

Chapter One

Introduction

The present study aims to investigate the influence of logical conjunctions on EFL students' English reading comprehension. Since conjunctions are closely related to reading comprehension (Geva, 1992; Nunan, 1993; Cain, 2003; and others), this thesis mainly focuses on whether conjunctions play a facilitating role or not as well as explores in what aspects of reading comprehension they have impact on. Also, some previous studies have found out the different comprehension difficulty of conjunctions (Gardner, 1983; Chou, 2002; Pretorius, 2006; and others); thus, the difficulty order of different types of conjunctions is included in the discussion.

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One gives a brief introduction of the whole research, presenting the background and motivation, the purpose and significance of the study, and definition of terms. Chapter Two reviews the related literature in four aspects: theories of conjunctions, the relationship between conjunctions and reading, effects of conjunctions on reading comprehension, and comprehension of different conjunctions. Chapter Three describes the method, including participants, materials, testing procedures and data analysis. Chapter Four presents the results of the experiments along with the discussion. Chapter Five concludes the whole research by summarizing the major findings, bringing up the pedagogical implications and the limitations of the study, and finally offering suggestions for future research.

Background and Motivation

Conjunctions play an essential role in text relations. Halliday and Hasan (1976) proposed that conjunctions, which are explicit linguistic devices, join two or more clauses together to express a coherent relation in the text. If conjunctions function to combine ideas together and signify the relationship between segments in a text, they help to direct readers' attention to important text information (Lorch & Lorch, 1986). Therefore, their contribution to the connection of texts reflects their position in a reader's reading performance.

A number of researches have illustrated the relationship between students' knowledge of logical conjunctions and their reading achievements (Robertson, 1968; Stoodt, 1972; Geva, 1992; Cox et al.1990; Goldman & Murray, 1992; Wu,1994; Franks et al. 1997; Chung, 2000; Cain, 2003). In the studies of both L1 and L2, it is found that students' comprehension of conjunctions is positively correlated to their reading performance, suggesting that a good command of conjunctions is the key to a successful understanding of textual information (Nunan, 1993; Geva, 1992; Goldman & Murray, 1992; Wu, 1994; Chung, 2000; Cain, 2003). Nunan (1993) claimed that "logical relations of the type marked by conjunctions are the most difficult of the cohesive relationship for junior secondary pupils to identify in school texts" (p110), emphasizing the crucial role conjunctions play in processing written texts. Naturally, it is evidenced that less-skilled readers are separated from skilled readers by this kind of ability (Geva, 1992; Goldman & Murray, 1992; Wu, 1994; Chung, 2000; Cain, 2003).

In addition to the relationship between conjunctions and reading comprehension,

the effects of logical conjunctions on the reading performance have received plenty of attention. Most studies investigating this issue were based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) classification, which categorized conjunctions into four types by different logical relations: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. The focus of the discussion is whether explicit conjunctions facilitate reading comprehension or not. The results have been contradictory. Some studies claim that conjunctions are beneficial to reading performance (e.g. Geva & Ryan, 1985; Loman & Mayer, 1983; Chung, 2000; and others), others assert that a reader's comprehension of the texts is not affected or even inhibited (e.g. Crewe, 1990; Millis et al. 1993; and others), and still others present mixed results, maintaining that not each conjunction has the same effect (e.g. Murray, 1995; Sanders & Noordman, 2000; and others). Furthermore, some hypotheses (Millis and Just, 1994; Murray, 1997) were proposed to account for the findings. For example, Reactivation Hypothesis by Millis and Just (1994) states that conjunctions reactivate the memory of the previous segments and thus lead to faster processing of the text and generate better answers to the comprehension questions. Murray (1997) advanced a Continuity Hypothesis, by which he claimed that "logical connectives serve as explicit markers of continuity and discontinuity in a discourse" (p. 229), arguing that "not all logical connectives affect sentence processing and integration in the same manner" (p. 228). In a word, the effects of logical conjunctions have been widely discussed; nevertheless, a conclusion has not been reached yet.

As mentioned, the knowledge of conjunctions determines the reading comprehension. However, studies have detected that students have difficulties with

them. “ Less-skilled readers lack knowledge of various text structure marker (conjunction), a deficit that is reflected in their ability to form expectations about the function of forthcoming information in a text and in the accuracy with which logical relations are spelled out” (Geva, 1983, p.402). To solve this problem, a good many studies have explored the different comprehension difficulty of conjunctions. For instance, Stoodt (1972), Gardner (1983), Steffani & Nippold (1997) have listed some comparably more difficult conjunctions during the process of reading, such as *so*, *while*, *moreover*, *nevertheless*, etc. Even more studies dealt with this issue by comparing difference in the level of difficulty among types of logical conjunctions (e.g. Chou, 2002; Ozono & Ito, 2003; Pretorius, 2006; and others). Although the difficulty sequence among conjunctions presented varied, these studies designate that age and language proficiency are important factors to the comprehension of logical conjunctions.

Purpose of the Study

Given that the issue of the roles logical conjunctions play in reading comprehension has not come to a satisfactory conclusion, the present study aims to investigate the influence of logical conjunctions on Taiwanese vocational high school students’ reading comprehension. It consists of three main purposes:

1. To clarify if logical conjunctions are able to facilitate EFL students’ English reading comprehension
2. To discover what aspects of reading comprehension are affected by logical conjunctions
3. To determine the sequence of comprehension difficulty among four types of

logical conjunctions.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in the following aspects. First, it will substantiate the previous research related to the effects of conjunctions on reading comprehension. Second, the results of the study will provide English teachers in vocational high school with insights that different performance in reading may be caused by inconsistent degree of difficulty among conjunctions as well as readers' proficiency level. Third, the study will offer practical suggestions for English teachers to teach reading more effectively.

Definition of Terms

Conjunctions. The term "conjunction" in this study was not restricted to a certain part of speech. It referred to words and phrases that function to connect two clauses, sentences or paragraphs. Conjunction was also named logical connective, connector, conjunct, relational marker, or connecting signal, consisting of various forms. It can be a single-word conjunction, like *and*, *but*, *so*, *while*, etc. It can also be a phrasal conjunction, such as *for example*, *in addition*, *on the contrary*, *as a result*, etc. Adverbial conjunctions were included as well, like *besides*, *therefore*, *however*, etc. In the present study, the classification scheme of conjunctions was adopted from Halliday and Hasan's (1976) research. Conjunctions were divided into categories by these four types of logical relations: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal.

Frequently-used conjunctions were listed as examples below:

1. Additive conjunctions: *and*, *besides*, *for example*, *that is*
2. Adversative conjunctions: *but*, *however*, *although*, *on the other hand*

3. Causal conjunctions: *because, so, therefore, as a result*
4. Temporal conjunctions: *at first, finally, next, when, before.*