyze their corresponding functions as textual themes in message organization. By moving beyond surface-level frequency counts, this structural analysis uncovers how student writers leverage sentence-initial connectors to manage information flow globally. Ultimately, these insights are expected to enrich the scholarship on foreign language cohesion, expand

SFL applications within Indonesian higher education, and offer valuable pedagogical implications for genre-based writing instructions.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design framed within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to investigate the types and textual functions of conjunctions in student essays. The focus of this study is the use of conjunctions as textual themes in students' analytical exposition texts. This approach operationalized the qualitative research principles found in Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to achieve a comprehensive and contextual interpretation of the textual data. The research participants included 30 fourth-semester English Language Education students enrolled in an Academic Writing course. These students were divided into five working groups, with each group collaboratively producing one text. This process generated a research corpus of five collaborative analytical exposition texts containing a total of 83 clauses. We applied a total sampling technique to evaluate this entire available dataset, ensuring an exhaustive analysis of the student-generated prose. Data collection relied on documentation, utilizing a systematic and repetitive reading process to isolate conjunctions and identify their clause-initial positions. This technique integrated the document analysis framework established in Bowen (2009) for structured text evaluation. To ensure data trustworthiness and credibility, the study employed an investigator triangulation approach (Patton, 2002). The authors independently coded the text segments and cross-examined the identified clauses until reaching a full consensus, a measure that effectively minimized subjective analytical bias. The analysis incorporated the interactive qualitative stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). To classify the conjunctions and map their roles within the Theme-Rheme structure, the study integrated Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion model with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) textual metafunction framework, using the analytical procedures detailed in Eggins (2004). The identified conjunctions were first classified into additive, adversative, causal, and temporal types. Subsequently, we evaluated their clause-initial positions to determine how they explicitly functioned as textual themes to manage information flow and maintain discourse connectivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of an analysis of conjunctions found in five analytical exposition texts written by fourth-semester students in the Academic Writing course. The analysis focuses on two main aspects aligned with the research objectives: the types of conjunctions used in the texts and their functions as textual themes within the Theme-Rheme structure. The research findings are presented step-by-step based on the research questions, beginning with the identification of conjunction types and proceeding to the analysis of their textual functions in message organization.

A. Types of Conjunctions Used in Students' Analytical Exposition Texts

To address the first research question, all conjunctions found in the five analytical exposition texts were identified and classified based on the categories proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) namely additive, adversative, causal, and temporal conjunctions. The results of this classification are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Types of Conjunctions Used in Students' Analytical Exposition Texts

No.	Type of Conjunction	Frequency
1	Additive	31
2	Adversative	7
3	Causal	12
4	Temporal	7
	Total	57

Based on Table 1, the total 57 conjunctions found in the five analytical exposition texts, additive conjunctions were the most dominant type, appearing 31 times. Next, causal conjunctions appeared 12 times, while adversative conjunctions and temporal conjunctions were each found 7 times. These findings indicate that students more frequently use conjunctions that serve to add, expand, or develop ideas compared to conjunctions that mark contrast or temporal sequence. This finding is consistent with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) view that additive conjunctions function to extend meaning by providing additional information and supporting details within a text. The predominance of additive conjunctions also supports the findings of Rodliyah and Liani (2022), who reported that students' exposition texts tend to rely heavily on additive relations to develop arguments and maintain textual cohesion.

The prevalence of additive conjunctions indicated that students tended to construct arguments step by step by adding information, which was consistent with the nature of analytical exposition texts as argumentative texts. Within the framework of Halliday and Hasan (1976), additive conjunctions served to expand meaning by adding information, examples, or reinforcement to the preceding idea. Meanwhile, the significant presence of causal conjunctions indicated that students also attempted to present cause-and-effect relationships in their arguments. These results indicated that, in general, students had utilized conjunctions as cohesive devices to maintain connections between ideas in the text. These findings were consistent with the studies conducted by Rodliyah and Liani (2022) and Alawerdy and Alalwi (2022), which showed that the use of cohesive devices, including conjunctions, contributed to the coherence of EFL students' writing. To provide a more detailed overview of the forms of conjunctions used within each category, the results of the identification of each conjunction are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Realization of Conjunction Types in Students' Analytical Exposition Texts

No.	Type of Conjunction	Conjunctions Found
1	Additive	and, also, furthermore, in addition, additionally, such as, beside all of that, beside physical advantage
2	Adversative	however, but, rather than, instead of
3	Causal	because, because of, due to, therefore, so, if, as a direct result of
4	Temporal	then, before, while, from now on
	Total Forms	23 lexical realizations

As shown in Table 2, conjunctions in the students' texts were realized through various lexical forms. In the additive category, the forms identified included and, also, furthermore, in addition, additionally, such as, beside all of that, and beside physical advantage. In the adversative category, the forms found included however, but, rather than, and instead of. In the causal category, the forms identified included because, because of, due to, therefore, so, if, and as a direct result of. As for the temporal category, the forms were realized through then, before, while, and from now on. These findings indicated that students employed various forms of conjunctions to establish logical relationships within the text. This finding is consistent with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory, which states that conjunctions function to signal semantic relations between clauses and text segments, thereby contributing to textual cohesion. The result also supports the findings of Rodliyah and Liani (2022), who reported that EFL students utilized different conjunction forms to connect ideas and maintain coherence in exposition texts.

The variation in conjunction forms demonstrated that students did not merely rely on basic forms such as "and" and "but," but also employed a wider range of conjunctions to emphasize semantic relationships within the text. This finding was significant because analytical exposition texts require writers to develop logical and well-structured arguments. From the perspective of Halliday and Hasan (1976), the variation in conjunction forms reflected the ways writers connected text segments to create a coherent whole. The dominance of the form "and" in the additive category indicated that students still tended to choose the simplest and most familiar form for expanding information. Meanwhile, the occurrence of forms such as "however," "therefore," and "furthermore" indicated that students had begun to employ more varied conjunctions to express contrast, cause-and-effect relationships, and the expansion of arguments. The use of these conjunctions suggested an awareness of the need to organize ideas logically and guide readers through the development of arguments. This finding supports the study of Alawerdy and Alalwi (2022), which showed that the appropriate use of a variety of conjunctions contributed to the quality and coherence of EFL students' academic writing.

It also aligns with Halliday and Hasan's (1976) view that conjunctions function as cohesive resources that help establish meaningful relationships between clauses and sentences within a text.

B. Functions of Conjunctions as Textual Themes in Theme-Rheme Structure

To address the second research question, every conjunction found in the five analytical exposition texts was analyzed based on its position within the Theme-Rheme structure. This analysis focused on conjunctions that appeared at the beginning of a clause and functioned as textual themes. In this position, the conjunctions helped establish connections between preceding information and the message developed in the subsequent clause, thereby contributing to the flow of information within the text. The results of the identification show that not all conjunctions in the data function as textual themes, but only certain conjunctions that appear at the beginning of a clause and play a role in directing the flow of information. These findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Conjunctions Functioning as Textual Themes

No.	Conjunction / Conjunctive Adjunct	Frequency
1	In addition, Or, Therefore, So, From now on, Before, Additionally, Because, As if	1
2	If, Furthermore, Due to, Beside	2
3	However	3
Total		20

Based on Table 3, 20 conjunctions were identified that functioned as textual themes in the five student texts. The most frequently occurring form was *however*, appearing three times, followed by *if*, *furthermore*, *due to*, and *beside* which each appeared twice. Meanwhile, other forms such as *in addition*, *or*, *therefore*, *so*, *from now on*, *before*, *additionally*, *because*, and *as if* each appeared once.

The emergence of conjunctions as textual themes indicated that students used conjunctions not only to link ideas but also to organize the flow of information. Within the framework of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), textual themes functioned as clause openers that prepared the reader to receive the main information presented in the rheme. In other words, conjunctions that appeared at the beginning of a clause helped establish discourse coherence and clarify logical relationships within the text. The use of "however" as a textual theme, for example, signaled a shift or contradiction in relation to previous information, while "furthermore" and "in addition" expanded the arguments already presented. These findings were in line with Suharsono *et al.* (2024), who emphasized that effective thematic management supported systematic relationships between ideas, and with Mukhamirudin (2025), who found that textual themes contributed to maintaining coherence between clauses in academic writing.

These findings also indicated that students did not only use conjunctions to connect ideas in general, but also placed several conjunctions at the beginning of clauses to introduce new information. This pattern was consistent with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) view that the textual theme helped organize message development within a clause. In the data, these textual themes appeared in both main clauses and subordinate clauses that formed complex structures, showing that students had begun to apply thematic organization in constructing more coherent texts. To clarify the realization of Theme-Rheme in the data, several representative examples are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.*Examples of Textual Themes in Theme-Rheme Structure*

No.	Clause	Textual Theme	Topical Theme	Rheme
1	Due to the overweight, the heart will work harder.	Due to	the overweight	will work harder
2	Furthermore, obesity potentially rises blood cholesterol and blood pressure.	Furthermore	obesity	potentially rises blood cholesterol and blood pressure
3	In addition, being too fat can change the amount of sugar in the blood.	In addition	being too fat	can change the amount of sugar in the blood
4	However, many expert said that exercise has great role in making our body healthy.	However	many expert	said that exercise has great role in making our body healthy
5	Or we can go cycling while enjoy the leisure time.	Or	we	can go cycling while enjoy the leisure time
6	Therefore, by buying local groceries we are helping reduce the amount of carbon dioxide produced.	Therefore	by buying local groceries	we are helping reduce the amount of carbon dioxide produced
7	From now on we should consume fresh local groceries to reduce global warming.	From now on	we	should consume fresh local groceries to reduce global warming
8	Before we are going to smoke, it is better to look at the fact.	Before	we	are going to smoke, it is better to look at the fact
9	If we smoke five cigarettes a day, we are six times more likely to die of lung cancer than a non-smoker.	If	we	smoke five cigarettes a day, we are six times more likely to die of lung cancer than a non-smoker
10	Additionally, children of smoker are more likely to develop bronchitis and pneumonia.	Additionally	children	of smoker are more likely to develop bronchitis and pneumonia

11	Because they do make much money from smoking habit, smoking is really good for tobacco companies.	Because	they	do make much money from smoking habit
12	As if he had smoked fifteen cigarettes, the non-smoker breathes as much as substance causing cancer.	As if	he	had smoked fifteen cigarettes

As shown in Table 4, examples of Theme-Rheme structures that demonstrate how conjunctions function as textual themes in the students' texts. In examples such as "Due to being overweight, the heart will work harder" and "Therefore, by buying local groceries we are helping reduce the amount of carbon dioxide produced," conjunctions appear at the beginning of the clause and are followed by the topical theme and the rheme. A similar pattern was also evident in clauses such as "However, many experts said that exercise played a significant role in keeping our bodies healthy." This pattern was in line with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) explanation that textual themes functioned to direct the reader toward the rheme, and it was also consistent with Suharsono *et al.* (2024) and Mukhamirudin (2025), who showed that thematic elements at the beginning of clauses helped maintain coherence and continuity in academic writing. "From now on, we should consume fresh local groceries to reduce global warming," and "Before we start smoking, it is better to consider the facts." These findings indicate that students have used conjunctions to guide readers from initial information toward the development of the message within the clause.

The examples in Table 4 illustrate that textual themes play a crucial role in shaping the flow of information in analytical exposition texts. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the Theme serves as the starting point of the message, while the Rheme is the part that develops the information following the Theme. When a conjunction is placed at the beginning of a clause, it functions as a textual theme that connects the clause to the preceding discourse context, and the topical theme introduces the main point of information to be explained. *For example, in the clause "However, many experts said that exercise plays a significant role in keeping our bodies healthy,"* the word "however" indicates a contrastive relationship, while the subsequent part develops the main argument. This pattern indicates that students have utilized conjunctions to construct messages in a gradual and logical manner. This finding also demonstrates that the Theme-Rheme structure in the data serves not only to organize information but also to maintain the continuity of the argument, as emphasized in the studies by Suharsono *et al.* (2024) and Mukhamirudin (2025) regarding the importance of thematic development in academic writing.

CONCLUSION

This study accentuates the multifaceted utility of conjunctions in academic prose, demonstrating their capacity to operate simultaneously as localized cohesive ties and as macro-structural instruments. The empirical evidence indicates that the structural integrity of analytical exposition texts depends heavily on how these cohesive resources are distributed and positioned within the discourse. Rather than serving as mere mechanical links between clauses, conjunctions function as vital semantic pathways that allow student writers to balance information expansion with systematic argument development. The detailed mapping of these items reveals a distinct rhetorical profile among Indonesian EFL learners, characterized by a clear reliance on additive and causal transitions to layer reinforcing evidence, while strategically employing adversative and temporal markers to navigate logical contrasts and chronological sequences. More importantly, when positioned at the clause-initial boundary, these connectors assume a crucial operational role as textual themes. In this capacity, they serve as cognitive signposts that prime the reader and bridge prior assertions with upcoming information in the rheme, thereby safeguarding the text against fragmented discourse flow. These insights offer significant pedagogical implications for foreign language writing instruction, exposing the limitations of conventional, grammar-heavy frameworks that focus strictly on sentence-level accuracy. To foster advanced academic literacy, writing curricula should deliberately incorporate Systemic Functional Linguistics principles. Shifting the instructional paradigm toward functional grammar will encourage students to move beyond basic lexical repetition and actively engage in strategic theme management. Ultimately, empowering learners with this structural awareness enables them to produce highly coherent, systematic, and rhetorically persuasive academic texts tailored to university conventions.

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Author Contribution

Allisa Putri Nurullita: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Data Analysis and Original Draft Preparation.

Yogi Setia Samsi: Supervision, Reviewing, and Editing

Sidik Indra Nugraha: Supervision, Reviewing, and Editing

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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