AN ENGLISH WRITING COURSE STRUCTURE: PLURALISTIC APPROACHES TO ENHANCING UNDERGRADUATES' UNDERSTANDING OF THE USE OF SIGNAL WORDS

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ABSTRACT

In Taiwan, most English writing classes have been taught in EFL settings in many universities for decades. Research on English writing classes has been conducted in various directions. However, the use of signal words in undergraduates' compositions has not yet investigated on the basis of signal word categories for different types of essays. In this study, pluralistic approaches to teaching writing in English language were applied. The purpose of this study was to propose an English writing course structure in which English-only lectures were delivered and three categories of signal words that show (1) cause and effect, (2) comparison, and (3) contrast were introduced to English majors studying in the extension school of a private university in Taiwan. It explored how well they understood how to properly use signal words when writing for these three situations: (1) cause and effect, (2) comparison, and (3) contrast. Participants included native Chinese undergraduates in year three, taking English writing classes. They were at A2-B1 levels within the CEFR. The study was conducted with one group of 28 participants taking a pre-test and a post-test. The number of the occurrence of the three variables[2] was calculated by a paired sample *t*-test in SPSS. The occurrence of the three categories of signal words in the participants' compositions reveals how well they understand the use of these signal words taught in class. The results indicated a significant difference between the participants' pre-test and post-test results, implying that the participants had learned to use signal words properly to enhance the transition within their essays.

KEY WORDS

English Writing, Signal Words, Class Design, Pluralistic Approaches, *T*-Test

INTRODUCTION

Few researchers have carried out research either on transitions or signal words in composition. However, a proper transition between two ideas or two parts of a piece of writing can enhance cohesion. Moreover, signal words show cause and effect, comparison, contrast, addition, or emphasis. The classroom writing assignments in relation to the kinds of essays such as cause and effect, comparison, and contrast can help students concentrate on signal words for these three categories of essays. In this experiment, the teacher made corrections of students' compositions as Graham, Harris, and Hebert (2011) recommended classroom writing assessments as a good way to improve students' writing. In studying compositions, it may be necessary to place some emphasis on the use of signal words in undergraduates' compositions, especially those below

level B1 among 6 levels of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).[1] A study of variations by signal words in the expository texts written by 4th-8th graders was conducted and it "provided the first detailed investigation about the effects of structure strategy instruction on understanding several types of comparative signal words in multi-paragraph expository texts" (Meyer et al., 2018, p. 1937). The experiment that aimed to explore the individual variations in using connectives from teenage years to adulthood proved that "academic background is indeed a strong predictor for students' ability to use connectives" (Tskhovrebova et al., 2022, p. 447). All these studies suggested the importance of teaching students to use signal words or connectives in compositions.

English writing has been a challenge to Chinese undergraduates. The challenge comes from two reasons. First, they have a fear of how to start to write. They may have a problem with generating ideas. Second, they are unable to connect ideas. Connectives or signal words can help the reader to read smoothly from one idea to the next. During last two decades, the emphasis of research on writing has centered on writing scientific compositions (Nesbit & Rogers, 1997), inclusive settings (Staal, 2001), or peer assisted writing (Sarikaya & Yilar, 2021). Apart from article fields, setting analyses, and peer reviews, this study emphasizes strategies for improving coherence and fluency in writing and teacher-correction for less self-disciplined L2 students with a lack of understanding how to use English words properly. On vocabulary, some studies found that L2 writers displayed more concern and difficulty with vocabulary (Dennett, 1985; Arndt, 1987; Skibniewski, 1988; Yau, 1989; Krapels 1990; Moragne e Silva, 1991; Silva, 1993). In addition to the difficulty with English words, L2 students have to overcome another barrier which is interculture in writing. Hinkel (1994) asserted that written texts characterize a mixture of different cultural and social notions, which comprise written discourse frameworks. Moreover, Matalene (1985) found that when her Chinese students wrote in English, they wrote in the traditional Chinese writing style. The participants were juniors in the department of English in night school; at the beginning of this study, when they wrote in English, they tended to write in Chinese writing style without thinking of the coherence of their compositions as a whole. Shakir and Obeidat (1992) indicated that incoherent texts were shown in participants' compositions due to lack of contextualization, absence of cohesive connectives, especially conjunctives, fragmentary textual components. The most obvious problem that made their compositions not logically consistent among parts was the lack of the use of signal words. This experiment aimed to address this problem.

There are many ways to overcome L2 students' problem with not using signal words. In addition to word building, word cards, dictionary use strategies (Nation, 2000), and mass reading related to writing (Hedgcock, 1993; Carson et al., 1990; Chu, 2002), signal word lists can be one of the ways to increase the use of signal words in students' compositions. In view of the basic paragraph structure which consists of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence (Watkins, Dillingham, & Hiers 2001; Fellag, 2002; Blanchard & Root, 2003; In, 2006), the signal word lists used in this study were designed based on not only the writing for three situations, namely (1) cause and effect, (2) comparison, and (3) contrast, but also the paragraph structure, namely a topic, supporting evidence, transitions, and a conclusion.

However, few studies have focused on the strategies for boosting the use of signal words in English writing classes. Among them, a study on multivariate regression analyses reveals that adversative connectives (e.g., although, however) were related to the most complex arguments, controlling for essay length and topic type, and overall argument sophistication (Taylor et al., 2019). The current study centered on enhancing the fluency, coherence, and smooth transition in students' essays. The purpose of the current study was to propose an English writing course structure in which English-only lectures were given and three categories of signal words were introduced to English majors studying in the extension school of a private university in Taiwan. It explored how well these students understood how to properly use signal words in writing for these three situations: (1) cause and effect, (2) comparison, and 3) contrast. To be specific, such signal words as 'because, therefore, so that, thus, consequently, since, as a result,' can be used for connecting between a reason and its consequence. Such signal words as 'similarly, likewise, in the same way, as well, too, in common,' can be used for connecting between two similar ideas or examples. Apart from this, such signal words as 'but, although, however, in contrast, instead, except, on the contrary,' can be used for connecting

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[1] CEFR is an international standard for describing Engllish language proficiency levels. It describes English language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for advanced level learners.

between two opposing notions or stances. All these signal words can fill the paragraph structure when necessary.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to propose an English writing course structure in which the signal word lists for three situations— (1) cause and effect, (2) comparison, and (3) contrast—were uploaded to TronClass Platform for participants to download. These signal word lists were also used as supplementary materials in class. English-only lectures were delivered to the participants who were English majors, studying in the extension school of a private university in Taiwan. Three research questions were addressed by this study.

1. What effect does the signal-word-list approach have on the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test?
2. What effect does the signal-word-quiz approach have on the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test?
3. What effect does the English-only approach have on the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test?

METHODS

This section introduces information on participants, materials, and procedures. It provides a description of participants involved in the study, supplementary teaching materials prepared by the teacher for this class, and test instruments for the evaluation of the results of the experiment.

Participants

This was a one-group experiment with a pre-test and a post-test. This group was comprised of 28 English majors in year three. In this university, the English writing classes are offered to students, ranging from sophomores to juniors. The 28 participants were at A2-B1 levels within the CEFR. Some of them could, according to the descriptions of each CEFR level on Tracktest website (2023), "use expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment) and communicate in simple and routine tasks," while others could "understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken, and produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest".[2] As the participants showed these features of the descriptions of CEFR levels for language proficiency level roughly equivalent to other global English evaluation schemes, their English proficiency levels were identified as between A2 and B1. The evaluation of this experiment included the analysis of the results of pluralistic approaches. The study was conducted with one group of participants. Before the pre-test, this group had been given lectures on signal words in general based on the detailed classification of text connectives (e.g., *first, next, however*) and illocution markers (e.g., *to sum up, to give an example*) provided by Connor (1994). Text connectives can be seen as part of transitional devices and hence are given different names, for example, connective words (Watkins, Dillingham, & Hiers, 2001), and signal words (Fellag, 2002; Blanchard & Root, 2003; In, 2006; Weissberg & Buker, 2007). After the pre-test, this group was given the lectures and word lists of the signal words for the above-mentioned three situations and took three signal word quizzes which were on the word lists. In other words, the signal words were narrowed down to three specific situations for the participants who were taught in a specified way. This group was taught in an English-only setting. It was evaluated by a final writing test. The final writing test was analyzed with three variables included in text analysis. The number of the occurrence of these three variables was calculated by the paired samples *t*-test in SPSS. The occurrence of these three categories of signal words in the participants' compositions can indicate how well they understand the use of these signal words taught in class. In the current study, either text connectives or signal words were accordingly regarded as one more reliable indicator for text analysis, especially indicating a higher level of smooth transition and coherence. To summarize the above, the signal words or text connectives for bringing out a topic, giving supporting evidence, drawing a conclusion, addressing such situations as contrast, comparison, and cause and effect, can be used as the measurement of fluency of

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[2] Referring to Tracktest at https://tracktest.eu/english-levels-cefr/.

writing. The results of this study may provide a thorough picture of improvement in the participants' compositions.

According to the common reference levels of CEFR, B1 learners can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken, produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest, describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans (Cambridge ESOL, 2011). A2 learners can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment), communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters, and describe in simple terms aspects of their background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need (Cambridge ESOL, 2011). The participants in this study demonstrated in their writing assignments in the pre-test that they could either express their opinions and plans or describe their personal and family information, shopping, local geography, and employment.

In the semester prior to the study, all participants of these two groups completed a pre-test, which contained writing assignments in relation to their personal and family information, shopping, local geography, and employment. The topics for the writing assignments that the participants had written prior to the study included "My Wonderful

Family," "Preparing for a Birthday Party," "My Daily Schedule," "A Lucky Day," "The Layout of Maryland Department Store," "My Favorite Store," "My Shopping List," "A Wonderful Trip to the Blue Mountain," "Preparing for a Meeting as an Experienced Coordinator," "Things to Consider When Applying for a Job," and "Ways to Be in Good Health." CEFR provides descriptions of English language levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), either a textbook's or a student's CEFR level can be identified by matching the contents of the textbook or the composition with the descriptions of each CEFR level.[3] Through the analysis of the participants' compositions in these writing exercises which lasted for a whole semester, students can be regarded as A2 learners in CEFR. There were some writing assignments related to school, leisure, travel, describing experiences and events, and explaining opinions and plans before this study for the participants to gradually become B1 learners. The topics for these B1-level writing assignments included "My Class Schedule for

This Semester," "My Daily Schedule," "The Rundown of a Social Gathering," "A Thrilling Trip Last Night," "My Vacation Plan," "How to Borrow a Book from the Library," "How to Preparing for a Cocktail Party," "A Good Experience in My Life," and "Important Values in a Society." All these writing assignments were designed as the prerequisites for qualifying students as the participants at the same proficiency level.

Materials

This study is intended to explore how well the participants in the English writing class learn to use signal words in writing for these three situations: (1) cause and effect, (2) comparison, and (3) contrast. To facilitate this study, the signal word lists were prepared by the teacher for the participants. In week 11, the word list for cause and effect, including words such as "because, therefore, so that, thus, consequently, since, and as a result" was given to the participants along with a quiz on TronClass.[6] In week 12, the word list for comparison containing words, like "similarly, likewise, in the same way, as well, too, and in common," and a corresponding quiz were shown on TronClass. In week 13, the word list for contrast, including words, for example, "however, although, despite, but, in contrast to, rather," and a matching quiz were displayed on TronClass. In these three quizzes, the participants used the words on the word lists to fill in the blanks of sentences. These transition quizzes aimed to help the participants learn the connections between ideas in each sentence through the context.

To ensure that the participants can really use these signal words, three online writing assignments were assigned to them on TronClass. In week 14, the instruction of the first writing assignment was about

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[3] Please refer to Tracktest at https://tracktest.eu/english-levels-cefr/. [6] TronClass is an online learning interactive platform.

using the signal words for making contrasts, at least two, to write the essay titled 'Solar Power vs. Thermal Power.' The topic sentence for this essay – 'Solar power has advantages and disadvantages, so does thermal power' – was shown to the participants as a suggestion. With the suggested topic sentence for the essay about making contrasts, the participants might have a clearer idea of how to start writing about the topic. In week 15, the second writing assignment was designed to help the participants to use the signal words for making comparisons, at least two, to write the essay titled 'A Comparison Between Esports and Traditional Sports.' Still, topic sentences such as – 'Esports and traditional sports have a lot of features in common' and 'Although esports have become popular in recent years, they are like traditional sports in several aspects' – were suggested to the participants to specify and elaborate the topic of the second writing assignment. In week 16, the last writing assignment aimed to refresh the participants' memory of the signal words for expounding causes and effects, at least two, in order to write the essay titled 'Causes and Effects of the Popularity of Cafes.' Given that the participants struggled to write the previous essays, in this writing assignment a topic and more example sentences were shown to them.

Procedures

In this study, direct method and kinesthetic approach were applied to the English writing class. In terms of the application of direct method, the teacher delivered English-only lectures to the participants. In weeks 11, 12, and 13, the English-only lectures included demonstrations of how to use the signal words on these three wordlists to make sentences. According to Grant (1985), "kinesthetic approach to teaching relies on the students' active, physical participation" and in this approach "a teacher should primarily be a motivator" (p. 455). Fleming and Bauma (2006) elaborated that "The kinesthetic learner thrives in activities and learning by doing" (p. 116). Therefore, the kinesthetic approach is also named hands-on learning because it highlights practice activities, like quizzes and exercises. The application of the kinesthetic method in the current study was shown in three online writing assignments. The participants were required to take online quizzes in weeks 11, 12, and 13 and write a contrast essay in week 14, a comparison essay in week 15, and a cause-and-effect essay in week 16.

The evaluation in this study was composed of two parts: a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test, including writing assignments, has been expounded in the Methods section of this research article. The post-test was the final writing exam in which there were two topics for students to write about. The use of three categories of signal words, which were taught during the period of this study, was supposed to be seen in the participants' compositions in the post-test. The increase in the number of occurrences of signal words in the participants' compositions in the post-test may indicate the improvement of fluency and transition as compared to the number of those in the participants' compositions in the pre-test.

Part of the text analysis (Connor, 1994) was used as a means of assessing the occurrences of signal words in the participants' compositions in the pre-test and post-test. The text analysis (Connor, 1994) was conducted to obtain the number of occurrences of five variables (phrasal verbs, wh-relative clauses, text connectives, compound sentences, and syntactic inversions) among which text connectives (Watkins, Dillingham, & Hiers, 2001; Blanchard & Root, 2003; In, 2006) were the core of analysis of the transition and fluency in the essays of the participants in the current study. As stumbling blocks, smart phones have been distracting students from listening to the teacher's lectures for years. One single learning focus and more hands-on practice may help students master what they are learning in the curriculum with the teaching of English language for EFL students. This study adopted three approaches which were one single learning focus, i.e. signal words, more hands-on practice, i.e. three types of writing assignments, and English-only instruction. Paired samples *t*-tests were conducted using SPSS to compare the number of occurrences of three categories of signal words in pre- and post-tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results in the current study included two parts: descriptive statistics and paired samples *t*-test. Descriptive statistics of final writing test display the number of occurrences of four variables in each group, including the total number of text connectives and signal words for three situations used in the participants' final compositions. The *t*-test results of final writing test show if there was a significant difference in each variable.

Results of Descriptive Statistics

The raw results of the post-test are shown in Table 1. In this study, a corpus of 28 participants' compositions was analyzed. As an evaluative tool for the post-test, the text analysis was completed to attain the number of occurrences of three variables—text connectives for three situations (Watkins, Dillingham, & Hiers, 2001; Blanchard & Root, 2003; In, 2006).

In total, the number of signal words in general occurred less in the compositions of pre-test in which 91 occurrences were found. In contrast, 194 occurrences were found in the compositions of post-test. This result indicated that the participants tended to use more signal words after the pluralistic approaches were applied. Signal words or text connectives occurred 91 times in the compositions of pre-test in comparison to the 188 occurrences in those of post-test. This improvement may result from the English-only lectures and hands-on practice activities, like quizzes and exercises, that focused on three categories of signal words during the study.

To interpret the meaning of the ratio of 91 to 194, the participants using more text connectives in their final compositions may exhibit their capability to write more skillfully.

According to Connor (1994), "Metadiscoursal taxonomies include text connectives (e.g., first, next, however), illocution markers (e.g., to sum up, to give an example), hedges (e.g., might, perhaps), and emphatics (e.g., clearly, obviously)—which skillful writers use effectively" (p. 683). Therefore, when students use text connectives more frequently in their compositions, they are more capable of becoming skillful writers. Moreover, signal words are used to form a transition from one idea to the next which create a coherent paragraph (Blanchard & Root, 2003; Fellag, 2002; In, 2006; Weissberg & Buker, 2007). Before the implementation of the current study, text connectives for signaling emphatic order (e.g., more importantly, most of all), spatial order (e.g., next to, in front of), and chronological order (e.g., after, before) were part of the main teaching contents. Different from the previous study, the current study focused on text connectives for signaling differences (contrast), similarities (comparison), and cause and effect. In total, 151 text connectives for these three purposes out of 188 were found in the participants' final compositions.

Table 1 Number of Occurrences of Variables (N = 28)

Test Variables	Pre-test (N= 28)	Post-test (N= 28)
Signal words for cause and effect	23	53
Signal words for comparison	0	37
Signal words for contrast	0	61
Others (e.g., signal words for chronological order…)	68	43
Total of text connectives	91	194

Results of Paired Samples T-test

The paired samples *t*-test aimed to indicate whether there was a difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. The paired samples *t*-test concerning the number of three variables generated by the pre-test and post-test results of the sole group yielded significant results, as demonstrated in Table 2. Significant differences between the pre- and post-test scores were shown in these three variables: (1) signal words for cause and effect, (2) signal words for comparison, and (3) signal words for contrast. Table 2 displays the paired samples *t*-test results of text connectives for signaling contrast, comparison, and cause and effect. In addition, the total of text connectives, including these three variables and the signal words for other situations, were also analyzed by the paired samples *t*-test in SPSS, which also produced a significant result, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Based on the purpose of the paired samples *t*-test which was to test whether the means of two paired measurements, i.e. pretest and posttest results, are significantly different,[4] the paired measurements in the current study were taken from the same group of participants at two different periods of time (i.e., pre-test and

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[4] Referring to the SPSS tutorials of paired samples t test provided by Kent State University at
https://libguides.library.kent.edu/spss/pairedsamplesttest.

post-test results with an intervention administered between the two periods of time). The results of text connectives in general, $p=0<0.05$, indicated a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results (see Fig. 1). Next, the results of signal words for cause and effect, $p=0.000026<0.05$, indicated a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results (see Fig. 2). In terms of signal words for comparison, the results, $p=0.000005<0.05$, showed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results (see Fig. 3). And last but not least, the results of signal words for contrast, $p=0<0.05$, implied a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results (see Fig. 4). The post-test results of these three variables surpass the pre-test results of the three variables and text connectives in general. In short. there were significant impacts after giving the treatment by using the pluralistic approaches in this experiment.

The *t*-test results seem to be homogenous with the raw data. The pluralistic approaches incorporating (1) English-only lectures and (2) signal word lists and quizzes might help the participants at A2-B1 levels in the current experiment to increase the occurrences of designated categories of text connectives in their final written compositions. This improvement implies that the coherence and syntactic complexity of the participants' compositions have been enhanced through the occurrences of proper signal words in their writing. The signal words or connectives taught in this writing class were the so-called subject-target, and for this reason, the signal word lists were created for specific purposes for the participants to comprehend and use them when writing a composition corresponding to a specific situation.

Table 2 Paired Samples T-test Results: Mean of Difference and SD of Difference Results (N = 28)

Variables		Text connectives in general		Signal words for cause and effect		Signal words for comparison		Signal words for contrast	
Pre-test	N=28	MD	SD	MD	SD	MD	SD	MD	SD
Post-test	N=28	3.46*	0.40*	1.07*	0.21*	1.37*	0.23*	2.25*	0.27*

*$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

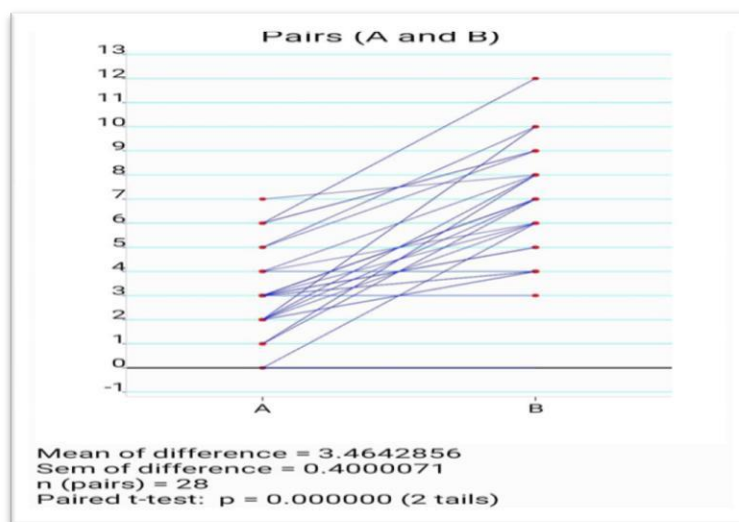**Figure 1 Paired Samples T-test Results of Text Connectives in General**

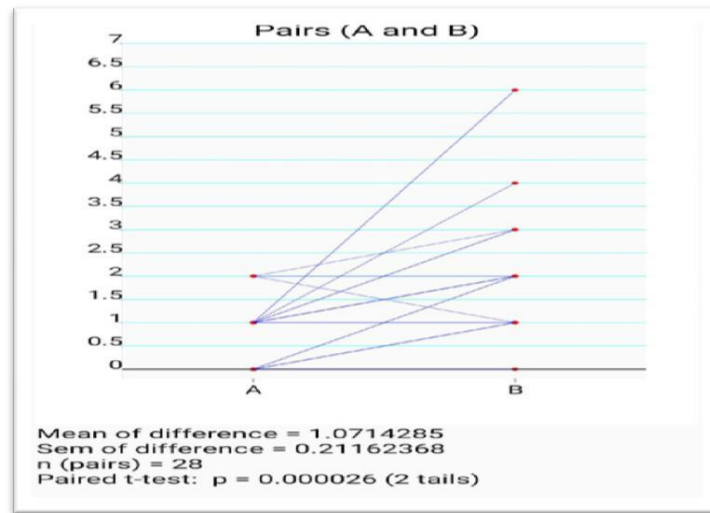**Figure 2 Paired Samples T-test Results of Signal Words for Cause and Effect Essays**

Figure 3 Paired Samples T-test Results of Signal Words for Comparison Essays
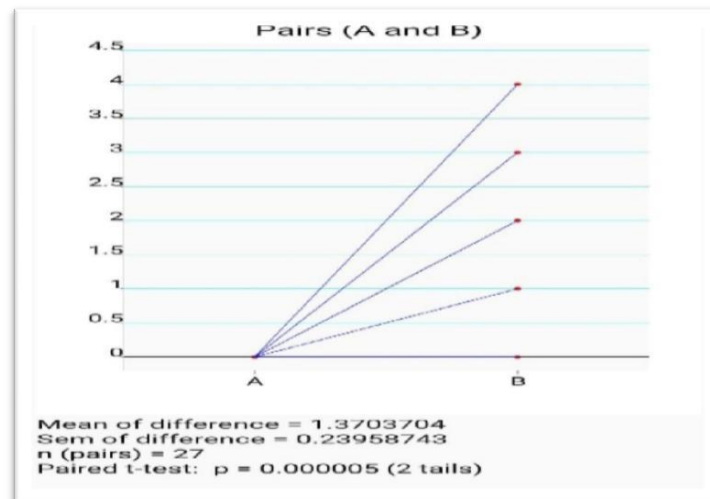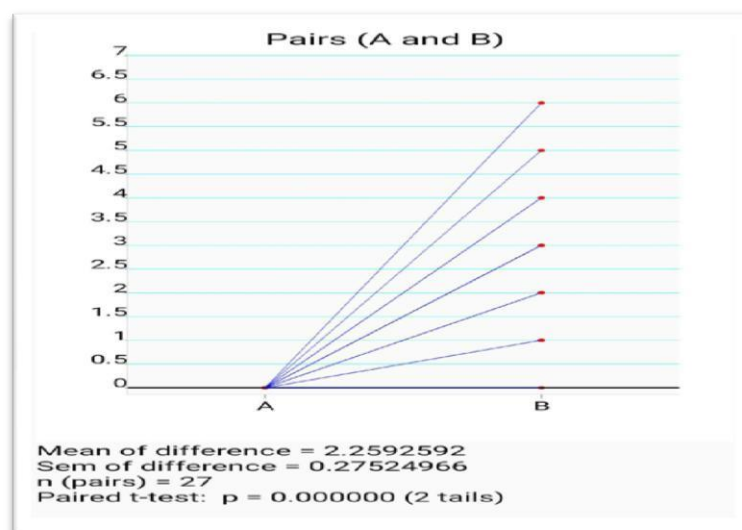

Figure 4 Paired Samples T-test Results of Signal Words for Contrast Essays

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to assess the class design, incorporating the pluralistic approaches of (1) English-only lectures and (2) signal word lists and quizzes, to see whether it helped students to learn how to use more signal words in their final writing test. In response to the first research question, the signal word lists for three situations had a beneficial effect on the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test. Next, in reply to the second research question, the signal word quizzes for three situations had a beneficial effect on the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test. At last, the English-only approach could be seen as a contributing factor, though a relative minor one, to the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test.

The primary purpose of this study was to quantify the learning effects of participants in the experiment of the pluralistic approaches. The above statistical results have shown that all the variables had significant differences between the pre-test and post-test. In addition to the increased number of the designated categories of signal words in the post-test, the other categories of signal words were also shown in the post-test. There are two implications from this finding. First, some of them were taught prior to the pre-test. Second, the participants were encouraged to learn and use signal words in and out of class. In other words, one single focus in class can deeply influence students to concentrate on that focus and learn well. Most importantly, even English-only classes are difficult to EFL students at level A2 of the CEFR, one single focus in class can still take effect.

In terms of the relation between the current research findings and previous studies, there are two main aspects. Less attention has been given to the study of connectives or signal words for years. There is a gap over last two decades. To decrease the increasing neglect of using signal words or connectives to enhance coherence in compositions, the current study proposes an English writing course structure which, unlike previous studies, specifically deals with how to teach students to learn signal words by category and practice using them to write for these situations—cause and effect, comparison, and contrast. The current research findings provide specific *t*-test results of applying pluralistic approaches in the English writing course. The learning effectiveness of using particular signal words in writing for a particular situation is precisely shown. For example, the *t*-test results of signal words for cause and effect, comparison, and contrast are shown respectively. Hopefully, the pluralistic approaches with a focus on categorized signal words can reinforce the importance of emphasizing the usage of signal words in writing.

The positive findings of this study may endorse and recommend the class design of pluralistic approaches to English language teachers and curriculum designers. If there are any limitations of the current research, it is expected that they will be overcome by the following means. More participants in the future experiments can make the quantitative results more persuasive. In the future, the independent two-sample *t*-test in SPSS can be used when there are two groups of participants. The pluralistic approaches in this study can be applied when using different statistical methods in SPSS to see if there are any different results. The implications of the study include two spindles—(1) teaching approaches directly correspond to learning outcomes; (2) importance of signal words are on the rise again.

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