Diagnosis of EFL Learners' Difficulties in the Use of Connectors in a writing task: Strategies for Remedial Work

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ABSTRACT
Connectors are words that serve to join other words, phrases, and clauses together. They range from single words to combination of words, as well as adverbs serving conjunctive functions in the sentence. Connectors are very important for language teachers and learners, as they structure texts in discourse and, as a result, they have considerable influence on learners' success or failure in communication in a target language. However, they have been traditionally neglected in ELT coursebooks, particularly in beginners and intermediate levels; this may explain the many difficulties learners encounter when writing texts as reported in Granger & Tyson (1996), Abe (2001), Lee (2003), Fe (2006), Wei-Yun Chen (2006), Zhang (2007), Bikeliené (2008), Jalilifar (2008), Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba (2010). The aims of this paper are twofold. Firstly, we identify patterns of connector misuse in a wide collection of examples drawn from a corpus of written essays by 228 Spanish learners of English in secondary education. Secondly, we propose strategies for remedial work for basic to intermediate levels. Our results show three types of problems with English connectors: total omission and scarcity of connectors, addition of unnecessary connectors, and wrong choice of connectors. On the basis of the difficulties diagnosed we include some guidelines for remedial work as well as examples of tasks that may help EFL learners develop explicit and implicit knowledge of the use of connectors in written texts.
Keywords: EFL learners' difficulties in writing, Use of English connectors, tasks for remedial work.

Diagnostic des difficultés concernant l'utilisation des connecteurs dans une tâche écrite chez les apprentis d'anglais langue étrangère: Stratégies de correction

RESUMÉ
Les connecteurs servent à relier des mots, des propositions et des phrases. On y trouve un seul mot, plusieurs mots et même des adverbes fonctionnant en tant qu'articulateurs dans la phrase. Les connecteurs sont des éléments très importants aussi bien pour les professeurs que pour les apprentis de langues car ils servent à articuler les textes dans les discours

oraux et écrits et, en conséquence, ils prennent part activement au succès ou à l'échec de la communication en langue cible (objet de l'apprentissage). Néanmoins, les connecteurs ont été traditionnellement relégués dans les méthodes d'enseignement de la langue anglaise, surtout en ce qui concerne les niveaux élémentaire et intermédiaire ; cela peut expliquer le grand nombre de difficultés auxquelles les apprentis se heurtent lors d'écrire des textes, comme nous pouvons constater dans un large répertoire d'études : p. ex. Granger & Tyson (1996), Abe (2001), Lee (2003), Fe (2006), Wei-Yun Chen (2006), Zhang (2007), Bikelinė (2008), Jalilifar (2008), Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba (2010).

Deux sont les objectifs de cet article. Premièrement, nous repérons des modèles de problèmes dans l'emploi des connecteurs parmi un large échantillon d'exemples extraits d'un corpus de compositions écrites par 228 élèves espagnols du secondaire, apprentis d'ALE (anglais langue étrangère). Deuxièmement, nous proposons des stratégies et des tâches pour la remédiation de ce problème dans les niveaux élémentaire et intermédiaire. Nos résultats montrent trois types de problèmes : nulle ou faible présence des connecteurs, emploi gratuit des connecteurs ou choix erroné des connecteurs. À partir des difficultés diagnostiquées, nous proposons quelques indications pour y remédier ainsi que des exemples de tâches qui peuvent aider les apprentis d'ALE à développer la connaissance implicite et explicite de l'utilisation des connecteurs dans les textes écrits.

Mots-clé: Difficultés des apprentis d'ALE dans le langage écrit, Utilisation des connecteurs anglais, tâches pour remédier aux problèmes dans l'emploi des connecteurs.

Diagnóstico de las dificultades en el uso de los conectores en una tarea escrita por parte de aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera: Estrategias de corrección

RESUMEN

Los conectores sirven para unir palabras, cláusulas y frases. Van desde una sola palabra a combinación de palabras así como a adverbios con funciones de conjunción en la frase. Los conectores son elementos muy importantes para profesores y aprendices de idiomas ya que sirven para estructurar los textos en el discurso escrito y oral y, como consecuencia, tienen que ver con el éxito o el fracaso en la comunicación en la lengua término (objeto de aprendizaje). Sin embargo, los conectores han sido tradicionalmente relegados en los libros de texto en la enseñanza del inglés, particularmente en lo que respecta a los niveles elemental e intermedio; esto puede explicar las muchas dificultades que encuentran los aprendices a la hora de escribir textos como se observa en muchos estudios: Granger & Tyson (1996), Abe (2001), Lee (2003), Fe (2006), Wei-Yun Chen (2006), Zhang (2007), Bikelinė (2008), Jalilifar (2008), Jiménez Catalán & Ojeda Alba (2010).

Los objetivos de este artículo son dos. En primer lugar, identificamos patrones de problemas en uso de conectores en una amplia colección de ejemplos extraídos a partir de un corpus de composiciones escritas por 228 estudiantes españoles en educación secundaria, aprendices de EFL (inglés como lengua extranjera). En segundo lugar, proponemos estrategias y tareas para remediar este problema en los niveles elemental e intermedio. Nuestros resultados muestran tres tipos de problemas: omisión total o escasez de conectores, utilización innecesaria de conectores, selección errónea de conector. En base a las dificultades diagnosticadas proponemos algunas orientaciones para su erradicación así

como ejemplos de tareas que pueden ayudar a los aprendices de EFL a desarrollar conocimiento explícito e implícito del uso de los conectores en los textos escritos.

Palabras clave: Dificultades de los aprendices de EFL en la escritura, Uso de los conectores ingleses, tareas para remediar problemas en el uso de conectores

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is twofold. In the first place, we intend to draw the attention of English language teachers and researchers to the difficulties that foreign language learners face as far as the use of English connectors is concerned. In this regard, we focus on the identification and qualitative analysis of learners' underuse, misuse or overuse of these discourse elements in a letter-writing task. Once learners' difficulties are diagnosed, we attempt to provide language practitioners with a few guidelines and tasks to implement explicit remedial work.

Letter writing tasks are contained in most EFL coursebooks focused on different language levels; most of these books are published by international companies and used by thousands of language learners in foreign language classrooms all over the world. Letter writing tasks have a great potential for language learners: either for personal or professional uses, they will most probably have to write a letter in English at some point in their lives. But even more important is the fact that letters help learners organize their ideas and express their views in a coherent and cohesive way. In part, this is achieved by means of connectors, which are essential elements in oral and written discourse. However, they have been systematically neglected in English language teaching methods and course books.

Our interest in English connectors is triggered by the empirical evidence that intermediate learners in English foreign language classrooms need to improve their competence in this area. The various difficulties students encounter when writing texts are reported for instance in Granger & Tyson (1996), Abe (2001), Lee (2003), Fei (2006), Zhang (2007), Bikeliené (2008), Jalilifar (2008), and Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2010).

The organization of this paper is as follows. First, we define the term "connector" and provide a brief summary of the theoretical assumptions underlining our proposal for corrective work. Next, we present a collection of

examples drawn from EFL learners' essays to identify and illustrate their main difficulties with English connectors. Finally, we include a section devoted to remedial work, in which we provide instructors with suggestions for teaching connectors and examples of tasks for elementary to intermediate EFL learners.

2. DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

2.1. Defining connectors

First all of all we need to define what we understand by "connectors". On the one hand, there are different terms that apparently refer to the same reality such as connector, connective, conjunction, conjunctive, discourse marker, or link word. On the other hand, we also find slightly different definitions for each of those terms. However, most definitions share two assumptions that are important for language teachers: the assumption that they are words that serve the function of joining words, clauses, sentences, or paragraphs, and the assumption that these words are classified into two main types according to their function, either coordination or subordination. In the former, two words, clauses, sentences or paragraphs are linked on equal basis. This means to say that the two parts have an equivalent status, whereas in the latter, one part is dependent on the other. The functions realized in each category are fulfilled by conjunctions but also by adverbs and other connective expressions. Some examples [1] for each category are illustrated in the following table:

Coordination	Subordination
-He opened the car door *and* got out -It was a long walk *but* it was worth it -Have you got any brothers *or* sisters? -He spoke *neither* English *nor* French	-She got the job *because* she was the best candidate -I couldn't get a grant *unless* I had five years' teaching experience -He has to earn lots of money *so that* he can buy his children food and nice clothes

Due to the difficulty of drawing a clear distinction between conjunctions and adverbs when they are realizing the same function, throughout this paper we use the term "connector" as an umbrella term to denote words whose function is to connect words, clauses, sentences and paragraphs, independently of whether the word be a conjunction or an adverb.

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[1] Examples were drawn from 2004 *Collins Cobuild English Usage for Learners*. HarperCollins Publisher.

2.2. Theoretical background

Our proposal for remedial work is inspired by the following theoretical postulates: explicit language teaching, raising consciousness, and focus-on-form. Let us briefly define each of them.

2.2.1. Explicit language teaching

Language teaching is done by means of overt techniques and strategies. In explicit language teaching the teacher encourages learners to pay attention to the target language in order to notice linguistic items, guess from context, make deductions or formulate and test hypothesis about linguistic items. Traditionally, explicit teaching stands in opposition to implicit teaching. Each term refers to different type of language knowledge. Explicit relates to declarative and conscious knowledge, whereas implicit has to do with procedural and unconsciously language knowledge. Likewise, each term is associated with different results in second language acquisition. Explicit knowledge has to do with the conscious control of rules that leads to accuracy in the use of language, whereas implicit knowledge has to do with fluency and with the capacity to communicate by means of the second language. In practice, both types of knowledge may overlap. As Ellis (2002:169) remarks: "Even if the practice work is directed at implicit learning of the structure and no formal explanation is provided, learners (particularly adults) are likely to try to construct some kind of explicit representation of the rule".

An important question regarding explicit knowledge is whether it leads to implicit knowledge (Interface hypothesis). As Ellis (2005) notes there are three positions in this respect: those who maintain that there is no relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge (e.g Krashen, 1982), those that argue that explicit knowledge results in implicit knowledge when learners are provided with communicative activities (e.g. Dekeyser, 1998) and those who opt for a middle position, in which it is maintained that explicit knowledge encourages important acquisition processes such as noticing (e.g. Ellis, 1993; 2002).

2.2.2. Consciousness-raising

According to Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985: 274) Consciousness-raising (CR) (also called awareness raising) is "a deliberate attempt to draw the learners' attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language". CR is done by means of strategies and techniques that lead learners to: "infer grammatical rules from examples, compare differences between two or more different ways of saying something, and observe differences between a learner's use of a grammar item and its use by native speakers." (Richard and Schmidt 2001: 109). Ellis (2002:168) notes that the purpose of these activities is "to equip the learner with an understanding of a specific language feature- to develop declarative knowledge rather than procedural knowledge of it". In his view, CR

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activities are characterized by the following features: i) the specific language feature may be presented in isolation; ii) data and explanation of the explicit rule may be given; iii) the learner is expected to be cognitively active in order to deduce or infer the rules; iv) in case of misunderstanding of the rule, there may be explicit clarification, explanation or further presentation of data; v) "learners may be required (although this is not obligatory) to articulate the rule describing the grammatical structure" (168). Apparently, if we take into account these characteristics, CR activities do not seem to be a novelty in language teaching methodologies as in Grammar-Translation Method learners were presented with sentences containing rules of grammar and they were required to work out the rules. However, as Willis and Willis (1996) and also Ellis (2002) point out, this approach did not provide learners with enough language exposure.

CR activities are usually classified into deductive and inductive (e.g. Ellis 2002). In deductive CR activities, learners are first presented with explanations as well as examples of rules of specific linguistic elements. Then learners are asked to perform tasks in order to assimilate those rules. In contrast, in inductive CR tasks learners are presented with examples of realization of the rules and encouraged to search for the rules by means of CR activities. Research has shown the benefits of providing learners with inductive and deductive CR tasks. Also it has shown that EFL learners of different language levels consider inductive and deductive CR tasks beneficial (Mohamed, 2004).

2.2.3. Focus-on-form

At this point, it is important to distinguish among three different but somehow related terms: Focus-on-forms, Focus-on-meaning, and Focus-on-form. Focus-on-forms is a teaching approach in which learners develop awareness of isolated target language linguistic features and teachers exclusively concentrate on achieving linguistic accuracy on these isolated linguistic features. It has been traditionally associated to the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audiolingual Method. In contrast, Focus on meaning is an instructional approach in which learners are almost uniquely meant to learn communicative skills, and teachers concentrate on teaching them fluency. Interruptions to communication are kept to the minimum and grammar correction occurs only as feedback. This approach has been traditionally associated with a learner-centred approach to language learning. Likewise, it has been related to the view of language as communication and language learning as incidental (Terrell and Krashen, 1983; Doughty and Varela, 1998). Finally, Focus-on form can be considered as a kind of compromise of both the above. There are many variants of this instructional approach but the assumption that the linguistic form is often treated in the context of performing authentic communicative tasks such as conducting oral interviews or writing letters is common to all of them. (Long, 1991; Long and Robinson, 1988).

Although each of the above instructional approaches ideally points to different focus (either form or meaning or both), in practice, they may overlap. Ellis (2005) refers to the need of instruction to "ensure that learners focus on meaning" but also to the need of "focus on form"; other authors as for instance, Schmidt (1994) highlights the importance of paying attention to linguistic items and structures in a piece of communication so that acquisition can take place. Furthermore, there are different interpretations of the terms Focus-on-forms, Focus-on-meaning, and Focus-on-form. For some scholars, these terms overlap. For instance, Schmidt and also Long (as cited in Ellis 2005) see form and meaning as part of the same mental mapping realized in given context rather than just awareness of rules for their own sake.

2.2.4. The need for explicit teaching and Focus-on-form

We believe that the purpose of ELT should be to prepare learners for real communication by means of the target language and that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods are the most appropriate to accomplish that purpose. However, we also agree with Sheen (2002) that CLT is more effective when learners receive a considerable amount of language input. Incidental acquisition of written and oral communication skills can take place only when there is sufficient exposure to the target language. Unfortunately, even if CLT methods are used, foreign language classrooms do not provide learners with enough language exposure to result in incidental language learning. Moreover, language teachers, have to prepare students to engage in real interactions in a world of international communication but also need to prepare them to pass examinations, in which not only fluency but also accuracy matters. Taking into account the reality of foreign language classrooms, we deem necessary to complement CLT methods with explicit language teaching, conscious-raising and Focus-on-forms and Focus-on-Form activities. In our adoption of these complementary instructional approaches we follow Dekeyser (1998) and also Lightbown (1998, 2000) who consider Focus on Form as an instructional approach that helps learners to pay attention to the form and meaning of linguistic items and progressively integrates the latter into communicative activities. Our defence of complementing language teaching by those instructional approaches derives from our own experience as English language teachers as well as researchers on vocabulary acquisition, development and use by EFL learners in primary and secondary education in foreign language learning contexts where exposure to the target language is very scarce. We are not alone on this. In conversations with teachers from all over the world in conferences and workshops, we have been told that their students (as ours) get a minimum exposure to the target language (four hours weekly in the best cases): this scarcity of input renders it absolutely necessary to apply explicit teaching, conscious-raising and focus-on-form to facilitate the acquisition of features of the target

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language which in natural contexts may be unconsciously acquired by means f repeated exposure. Students have few opportunities to get English input within and outside of the EFL classroom and in order to render the teaching process time efficient, teachers need to rely more on explicit teaching together with communicative activities. We agree with Michael H. Long's observation that a focus on meaning alone is insufficient to achieve full native-like competence (2000); but we also concur with Laufer's remark: "I do not claim that form-focused instruction should replace opportunities to learn words from input." (2006: 162). Ideally, ELT materials should combine communicative and Focus-on-form and Focus-on-forms tasks with an aim to help learners develop fluency and accuracy. However, as shown in Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2010) the content of EFL course books overtly reveals lack of explicit teaching and consciousness-raising tasks in some word kinds such as connectors. This may explain the difficulties learners encounter with these words, as we will see in the following section.

3. DIAGNOSIS OF LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES
3.1. Some remarks

In this section we outline and illustrate the most frequent difficulties foreign language learners encounter in dealing with English connectors in a written task. The diagnosis of learners' difficulties in language learning is one of the most important parts of language teachers' work, because being aware of the difficulties allows us to plan how to help our students overcome them. Our diagnosis of learners' difficulties in the use of connectors is based on a previous study (Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba, 2010). There we reported the absolute and relative frequencies of types of connectors used by our sample of students and related this to the use to the connectors contained in their course books. The present article differs in the methodological approach and in focus. In our previous study we neither looked at the data from a qualitative stance nor provided examples of tasks for remedial work as we do in the present study. Both studies differ in focus, purpose and methodology but share the sample and the data collection instrument. Thus for the sake of clarity and the appropriate contextualization of the present study in the following paragraph we provide the reader with a summary of the methodological steps adopted originally. Then we move to the diagnosis of learners' difficulties by applying a qualitative analysis to fifteen examples of misuse of connectors not analysed previously. This analysis is the basis of the proposal of remedial work included in section 4.

3.2. Methodology
3.2.1. Informants

Our sample is comprised of 228 learners of English as foreign language (EFL) at second year of Spanish secondary education. The sample consists of twelve

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intact groups from four schools composed of predominately middle-class students from a capital city of northern Spain. The learners present a great deal of homogeneity with regard to age, social and linguistic background. Their average age is 15 and they come from middle-class families with L1 predominantly Spanish. The sample of learners also presents homogeneity concerning the number of hours of English instruction received: a total of 770 hours of English as a subject. Those learners who had attended English private classes or English courses were discarded for the purpose of the present study.

3.2.2. Data collection instrument

In order to carry out our diagnosis, we need a sample of foreign language learners and an appropriate instrument from which to elicit data. Its appropriateness depends on the specific objective we may pursue. If our purpose is to draw a profile of learners' writing and to detect difficulties, then the instrument we need is a composition task. In our case, we decided to make use of an informal letter to an unknown potential host family in United Kingdom. The letter as data collection instrument was validated in previous studies conducted with samples of EFL learners of different and same age as the informants in our study (see Jiménez Catalán, Ruiz de Zarobe and Cenoz, 2006; Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba, 2008; Ojeda Alba and Jiménez Catalán, 2009, 2007). In the process of data collection we followed the same procedures as in those studies: students received oral and written instructions in English and Spanish and they were asked to introduce themselves, talk about their town, their school and their hobbies, as well as other interests. The time given and the conditions to accomplish the task were repeated with each group: 30 minutes and no dictionaries or other aids were allowed. Students completed the letter in class in the presence of the teacher and one researcher. In addition to the letter, students were also administered a receptive vocabulary test and a questionnaire. The receptive vocabulary was used as a reference of vocabulary level whereas the questionnaire was meant to obtain information about their linguistic background such as mother tongue and knowledge or other languages. The questionnaire also provided us with information regarding students' English habits and exposure as well as motivation towards this language. [2]

As in the data collection, the processes followed in the handling of the corpus of letters were exactly the same in all our studies. First, we typed the letters in plain texts in order to build an electronic corpus of letters. Then we applied

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[2] Some findings of the vocabulary test for a subsample of the learners partipating in this study can be found in Fernández Fontecha and Terrazas Gallego, 2012. As to the questionnaire, findings concerning motivation can be found in Fernández Fontecha, 2014.

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different types of quantitative analyses by means of WordSmith Tools[3]. A chi-square Test was applied to the data in order to check for the homogeneity of the sample. The value obtained (5.31 p 0.150, significant at p 5 %.) proved that there were not significant differences among students caused by the school variable.

3.3. Results

The quantitative analysis of the learners' letters with regard to connectors was reported in Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2010). Our analysis in the present article is qualitative rather than quantitative. The purpose is to provide a diagnosis of learners' difficulties in their use of connectors in the letter-writing task. However, in order to contextualize the data we first provide a brief account of the use of connectors.

The connector production of our sample of foreign language learners is of only 13 connector types that we list below by order of the number of students who implement them.[4] The figures in brackets represent the number of informants who implemented each connector: *and* (220), *but* (143), *because* (83), *when* (30), *also* (28), *then* (16), *so* (8), *where* (5), *before* (3), *however* (1), *after* (1), *after that* (1), *first* (1).

Due to space restrictions we limit our analysis of cases only to those tendencies with wide representation in the whole corpus of compositions. For the same reason, and also due to the focus of the present paper, we illustrate only three types of problems with English connectors: total omission and scarcity of connectors; connectors used unnecessarily; wrong choice of connectors.

3.3.1. Omission, scarcity and overuse of connectors

From our sample of 228 foreign language learners, six did not use any connectors at all, and as can be observed when examining the abridged extracts included below, [5]the compositions of these six learners are of poor quality with little coherence. They do not demonstrate possession of much lexical competence and samples are composed, almost entirely, of lists of proper names and the recurrence to verbs in the native language.

> **Example 1, SM 262**: I'm Carlos. …. my friends names are, Javier, Juan, Pérez, Tomas y, Jon, My hobies are tennis football, ride horse, plane,

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[3] WordSmith Tools arranges the data into alphabetic and frequency lists. The program also provides keywords and patterns of collocations.
[4] In this study we understand "type" and "token" following the definition of Richards et al. in p. 391 of the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics,* 2002: "The class of linguistic units is called a type and examples or individual members of the class are called tokens."
[5] Names of persons have been modified as to protect students' identities.

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point, computer games, I'm a Marcelino's fan [famous Spanish football player]. My father is Carlos my mother is Pilar…

Example 2, SM 215: My name is Felipe Pérez, Martínez,. I love Angy. My best friend is Joaquín, My *idolo* is Allen Iverson…

The number of learners who use only one connector type amounts to 43 (18, 85 %). The one connector used is *and* in all cases except one where the connector *but* is used only once. In most of the other 42 cases, the scarcity of types, the abundance of juxtaposition, the flow of proper names, and the profusion of very short sentences create an effect of staccato and incoherence.

Example 3, SM 38: My name is Mario. I'm 13 years old and borned the 15th of September. I have a sister, Eva, she's 8 years old. I like basketball and I play badminton. I hate the football. My city is beautiful and my friends and I go to the park. In my high school are a lot of classes. I haven't got any pet. My favourite subject is Languaje. I kike pizza, spaghetti and Macarroni. I hate fish and vegetables. Goodbye Peter and Helen.

The recurrence to the same connector type suggests that the students are fully aware of the need of using connectors, but that their only available one is *and*. This excessive repetition does not help the quality of the writing.

3.3.2. Selection of the wrong connector

The use of an unsuitable connector is also frequent in this sample of foreign language learners. They make the wrong choice even with such a familiar connector as *and*. For instance, one student used 140 words and 10 *ands* wrote:

Example 4, SM 45: Hellow my name is Manuel, I live in xxx, I have a sister Marta. Martín my father work in a shop and Angeles my mother work in a shop. My sister study in a school and she paint a lot. Logroño is a small city and he is very happy. My school is big and he study 385 persons. My hobbies is ride a bike and play the computer. My father have a house in Tera de Arriba and every summer to this house. I will study in the university and work in Nueva York. My house is a small and have a tv 42" in my room. My room is small and I have a lot of, car, toys….This summer I go to Canarias and I'll go to teide. My friends Bertin, Ignacio, Antonio, ride a bike with me.

This informant used *and* in cases where other connectors would have been more appropriate, "Logroño is a small city and he is very happy" is one of them. Throughout the corpus the adjective "small" applied to a city, village or town has negative connotations, while "happy" is invariably positive; so, in all probability, the informant wants to establish a contrast, and he really means: "Logroño is a small city but it is very happy". Likewise, in the sentence "My house is a small and have a tv 42" in my room." the adjective "small" applied to the noun "house" is bound to be negative, while "big" applied to a television set is clearly positive: the logical conclusion is that this informant's intention is again to establish a contrast of this type, "My house is a small, but have a tv 42" in my room." Also,

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in "Martín, my father work in a shop and Angeles my mother work in a shop" the addition of *also* would help the reader's understanding.

Wrong connectors are frequently used; below we include a small selection of extracts to illustrate this point, followed by our own interpretation of the intended meaning. Surprisingly, the familiar connector *because* is one of the most frequently misused.

> **Example 5, SM12**: I from Logroño. My city is very beautiful *because* I
> have many friends my favourite friend is Mateo.

This informant declared that his city is beautiful, and uses the causal conjunction *because* thus attributing the beauty of the city to the fact that he has many friends: logic does not work here, the sentence would improve by substituting *because* for *besides*.

> **Example 6, SM 23**: I a bad student *because* the teachers are bad people
> and they fall me.

This sentence presents a similar example and it would work better if the informant had used *besides* or *furthermore* instead of *because*.

> **Example7, SM 45**: My favourite sport is Karate *because* is very difficult.

It might be that the learner likes karate due to its difficulty, but it is more likely that what he means to write is, "My favourite sport is karate *but* it is very difficult" or perhaps that although he likes it, he finds it very difficult.

> **Example 8, SF 243:** The way to the school is long, *because* I walk at him.

Again this informant does not mean that the distance to her school is long due to the fact that she walks it, but probably that she knows because she has walked that distance. The conjunction here impedes rather than aids understanding.

> **Example 9, SM 261**: My high school is very fun and big, *because* (it) is a
> new building.

Once again this student obviously does not mean to say that his school is fun because it is new, but due to the wrong choice of conjunction that is the meaning his sentence conveys. Very similar cases are those of female student 209 in example 10, and male student 107 in example 11.

> **Example 10, SF 209**: My school are new, *because* the other school is
> tired.
> **Example 11, SM 107**: I like play football and basketball every day
> *because* I don't do my homework.

This sequence is semantically illogical, and we can only guess that the informant's intention is to express the effect of his liking basketball, and "*so* I don't do my homework" would have worked better here. It is also probable that he means to use a contrasting connector like *but*, *on the other hand*, *consequently* or *howeve*r. Although the conjunction *but* is the second most used after *and,* it is also often misused.

> **Example 12, SF 13**: I'm very good, *but* today we start the classes…

This informant obviously wants to say that in spite of the fact that classes begin he is very well.

>   **Example 13, SF, 42:** I live in Logroño in La Rioja where we make the
>   famous wine *but* Logroño is very beautiful town.

Since Riojan wine is considered a desirable product, this participant probably does not intend to establish a contrast, but to use a transitional phrase or add information using connectives such as *in addition* or *moreover*.

>   **Example 14, SF 204**: My jaw is small... but I am prefer bilich, [village]
>   my bilich is San Andrés.

In this example the lack of congruency makes it impossible to envision the connotations of "having a small jaw", but the statement that she prefers her village seems completely irrelevant and no contrast is established. It is obvious that she has mistaken either the connector or some other feature, at any rate, the sentence lacks coherence and cohesion.

>   **Example 15, SM 140**: My center (school) also is old. Later, it was a
>   monastery and it have a gigant library. My best page is www.urban-
>   rivalt.com …… I go to the beach with my family. *Also,* I stay at home *but*
>   I don't stay much *but* is very hot!

This student is unaware that *also* is a conjunction meant to give additional information to what is already there; however, in this composition there is nothing said previously about the school. Then, he uses later instead of 'earlier', a deduction based on the fact that the verb is in the past tense; and that monasteries in Spain are often transformed into other kinds of community buildings such as school, but we have no knowledge of the contrary being true. In the first case, he uses an unnecessary connector, and in the second he confuses the meanings of two connectors. The use of *but* in two occasions also seems uncalled for and we have no way of guessing the intended meaning.

4. REMEDIAL WORK

This section is divided into two parts. The first one includes some guidelines to enhance the effectiveness of focus-on-form connector remedial work. The second one includes examples of tasks in which the principles of explicit learning, consciousness-raising and focus-on-form are taken into account. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but suggestive of the type of work it could be designed and implemented as a solution to the problems identified in our diagnosis.

4.1. Some tips for remedial work on the use of connectors

Prior to implementing a given task, explicit explanation about its purpose should be given to the students. Likewise, they should receive information regarding the nature of the task concerning genre, language and vocabulary as well as the kind of connectors that may be appropriate for the specific task.

Connectors should be presented to learners by means of contextual sentences, never in isolated way. At this point it is important to bear in mind that in providing contextual sentences to learners, it is imperative that teachers select

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carefully the vocabulary involved: an overuse of unknown terms hinders learners from focusing on the targeted feature.

In order to avoid confusion on the part of the learners, when presenting a specific connector which is not inherently a conjunction but also an adverb, teachers should make a point in explaining its other possible functions. For instance, when working with the conjunction, teachers should mention that it might also be an adverb in sentences such as "Peter is so tall that he could easily be a basketball player". The number of functions being presented will depend on the level of the group being taught, time constraints and so on but, as a rule, the functions included in their course books should be presented, explained and practiced.

Some common sense advice is that, at elementary and intermediate level, the connectors included in the 1000 most frequent English words should be the first to be presented to the learners. English frequency vocabulary lists as for instance Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001; Nation, 1984; Francis & Kučera, 1982 can be very useful for English language teachers. Our reference here has been the Brown Corpus 1000 word frequency list by Francis & Kučera, (1982:132). We have verified for the connectors included in this list and check for their presence in learners' letters: there are 36 connectors types in the above mentioned list, but only 13 types (out of 36) are found in the whole set of learners' compositions: *Afte*r, *also*, *although*, *and*, *beside*, *before*, *because*, *but*, *even*, *else*, *early*, *first*, *if*, *however*, *instead*, *moreover*, *next*, *nor*, *now*, *otherwise*, *or*, *perhaps*, *since*, *so*, *as soon as*, *then*, *though*, *thus*, *unless*, *until*, *when*, *where*, *whethe*r, *while*.

4.2. Some tasks for remedial work
Task 1

Aim*:* To help learners become familiarized with the range of connectors and the different relations that can be expressed by means of them.

Resources and procedures: Out of grammar reference works and dictionaries we can select a list of sentences containing connectors of different types. We can then ask our students to identify the connector as well as the logical relations expressed by each connector as in the example below.

Instructions to the student: The list provided below contains five sentences each containing a different connector. Each connector expresses one of these relations: addition, contrast, cause, alternative, and concession. Read each sentence carefully and: a) identify the connector; b) identify the kind of logical relation expressed by means of each connector.

   a)   The work is hard but well paid
   b)   The sea can be blue or green
   c)   I don't want to go, besides, I am too tired

    d)   What you said was true but nevertheless was unkind
    e)   He can't come because he is very busy

Task 2

Aim: To improve learners' awareness on how dull and tedious repetition of the same identical connector may make a text.

Resources and procedures: Texts written by the learners. The teacher may present the class with examples of compositions, in which intentionally the only connector used is *an*d. Students are requested to read and substitute as many of these *and*s as possible for other connectors with the purpose in mind of making the text more vivid and accurate. By means of the example of an elementary composition with 80 words written by one of our students, in which as many as nine connectors appear in the text, we can demonstrate our students that using connectors is not enough, and that it is also essential to use the appropriate number and variety of them.

Instructions to the students: a) Underline and count the number of occurrences of the connector *and* in the text; b) What kind of impression does the repetitive use of *and* make to the reader? c) How could this text be improved?

> My name is Pepa Pérez and I am a student at a secondary school in Spain. I like to study English very much and I go to private classes twice a week. My friend is Ana and she likes English and has friends in London and she goes there in the summer. On Saturdays we go to the shopping centre and we look at the windows and sometimes buy T-shirts and other things and we like shopping and we we have a very good time.

Other alternatives:

We can write a similar composition on the black board and transform it in front of the students and with their assistance into a more vivid piece of writing merely by introducing a wider variety of connectors and even by simply eliminating some of them:

> My name is Pepa Pérez, I am a student at a secondary school in Spain. I like to study English very much so I go to private classes twice a week. My friend is Ana and she also likes English and has friends in London, because of this she goes there in the summer. On Saturdays we go to the shopping centre where we look at the windows and sometimes buy T-shirts and other things and we have a very good time because we like shopping.

Task 3

Aim: Make learners aware of the function and need of connectors in discourse. For example, if we want to teach the causal connector *because*, it would be convenient to first ask students questions with why leading them to answering with *because*.

Sources: Reference grammar works and dictionaries

Instruction to the students: Give an appropriate answer to each of the questions.

a) Why do you carry an umbrella?
b) Why do you watch TV?

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c) Why did you pass your examination?
d) Why did you switch on the lamp?
e) Why are you driving so fast?

Alternatives: Students may come up with the expected responses, but in some cases they might use alternative ones indicating, for example, purpose such as in sentence e), to which they might give an answer introducing a purpose such as "to arrive on time"; here the differences between them should be explained to learners.

In the next step we might proceeded by given learners a list of sentences with possible causes for the effects given in previous list and ask them to match the items in the two lists or once a number of similar exercises have been completed we may prompt learners to design other examples themselves in collaborative pair work activities.

1. Because it is raining.
2. Because I like it.
3. Because I studied a lot.
4. Because I could not see well.
5. Because it is late.

Task 4

Aim: 1) To raise learners' awareness regarding the logical relations expressed by means of the causal *so.* 2) to expand learners' use of a range of connectors

Procedures: The teacher could now illustrate on the blackboard how the causal *because* in their response could be substituted by *so*, e.g. "It rains, so I carry an umbrella". After going through the series we might start anew with simple incomplete sentences such as "I don't like bananas so" and prompt them to finish up the sentences by using so, as in "I don't eat them".

1. I like cinema, so I always watch a film on Sundays
2. I didn't study maths, so I failed my exams
3. I am from Spain, so I speak Spanish
4. The sun is shining so it will be warmer soon
5. Her mother is sick so she is very sad

Depending on the level of our learners we might make the task easier by giving them the verb to be used and, as observed above, vocabulary should be familiar to them when doing explicit teaching of a given structure.

Task 5

Aim: Expand learners' repertoire of connectors.

Procedures: Give the learners a series of sentences pertaining to daily or weekly routines and a series of time connectors to sequence them adequately.

Instruction to the students: In the table below you are provided with a list of daily routines (left column) and a list of time connectors. Sequence them adequately.

Daily routines	Time connectors
1. On weekdays I get up at 7. in the	*first, first of all, then, after that, finally,*

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morning 2. *I have breakfast in at the kitchen table* 3. *I take a shower and change my clothes* 4. *I take the bus for the city centre* 5. *I spend 15 minutes riding on the bus* 6. *I arrive at work at 9:00 a.m.*	*while*, *as soon as*, *before…*

Alternative: Another alternative would be to ask students to write a story using at least six of the ten time connectors listed. The teacher might write a model composition on the blackboard

Task 6

Aim: Help learners expand their repertoire of connectors

Resources and procedures: Out of examples included in reference grammar works it is possible to make up texts with gaps. Depending on the level of our students we can provide them with a list of connectors to fill in the text or ask them to provide the connector by themselves.

Instructions to students: Complete the sentences using the connector that best suits the meaning: *and*, *but*, *however*, *or*, *so*.

1. Peter was hungry ………. he had a big sandwich.
2. Do you want to have lunch now ….. wait for Mom to arrive?
3. Dr. like going to bed right after dinner, is it not healthy?
4. She is very intelligent ……… unfortunately she is very lazy.
5. He studied a lot ……… he never passed all his examinations.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article we set out to diagnose learners' difficulties with one specific class of words: English connectors. Our diagnosis was based on an informal letter-writing task accomplished by 228 Spanish EFL learners in secondary education. The most recurrent difficulties detected were omission, underuse and misuse of connectors. Although our analysis was based on Spanish EFL learners, the coincidence of our results with the ones obtained by researchers with other groups of learners pertaining to different mother tongues and target languages makes our analysis useful for English language teachers in other countries. Accepting that each educational context has its own characteristics, we also maintain that there are more similarities than differences in English foreign language learners. For thousands of learners, English, even if recognized as a lingua franca or an international instrument for communication, is mostly a subject in their school curricula. In our view, the similarity of results obtained by EFL learners all over the world has to do with the great deal of existing uniformity in foreign language

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classrooms: there is a syllabus to be implemented through a course, tasks to be assigned to learners, time restrictions for the English lesson, marks and grades to be given to students, a course book to be followed, and teachers who share the native language of the learners. For this reason, we believe that the diagnosis, guidelines and examples of tasks we have included in the present study may be also useful for teachers and learners beyond the boundaries of the Spanish school context. Regarding the tasks proposed, they are meant to serve as an example of the type of activities teachers could design to raise learners' consciousness on the idiosyncrasies of connectors. By guiding their attention on these specific elements we showing learners the way to their acquisition. We agree with Willis and Willis (1996) when in their discussion of focus-on-form and consciousness-raising activities they say: "By encouraging learners to observe and analyse language for themselves we are reinforcing their natural tendency and ability to make sense of language and to systematize it. We are encouraging learners to learn for themselves."

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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