Formulating Writer Stance: A Contrastive Study of EFL Learner Corpora

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1. Introduction

In previous studies, the SPICLE[1] writing research team at the University of Madrid studied various major factors influencing L2 writing (Neff, et al. 1994, 2002). The results of these studies show that two influential factors in the construction of texts are language proficiency in L2 (including knowledge of the linguistic code and the rhetorical conventions of the L2) and transfer factors from L1 (including transfer of the linguistic code and rhetorical/literacy skills). A cross-sectional study of university EFL texts written by 1st and 4th year English Philology students, from the MAD Corpus (Neff, Dafouz, Díez and Prieto 1992), revealed that, as students become more proficient, they eliminate language errors but still experience major problems in constructing texts, such as formulating writer stance, choosing adequate information structure techniques and over- under- or mis-using metadiscourse connectors.

This paper, part of the on-going research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, presents a comparison of the devices used to construct writer stance in argumentative texts written by advanced EFL students (Belgian-French speaking, Dutch, Italian and Peninsular-Spanish EFL writers, from the ICLE corpus), with those used by native speakers. The main aim of the present study is the analysis of the EFL students' use of the rhetorical conventions of the L2 discourse community as compared to the reference groups, American university students (from the Locness corpus, Louvain) and professional newspaper writers (from the ESCC, Madrid[2]).

As other EFL writing researchers have noted (Lorenz 1998, Petch-Tyson, 1998), advanced learners, even when they have mastered the basic rules of syntax and morphology, still experience difficulty in the adept use of rhetorical skills, especially the construction of writer stance, a lack of expertise which they share with novice native writers. Expressions which manifest the writer's voice ('it is certain/clear/obvious/true that…' or 'I am sure/certain that…') are not very problematical for EFL students although not without difficulty. However, more intricate strategies, such as the construction of a reader-in-the-text (Thompson, 2001), pose difficulties for both native and non-native novice writers. By reader-in-the-text strategies, we mean constructions such as 'It might be thought that ...', 'Most people believe that...' or 'This is now well-understood'. That is, the writer constructs a reader-in-the text with sets of shared attitudes and knowledge so that it does not appear that the writer is presupposing ideas which might be unacceptable for the real reader. This strategy allows the writer to construct a balanced discourse (Quirk et al. 1985: 1436) 'so that the text seems to anticipate objections and crosscurrents raised in the mind of the reader/hearer.'

The results of the study, based on both corpus and qualitative analysis, reveal significant differences between native and non-native texts, but also between signed editorial texts and American student texts. All of the student texts, both native and non-native, show a lack of awareness of the appropriate degrees of directness and indirectness in constructing writer stance. This lack of sophistication is compounded by the use of amateurish interactional strategies, such as the use of *but* when the student writer has not established a real antithesis. Since these interactional strategies are common to all the student texts, they appear to be a characteristic of novice writing, rather than a result of the influence of L1 writing conventions. Although language errors, particularly the incorrect use of lexical phrases, and some transfer of L1 writing conventions (Neff, et al. in press) affect the reader's understanding and acceptance of advanced EFL texts, writing expertise appears to be just as decisive a factor.

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[1] The SPICLE research group is the Spanish team contributing to the *International Corpus of Learner English* (*ICLE*), Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve.
[2] The ESCC is the English-Spanish Contrastive Corpus, held at the Department of English Philology, Universidad Complutense, Madrid (Project BFF-2000-0699-C02-01 and 02, researchers, JoAnne Neff and Juana Marín)

2. Interactive and interactional strategies

Although interaction with the reader has long been a focus in the teaching of L1 writing in English (Britton et al. 1975; Shaunessy 1977; Bazerman 1981), it has a more recent history in ESL and EFL writing instruction. In an assessment of writing expertise and second-language proficiency on three composition tasks, Cumming (1989: 81) found that second-language proficiency was 'an additive factor, enhancing the overall quality of the writing produced', but that, in the argumentative task, the quality of the writing was also influenced by discourse organization and content, by problem-solving behaviours, and by control strategies. He found that exceptionally high correlation ratings between the level of writing expertise and raters' quality scores occurred only for the professionally experienced ESL writers. This finding partially coincides with Neff et al's (2002) study of advanced EFL writers included in the *ICLE* corpus. This research showed that the transfer of writing conventions from the EFL student writers' L1 affected writer-reader interactional patterns in English. However, some of the unsophisticated argumentation strategies, particularly regarding the formulation of writer stance, occurred both in native and non-native student texts. This seems to point to novice writer characteristics as an important factor affecting the quality of EFL student writing, in addition to proficiency level. Thus, the training of novice EFL academic writers should focus not only language proficiency, but also on the development of writers' interactional resources.

According to Thompson (2001: 59), there are two main types of interaction in written texts. The first, called 'interactive', attends to the management of information; the second, called 'interactional' attends to the readers' involvement in the ethos of the argumentation. In the latter strategies, writers interact with readers 'by appearing in the text to comment on and evaluate the content through the use of modality and evaluation and by assigning speech roles to themselves and to the readers' (Thompson 2001: 63-64). This reader-in-the-text strategy is expressed through lexico-grammatical patterns which signal a hypothetical position (as in 'it might be argued' or 'it may seem that') put forth by the writer, which is then followed by a statement of the 'real', or frequently, a concessive relation (such as, 'it is true/clear/inevitable that ...., but'), as in this text (1), which discusses the advantages and disadvantages of a pan-European market for share dealing.

> (1) There has been progress of a sort on the political front. The EU's political leadership has accepted the broad thrust of the recommendations of a committee of wise men aimed at harmonising Europe's regulatory regime. *Critics, however, argue that* the plan does not go far enough and lines of demarcation between the different authorities are unclear. Much work still remains to be done.
> The development of Europe's stock markets is *not only* an issue for companies and institutional investors. Private investors need to keep a close eye on developments, *too*. Long regarded as the ugly ducklings of the investment sector, private investors are suddenly sexy again. For one thing, as the chart shows, they are becoming richer, very much richer.
> *In addition*, as Europe's governments have embraced privatisation they have had to spread the gospel of wider share ownership in order to win both political and financial support for the new ideology. Latterly demographics have pressured governments into trying to persuade their citizens to make their own provision for retirement rather than rely entirely on state pension systems which are creaking under the strain.
> *Inevitably* much of that saving will be invested through Europe's stock market, either indirectly through managed funds or directly as investors make increasing use of the ease of access offered by the internet. *But* without a true single market Europe's savers and the companies in which they invest will remain at a disadvantage to their counterparts in the US. (Mark Milner, *The Guardian*, June 25, 2001)

The hypothetical-real and concessive patterns (such as *critics, however, argue* and *Inevitable ... But*), along with the interactive signals (such as *in addition*) are strategies that allow the skillful writer to consider various hypothetical reader arguments and then strongly put forward his/her argument, in this case, signaled by the antithetical conjunction *but*. Sophisticated argumentation involves not only the use of both interactive and interactional markers over long stretches of text but also the presentation of propositions which support the major claims, as in the paragraph beginning with *In addition*. Without these further statements, which provide intermediate justification (Toulman 1958) for the final statement of position, stretches of text would appear to be marked by a profusion of signals with no claims, as frequently occurs in the student texts analyzed in this paper.

In regards to the concessive patterns (those involving *it is + (adverb) adjective + that*), it must be noted that the choice of adjective puts strong constraints on what type of claim may be put forth in the following stretch of text. For instance, it is more likely that a writer will refute a previous argument expressed with *it is true that X* with *but Y* than when the initial phrase is *it is noticeable that*. Of the adjectives frequently used in this construction, there seem to be three semantic patterns: 1) those indicating probability (*it is likely/probable that*); 2) those signalling normativity, appropriateness and obviousness (i.e., those that are most often followed by a rebuttal or a partial qualification, such as *it is*

clear that); and, 3)   those expressing expectability, desirability and significance (i.e., those that are most often followed by additional proof, such as *it is important that*).

3. Methods

3.1. Description of corpora
The argumentative texts used in this study came from three different corpora: 1) the essays written by advanced EFL university students whose first languages are Dutch (237, 631 words), Belgian-French (287, 683 words), Italian (226, 988 words), and peninsular Spanish (194, 845 words), all subcorpora from the *ICLE Corpus*, Louvain; 2) texts written by their American university counterparts (149, 790 words), a subcorpus from the *Locness Corpus,* Louvain; and, 3) texts written by professional newspaper writers, from a subcorpus of the *Spanish-English Contrastive Corpus*, held in Madrid (Marín and Neff 2000). From the latter corpus, we used only the signed editorials (103,367 words) as the reference group, as they are the editorials most similar to the student argumentative essays in regard to overt signals of writer stance.

3.2. Analysis
In order to search for the various constructions and to identify the most frequent lexico-grammatical patterns used by the EFL writers, the American university writers and the editorials, we used the Oxford University Press Wordsmith Tools to find the most frequent clusters and collocates for two types of patterns. One pattern was *it is + (adverb) adjective + that*, including agentless passive constructions, such as *it is + (adverb) said/thought* + that. The specifically the adjectives searched for were *true*, *clear*, *obvious*, *undeniable*, *apparent*, *essential*, *important*, *understandable*, *un/likely*, *possible*, *probable*, and *sure*. The second pattern involved the use of the conjunctions *however*, *yet*, *nevertheless* and *but*.

For the evaluative adjective pattern, we initially used Lemke's seven evaluative orientations (1999), but because of the different rhetorical strategies involved in the selection of the adjectives, we decided to reduce the categories from seven to only three, one of which includes a different syntactic pattern, the agentless passive formula, such as *it is well known that*, as follows:

1) Patterns that signal *probability* (i.e., those that express epistemic possibility, such as *it is likely that*)
2) Patterns which express *normativity, appropriateness and obviousness* (i.e., those that are most often followed by a rebuttal or a partial qualification, such as *it is clear that* or *it is well known that*)
3) Evaluative attributes which express *expectability*, *desirability* and *significance* (i.e., those that are most often followed by additional proof, such as *it is important that*)

For the conjunctions, it was necessary to eliminate from the concordance lines all of the cases in which *but*, *yet* and *however* did not connect two clauses, as in *difficult but necessary* and all of the cases in which *but* was used as a preposition, as in *nothing but trouble*, or an adverb, as in *decide but quickly*, and *yet* used as an adverb, as in *they have not yet decided*.

The statistical calculations were made by first norming the figures for each pattern by 10,000 words. We then compared the results to those of the reference group, the signed editorial texts, by using the Wordsmith Keyword tool in order to calculate the chi-square test of significance with Yates correction for a 2 x 2 table.

After this quantitative analysis, there followed a long process of qualitative examination of the most significant quantitative results. This involved examining stretches of text surrounding the concordance lines to study how each group of writers used the interactive and interactional strategies with the propositions they put forth to the reader.

4. Results

4.1. Results for patterns expressing probability, normativity, appropriateness, obviousness, expectability, desirability, and significance
The patterns used by each group to express probability, normativity, appropriateness, obviousness, expectability, desirability, and significance are displayed in Figure 1. When the two types
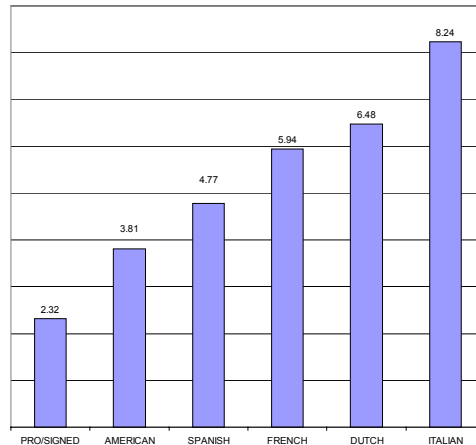
Figure 1. The total figures for the use of *it is + (adverb) adjective + that* and agentless passive

of patterns – the adjective with and without a premodifying adverb and the agentless passive – were counted together, all of the EFL writers showed an overused for the adjectival and the agentless passive constructions. Only the American university writers showed a use similar to the professional editorialists. An examination of the adjectival patterns showed that all the EFL groups overused the pattern with no premodifying adverb. For the pattern with a premodifying adverb, only the Dutch, the French and the Italian groups displayed a significant overuse, as compared to the professional editorialists.

Regarding the findings for the two other *it is + adjective* patterns, none of the differences between groups were significant.

4.2. Results for conjunctions *however*, *yet*, *nevertheless* and *but*
Figure 2 shows the results for the total usage of the four conjunctions per group. All of the groups, except for the Spanish university writers, show a significant overuse of the conjunctions, as compared to the professional writers. This does not mean, however that the Spanish EFL writers are
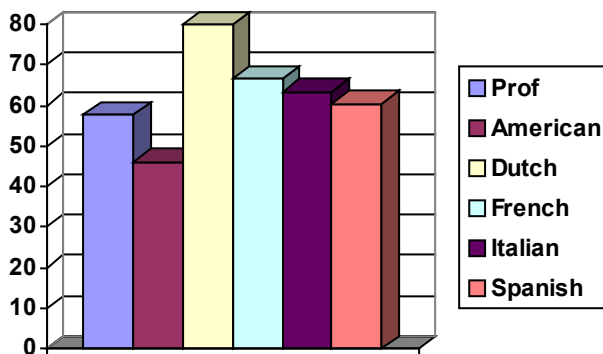

Figure 2. Total tokens for conjunctions (*however*, *yet*, *nevertheless* and *but*) used per group

the most similar to the editorialists, since in the total figures some of the large differences between the novice writers and the professionals cancel themselves out. The examination of the figures for each individual conjunction reveals a very different usage per group. Figure 3 shows that all the novice writers underuse *yet*, in comparison with the professional writers.
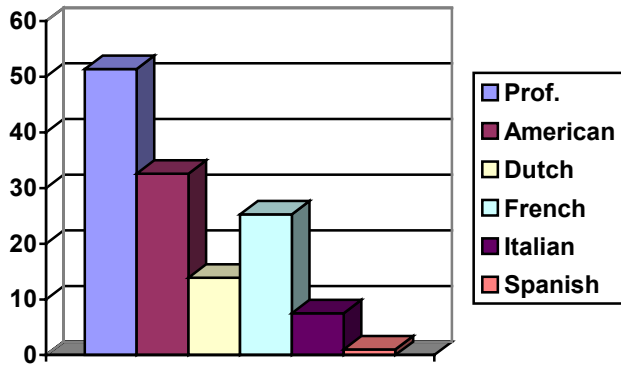
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Figure 3. Number of tokens of the conjunction *yet* per group

The professional writers are those who make most use of *yet*, followed by the American students, the French-speaking Belgians, the Dutch, the Italians and finally, the Spanish. All of the novice writers show a significant underuse, and for the Spanish writers, this conjunction is almost non-existent – only 2 tokens in almost 200,000 words.

Equally interesting are the figures for *however*, displayed in Figure 4. All of the novice
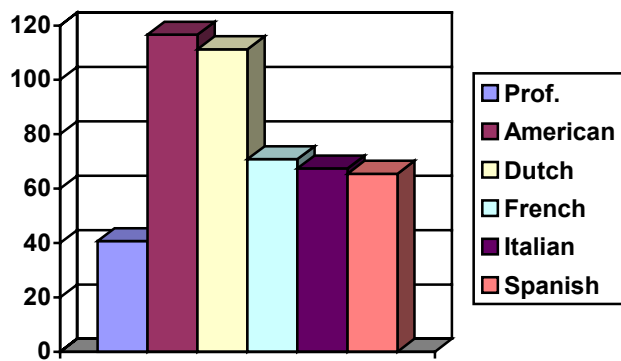

Figure 4. Number of tokens of the conjunction *however* per group

writers show a significant overuse of *however*, in comparison with the professional writers. The American university writers are those that most use this conjunction, followed by the Dutch, the
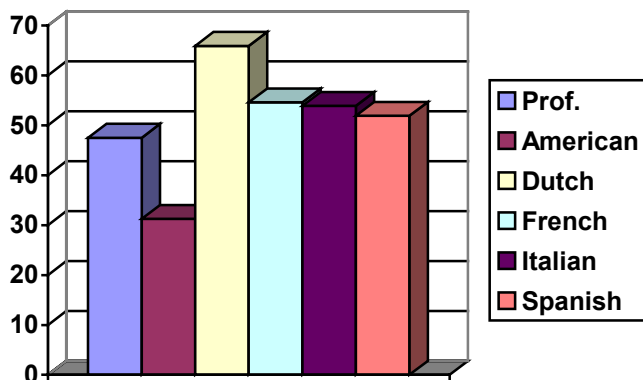

Figure 5. Number of uses of the conjunction *but* per group

French-speaking Belgians, the Italians, and the Spanish. These results should be interpreted in the light of the novice writers' underuse of *but*, in comparison to the editorialists, as displayed in Figure 5.

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The results for *nevertheless* also present interesting comparisons between the reference group and the novice writers. The difference in use between the professional writers and the American university writers was not significant, but this finding should also be compared with the latter's use of
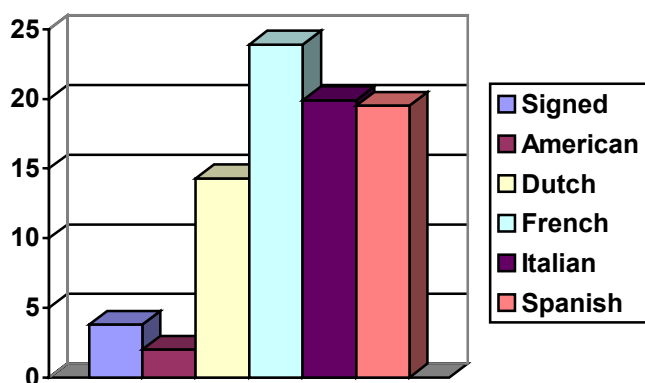

Figure 6. Number of tokens of *nevertheless* per group

the other three conjunctions. All of the EFL student writers showed a significant overuse of this conjunction, and again, this result is most probably related to their significant lack of other, more subtle conjunctions, such as *yet*.

5. Discussion

One of the characteristics of expert writing is the elaboration and extension of concepts over large stretches of text. Expert writers use reader-in-the-text strategies to anticipate diverse arguments which their readers might put forth. For these purposes, they make use –sparingly -- of lexico-grammatical patterns such as those examined in this paper, but, by themselves, these devices cannot provide a balanced argumentation. As these devices are highly visible, student writers seem to rely on them to structure their arguments, which are often single-clause explanations rather than extended inductive, deductive or causal chains of reasoning. The result is a profusion of devices, but weak argumentation.

All of the novice writers, including the American university students, showed divergence from the professional writers in the use the two types of patterns examined here: the *it is + Adj + that* or agentless passive formula, and the conjunctions *however*, *yet*, *nevertheless* and *but*. As noted above, the types of adjective used in the adjectival construction may constrain the kinds of comments a writer may make in the following clauses. An examination of the types of patterns in each corpus revealed that not only did the professional writers use many fewer of each of these patterns, but they also used each of the patterns almost an equal number of times. The pattern they least used was the agentless passive (e.g., *it is well-known that*). All of the EFL student corpora reflected a significant overuse of this pattern. An examination of the students' texts shows that they often use an agentless passive formula such as *it is well-known that* in order to introduce propositions which, in fact, cannot be taken for granted, as in example (2) from the Italian corpus. In cases such as these, the propositions which should establish a common ground may actually offend readers.

> (2) For example in America *it is commonly believed that* a 16-years-old teenager should be able to live alone.

Some of the EFL students, particularly the Spanish, use agentless passive formulae such as *it is said that* to introduce a new topic or sub-topic, as in this discussion of the merits of military service in example (3).

> (3) Nowadays one of the great debates in the Spanish society is about the
> period of military training. It is a big problem for many families with sons
> who have to do the period of military training when they leave school. It has
> advantages and disadvantages. First of all it is necessary in case of war of
> the own country against an enemy country. Although at the present time the
> Great Powers are demilitarizing, there can be conflicts between two
> countries. In that case the military service would be essential. I also think
> that it should be compulsory just in case of emergency or if you had to call

> on people when not enough people are in the army. *But* I also think that
> people should make their own decision on what kind of wars to fight.
> *Moreover it is said that* many young people mature and shape their character
> when they do the military service. *In contrast* they have to be far from their
> families for a year. *Furthermore* they waste time trying to learn something
> that they will forget in the future. (Spm 07002)

It is said that appears to introduce the new topic about military service bringing about increased maturity, but because it is preceded by *moreover*, an adverbial connective indicating addition, it looses its effectiveness as a reader-in-the-text device. The claim 'many young people mature and shape their character when they do the military service' cannot logically be an extension of the previous sentence 'But I also think that people should make their own decision on what kind of wars to fight'. Furthermore, there is no following justification for why some people might think that military service makes the young mature and thus this claim appears to be a shallow proposition, as if the student writer were not really willing to give the idea careful consideration. The effect of lack of expertise caused by the profusion of connectors – each of the last four sentences has one in thematic position -- corroborates the findings of other EFL researchers (Lintermann-Rygh 1985), who have found that the percentage of connectors in relation to essay length does not correlate with the skill level of the writers. In fact, good argumentation relies more on the balancing of sound claims than on the connection of ideas through lexico-grammatical devices, as can be deduced from the lack of such devices in the editorial texts.

Another pattern that was significantly overused by the EFL writers, but not the American student writers, was the one involving evaluative attributes which express *normativity, appropriateness and obviousness*, such as *it is clear that*. In the professional texts, the most frequent construction involved the adjective *true*. These propositions are almost always followed by a rebuttal or a partial qualification, which may also be placed in an initial concessive clause. That is, they represent a true reader-in-the-text strategy. The EFL student texts there were many cases in which the adjectival pattern is not supported by further statements of proof, as in example (4) from the Italian corpus.

> (4) On the other hand, someone can say that it is not possible made gun
> ownership illegal, because guns, if well used, are important for our protection. At
> these times we need protection, and a gun could be important in this occasion.
> *Moreover, it is always true that* if guns are keep illegal, the illegal market will
> increase, too. And in Italy, for example, there will be new earnings for Mafia. In
> conclusion, the solution for a so important problem, like crime, is in changing our
> society, in cleaning our television programmes and movies from violence, and in
> making everyday more difficult to keep a license. (It tto 2035)

As can be observed in both example (3) and (4), the argumentation includes very few supporting statements. This most probably forces the student writer to continue ahead to the next sub-topic and therefore, to another search for a topic-presenting device.

The results for the total number of the four adversative conjunctions reveal that all the novice writers, except for the Spanish, overused them in comparison with the professional writers. This does not indicate, however, that the Spanish writers use these conjunctions skillfully. The conjunction which most shows the divide between the professional writers and the novice ones is *yet*. Less forceful than *but*, especially in thematic position, *yet* has a concessive import which allows the skillful writer to make an *additional* adversative assertion. The concessive clause, apart from signaling contrast, also implies that there are slightly unexpected claims to be added (Quirk et al. 1985: 1088). It signals a careful second consideration of a additional reasoning, as in this argumentation chain found in one of the professional texts.

> (5) Maastricht went far to destroying the European parties of the Right by making them seem, or
> actually to be, the enemies of national prosperity. *Yet* even without Maastricht, Europe in the 1990s
> would have been failing the test of competitiveness. In terms of growth, it has fallen behind Asia. In
> terms of export competitiveness and financial strength, it has fallen behind Japan. In terms of
> technology, Europe has fallen behind the United States. It is a disastrous record. (William Rees-Mogg,
> *The Observer*, June 5 1997)

The second sentence in this text makes the additional claim that European competitiveness was already failing before the Maastricht agreements, which is the first claim. The three following sentences provide justification in parallel structures, 'in terms of growth', 'in terms of export competitiveness and

financial strength' and 'in terms of technology'. Then the last, short sentence offers the only conclusion a reasonable reader could deduce from such conditions.

The novice writers' use of *yet* is very scarce and not always appropriate, as this passage from the American essays. In example (6), *yet* is not followed by clauses which offer the reader additional and unexpected claims. The co-occurrence of *but* and *yet* is not only stylistically undesirable (Quirk et al. 643) but the following clause is so obvious in nature as to not constitute a claim at all.

> (6) Children are not educated enough below the age of twelve to experiment everything they see on television. The variety of television programs that children have to choose from is not large at all. *But yet* children have more time and use their time to watch television more than adults do. There are even some cartoon programs that are on early in the morning and early in the evening that are suitable for children, to watch. The parents do not pay attention to the cartoon programs to see what the content is. They just assume that because it is a cartoon that it is suitable for their child to watch. (ICLE-US-SCU-0010.2)

However, the American students do frequently show a more sophisticated use of *yet* which might match the use the professionals make of this conjunction. In example (7), the student writer introduces the topics of 'drugs' or 'crime' as major social problem only to discount these in favor of his/her topic,

> (7) When one thinks of the worst problem facing the young people today, things such as drug abuse and crime are the first things to come to mind, *yet arguably*, the worst problem concerning are young people today is adolescent suicide. Adolescent suicide is a major problem in our society that gets less attention than the other big problems in our society such as guns and drugs. (ICLE-US-PRB-0034.2)

adolescent suicide. In this case, the conjunction *yet* does signal a following and unexpected topic presentation and is accompanied by *arguably*, an adverbial hedge which has the same semantic import as 'some might argue that'.

In regards to the use of *but*, the American students writers underuse this conjunction while the Italian and French EFL students overuse it. The results of the American students suggest a teaching effect, since native speakers are often told not to begin sentence with this conjunction. *However* is the most frequent suggestion for sentence initial position. These native-speaker results coincide with those found by Altenberg and Tapper (1998: 86). Their comparison of Swedish EFL writers with British university writers showed that the native students relied strongly on *however* as a contrastive connector; in fact every fourth conjunct in the native essays was represented by *however*.

Learners of English may also be influenced by the idea that *but* should not be used in initial position, in spite of the fact that this conjunction is frequently used in professional texts. For example, the *Collins Cobuild English Usage* manual (1992:112) gives the following advice to learners: 'You do not normally put *but* at the beginning of a sentence, but you can do so when you are replying to someone, or writing in conversational style.' These admonitions may account for some of the learners' propensity to use *however* instead of *but*. In all the students texts, *however* is overused in comparison with the professional texts, while the editorials show a moderate use of this conjunct but a much more prominent use of the subtle *yet*.

Some of the student texts tend towards conversational style in their use of *but*, as in this French EFL essay, where *but* is combined with conjoining lexical phrases that are stylistically aberrant.

> (8) During this period, they would live in special rehabilitation centres, which would form a kind of bridge between prison and normal life. The third and last stage would be the total reinsertion in society. *As I explained it*, the rehabilitation process would thus be a long and progressive one *but according to me*, it is necessary in order to ensure the protection of society. *On the other hand*, this process could not fit any case. Indeed, authorities must not take the risk of reinserting a dangerous murderer in society. That is why each case should be examined separately by a special court. *Anyway*, I am perfectly aware that it is much easier to imagine new systems than to put them into practise. (UC rul 2024)

This pattern also occurs in the Italian EFL data. Once again, this EFL student writer's essay shows a profusion of connectors, some formal, some informal, where perhaps the content should be left to speak for itself. In other cases involving the uses of *but*, this conjunction appears to be a topic introducer rather than an strong adversative to a previous argument, as in example (9) from the French EFL essays.

> This is also the case with Martin on the rock trying to ensure his life with a minimum of comfort. In this has becom the main preocupation. Man sees his richies as a reward by God for his work. Man seems to be guided by hatred, egoism, ambition and not by love ... This is a terrifed picture of life but

very realistic. There are many other passages illustrating this satire *but* we must go over with another important feature of Postmodernism illustra ted also by means of the Tralfamadore namely : the rationalism. Postmodernist writers seem to doubt rationalism. We can give some exemples which show what is meant by this. The modern man always asks questions, he must always know ... (Fr- uc 2053)

Nevertheless is used so infrequently by the professional and American student writers and so frequently overused by the EFL that it appears to be, as well, the effect of not having been taught about the semantic differences between connectors. In Spanish, *nevertheless* corresponds to *sin embargo*, which is also the translation of *however*. This may lead Spanish EFL students to believe that these conjunctions are interchangeable, although this is not so. *Nevertheless*, that is *in spite of all these facts*, signals that many or very strong reasons have previously been given for arguing in favor of a particular position, while *however* does not indicate the same strong claim. The American writers seem to know this, as their usage is more in accord with the professional editorialists (i.e., no significant difference). But the fact that all of the EFL student writers show a significant overuse of *nevertheless* seems to point to a teaching effect. Perhaps textbooks, such as Jordan's *Academic Writing Course* (19) lump all these conjunctions together, although, in fairness, it must be said that Jordan at least mentions the concessive nature of *yet* and *nevertheless* and adds that this type of connector indicates the surprising or unexpected nature of what is being stated in view of previous statements.

One aspect which merits attention, although not directly connected with argumentation strategies is the number of mistaken lexical or grammatical choices in the use of a formula merits. Formulae used by EFL writers, such as *highly possible*, instead of *highly probable*, or *it is scientifically demonstrated*, instead of *it has been scientifically demonstrated*, show not only that students need more practice with common expressions, but also that they rely just as much as native speakers do on lexical and grammatical patterns.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined writer's discourse strategies. Some of these present the writer's voice clearly, as in *it is true/ clear that* although these devices might be used to establish a previous context for a posterior disclaimer, as in the professional texts. The major difference between the professional writers and the student writers appears to be, on the one hand, an unsophisticated use of connectors (that is, not distinguishing between the adversative and concessive values) and on the other hand, a lack of supporting statements which would justify the previous claims. The latter seems to be due to novice writing techniques rather than to EFL language difficulties. That is, while the American university writers resembled the professional editorialists more than the EFL writers, they still resembled the EFL writers in quite a few aspects of novice writing.

This consideration brings us to a methodological reflection. In previous studies, we have stressed the importance of using professional texts as a reference for the analysis of EFL texts instead of those written by native student writers. We have argued that student writers, even if proficient in English, are not necessarily proficient in writing skills. In this study, and after a comparison of the characteristics of signed and unsigned professional editorials (Dafouz 2000), we decided to use the signed editorials as the reference for all the university writers' texts, both native and non-native. Signed editorials come closer to the type of task required of the university writers with regard to the explicit and implicit expression of writer stance and the use of boosters and hedges.

We believe that studies of this type will lead not only to better EFL writing but more precise indications for native speakers of English as well.

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