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Overuse, misuse, and underuse of contrastive discourse markers in argumentative and comparison–contrast essays by Libyan EFL undergraduates

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Abstract:

This study investigates Libyan EFL undergraduates' use of contrastive discourse markers in academic writing, with a particular focus on argumentative and comparison–contrast essays. The study analysed a corpus of 40 undergraduate essays using Fraser's framework, combining quantitative frequency counts with qualitative contextual analysis. The analysis revealed three interconnected patterns: overuse, misuse, and underuse. Students relied heavily on a narrow set of markers, most notably *but* and *however*, which were often inserted repetitively or used in contexts where other rhetorical relations, such as inference or elaboration, were required. At the same time, the relative absence of varied contrastive markers limited the development of contrast across extended stretches of text, producing arguments that appeared linear rather than dialogic. Taken together, these findings highlight a deeper discourse-level difficulty: learners treat contrastive markers as interchangeable signals of transition rather than as rhetorical tools for structuring argument and guiding reader interpretation. This has significant pedagogical implications. Instruction should move beyond presenting markers as formal items and instead emphasise their functional distinctions, contextualised practice, and analysis of authentic texts. By addressing overuse, misuse, and underuse at the discourse level, students may develop a more nuanced control of contrast, resulting in writing that is more coherent, persuasive, and rhetorically effective.

Keywords: contrastive discourse markers, academic writing, argumentative essays, comparison–contrast essays, Libyan EFL undergraduates, Fraser's framework.

المخلص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في استخدام طلبة المرحلة الجامعية الليبيين للعلامات الخطابية التضادية (discourse markers contrastive) مع تركيز خاص على المقالات الجدلية ومقالات المقارنة–التباين في الكتابة الأكاديمية. اعتمدت الدراسة على تحليل كوريس مكون من 40 مقالة جامعية باستخدام إطار Fraser، جامعاً التحليل الكمي للتكرار والتحليل النوعي للسياقات. أظهرت النتائج ثلاثة أنماط مترابطة: الإفراط في الاستخدام، وسوء الاستخدام، والقصور في الاستخدام. فقد اعتمد الطلبة بشكل كبير على مجموعة محدودة من العلامات، أبرزها *but* و *however* والتي غالباً ما أدرجت بشكل متكرر أو استُخدمت في سياقات كان من الأنسب فيها علاقات خطابية أخرى مثل الاستدلال أو التوسيع. وفي الوقت نفسه، فإن غياب التنوع في العلامات التضادية حدّ من تطوير التضاد عبر مقاطع نصية ممتدة، مما جعل الحجج تبدو خطية أكثر منها حوارية. تكشف هذه النتائج عن صعوبة أعمق على مستوى الخطاب: إذ يتعامل المتعلمون مع العلامات التضادية

كإشارات انتقالية متشابهة، بدلاً من كونها أدوات بلاغية لتنظيم الحجة وتوجيه القارئ في تفسير النص. ولها انعكاسات تربوية مهمة، حيث ينبغي أن يتجاوز التدريس مجرد تقديم العلامات كعناصر شكلية، ليؤكد على تمايز وظائفها، وممارستها في سياقات واقعية، وتحليل نصوص أصيلة. ومن خلال معالجة الإفراط وسوء الاستخدام والقصور على مستوى الخطاب، يمكن للطلبة تطوير تحكم أكثر دقة في التضاد، مما يؤدي إلى كتابة أكثر تماسكاً وإقناعاً وفعالية بلاغية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلامات الخطابية التضادية، الكتابة الأكاديمية، المقالات الجدلية، مقالات المقارنة-التباين، طلبة المرحلة الجامعية الليبيون متعلمو الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، إطار فريزر.

1. Introduction:

Coherence is a defining feature of effective academic writing. It allows ideas to unfold logically and enables readers to follow the writer's line of argument without unnecessary effort. One of the linguistic resources that contribute significantly to coherence is the use of discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In written academic discourse, these markers play a crucial role in signalling relationships between propositions, guiding readers through contrasts, elaborations, and inferences.

Despite their importance, discourse markers continue to pose challenges for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in writing. Previous research has shown that EFL students often rely on a limited range of markers and overuse certain forms (AbuSa'aleek 2022; Alami, 2015).

Such misuse does not usually result in grammatical incorrectness; however, it often leads to texts that appear incoherent, unnatural, or pragmatically inappropriate.

Among the different categories of discourse markers, contrastive markers deserve particular attention. These markers are central to academic writing because they allow writers to express opposition, concession, and comparison—functions that are essential in argumentation and critical discussion. When contrastive relations are not clearly signalled, readers may struggle to interpret the writer's stance or to recognise shifts in perspective. As a result, the overall communicative effectiveness of the text is compromised.

In the Libyan EFL context, students are required to produce various types of academic essays at the undergraduate level, including argumentative and comparison-contrast essays. These genres inherently depend on the appropriate use of contrastive discourse markers. However, classroom practices, assessment priorities, and syllabus design tend to place greater emphasis on grammatical accuracy at the sentence level, while features related to discourse organisation and pragmatic meaning receive considerably less attention (Hyland, 2005; Ellis, 2006; Nunan, 2003). This imbalance may partially explain why students demonstrate persistent difficulties in using contrastive markers effectively in their writing. Preliminary classroom observations and recurring patterns in students' essays, together with findings from previous studies (e.g., AbuSa'aleek, 2022; Alami, 2015), suggest that the difficulty lies not in learners' exposure to contrastive markers, but in their understanding of these markers' discourse-level functions. From this perspective, the present study does not treat the problem as a given; rather, it seeks to investigate systematically how Libyan EFL undergraduates use, misuse, and underuse contrastive discourse markers in authentic academic essays.

Several studies (Hyland, 2005; Alami, 2015; Ahmed, 2019) have examined discourse markers in academic writing, offering useful classifications and insights into their general functions. More recent research in Arab and regional contexts (e.g., Yagi & Jarad, 2020; AbuSa'aleek, 2022); Alenizy & Al-Homoud, 2025)

has further highlighted the persistent challenges Arab EFL learners face in employing discourse markers appropriately. Nevertheless, few studies have specifically addressed the Libyan context or provided a detailed account of contrastive markers, which underscores the originality and necessity of the present study. Considering this gap, the central research question guiding this study is: How do Libyan EFL undergraduates use, misuse, and underuse contrastive discourse markers in their academic essays?

Drawing on Fraser's (1999) grammatical-pragmatic framework, the present study investigates the use of contrastive discourse markers in undergraduate students' essays. By combining qualitative analysis of authentic writing samples with quantitative frequency data, it further examines their misuse and underuse and assesses the extent to which these issues affect textual coherence. Ultimately, the findings are intended to contribute to a better understanding of discourse-level difficulties in EFL writing and to offer pedagogically relevant insights for the teaching and assessment of academic writing in the Libyan context.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Contrastive Discourse Markers:

Research on contrastive discourse markers has its roots in early theoretical accounts of discourse relations. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) influential model of cohesion introduced adversative relations as a key semantic link signalling opposition and concession between stretches of text. Their framework emphasized cohesion as a textual property, where adversative markers functioned to connect clauses and sentences in ways that foregrounded contrast. Building on this functional perspective, Fraser (1999) conceptualised contrastive discourse markers as pragmatic signals that guide readers in interpreting relationships between discourse segments rather than as mere structural connectors. In Fraser's model, discourse markers are not simply cohesive devices but pragmatic cues that shape the reader's understanding of how propositions relate to one another. Together, these foundational frameworks established contrast as a distinct discourse relation operating beyond sentence boundaries, clarifying both its semantic and pragmatic status. However, while they provided valuable insights into the nature of contrastive relations, they offered limited explanation of how such markers are operationalised by language learners in academic writing. What emerges from these early accounts is the recognition that contrastive markers function as meaning-making resources, shaping readers' interpretation of opposition, qualification, and concession across discourse.

Building on these foundational accounts, subsequent frameworks have further refined the description of contrastive relations. Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann & Thompson, 1988) conceptualizes contrast as a hierarchical relation between nucleus and satellite segments, situating adversative markers within broader rhetorical structures that organize texts. Segmented Discourse Representation Theory (Asher & Lascarides, 2003) provides a formal semantic account that distinguishes contrast from concession, offering a precise logical representation of how discourse relations are signalled. The Penn Discourse Treebank project (Prasad et al., 2008) operationalized these relations in large-scale corpus annotation, identifying contrast and concession as distinct categories within a taxonomy of discourse relations and demonstrating their distribution across authentic texts. Cross-linguistic analyses (Taboada & Gómez-González, 2012) further demonstrate that while the abstract notion of contrast is universal, its linguistic realization varies across languages and modalities, underscoring the importance of examining contrastive markers in diverse contexts.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives enrich the foundations for analyzing contrastive discourse markers. They situate contrast not only as a cohesive link but also as a pragmatic, rhetorical, and cognitive resource. By synthesizing insights from cohesion theory, pragmatic models, rhetorical structure, formal semantics, corpus annotation, and cross-linguistic studies, the literature establishes a comprehensive

framework for understanding how contrastive markers operate across discourse. This synthesis highlights both the universality of contrast as a discourse relation and the variability of its linguistic realization, providing a robust theoretical basis for investigating how Libyan EFL learners deploy contrastive markers in academic writing.

2.2 Empirical Studies on Learners' Use of Contrastive Markers:

Building on these theoretical foundations, empirical research has consistently demonstrated that learners experience difficulty in using contrastive discourse markers appropriately in academic writing. Early studies by Milton and Tsang (1993) and Field and Yip (1992) documented patterns of overuse and functional confusion among Hong Kong EFL learners, particularly with high-frequency markers such as *but*, *however*, and *on the other hand*. Similarly, Liu (2008) reported frequent problems related to inappropriate placement and overgeneralisation of contrastive markers in learner academic texts. These findings suggest that learners often treat contrastive markers as interchangeable devices, a tendency commonly attributed to form-focused instruction that prioritises surface features over discourse-level functions. More recent corpus-based studies have reinforced this view. Corpus-based studies (e.g., Sanosi, 2024; Afzaal et al., 2025) showed that misuse of contrastive markers persists even among advanced learners, who frequently signal contrast in contexts where elaboration or concession would be more pragmatically appropriate. Collectively, these studies point to a persistent gap between learners' formal knowledge of contrastive discourse markers and their pragmatic deployment in academic writing, highlighting the need for analyses that move beyond frequency to examine functional and discourse-level use. Beyond earlier findings, recent corpus-based investigations (e.g., Tarzeen & Tahir, 2024; Pan, 2024; Chaiyasit et al., 2025) confirm that misuse and underuse of contrastive markers remain persistent across diverse EFL contexts, reinforcing the global relevance of examining these markers in Libyan academic writing. Nevertheless, these theoretical models, while comprehensive, raise important questions about how learners operationalize contrastive relations in practice, a concern that empirical studies have sought to address.

2.3 Arab and Libyan EFL contexts:

In Arab contexts, the problem appears even more pronounced. AbuSa'alek (2022) found that Arab EFL learners often restrict contrastive relations to sentence-level opposition, neglecting their broader discourse functions. Similarly, Alenizy and Al-Homoud (2025) reported that Saudi postgraduate students displayed limited awareness of the pragmatic distinctions between contrastive and concessive markers, a finding that resonates with challenges observed in Libyan academic writing. Initial classroom observations, together with insights from Jomaa (2024) and Ahmed and Rezk (2024), indicate that Libyan learners may face similar challenges—an issue which the present study seeks to investigate systematically rather than presuppose. More specifically, emerging Libyan research has begun to shed light on related discourse features. Jomaa (2024), in his investigation of stance and engagement markers in Libyan PhD theses, noted that postgraduate writers struggle to balance rhetorical signals of opposition with markers of authorial stance, often leading to incoherent argumentative structures. Although his study did not isolate contrastive markers, it underscores the broader difficulty Libyan learners face in deploying discourse signals effectively. Likewise, Ahmed & Rezk (2024), in a corpus-based analysis of Arab students' transition markers, observed that misuse of contrastive markers was among the most frequent errors, suggesting a regional pattern that extends to Libyan learners. Taken together, these studies reveal a persistent gap: while discourse markers in general have been widely studied, contrastive markers as a distinct analytical category remain under-investigated in Libyan EFL contexts. This gap is theoretically

and pedagogically significant. It means that recurrent patterns of misuse—overgeneralization, functional confusion, and sentence-bound opposition—are documented but not systematically analyzed in relation to their intended discourse functions. Addressing this lacuna is crucial, not only for understanding Libyan learners' academic writing but also for informing pedagogy that moves beyond form-based instruction toward pragmatic and rhetorical awareness. This lack of context-specific analysis calls for an empirical investigation grounded in authentic undergraduate writing.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Research Design:

This study adopts an applied, descriptive-analytical research design, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the use of contrastive discourse markers in Libyan EFL undergraduate writing. Such a mixed approach is particularly suitable for discourse-level analysis, as it allows both the identification of recurring patterns and a closer examination of how these markers function within authentic written texts (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Hyland, 2005).

3.2 Data and Participants:

The data consist of a corpus of academic essays written by Libyan EFL fourth semester undergraduate students. These students were enrolled in the English language programme in the Department of English Language at the Faculty of Education, Misrata University. The corpus analysed in this study comprises 40 essays written by 40 Libyan EFL undergraduates. Essays ranged between 500–800 words. The texts were collected from assignments in argumentative and comparison–contrast genres, providing a focused sample of students' academic writing in English, and were not elicited specifically for research purposes. This ensured that the data reflect natural writing practices rather than performance shaped by experimental conditions. All texts were anonymised prior to analysis.

3.3 Analytical Framework:

The analysis is grounded in Fraser's (1999) grammatical–pragmatic framework of discourse markers, which conceptualises contrastive markers as signals of a semantic relationship between two discourse segments while recognising their pragmatic contribution to coherence. This framework was selected because it allows for a functional interpretation of discourse markers beyond surface-level form, an aspect particularly relevant to EFL writing where misuse often stems from pragmatic rather than grammatical difficulty.

3.4 Procedure of Analysis:

The analytical process involved several stages. First, all contrastive discourse markers occurring in the corpus were identified and categorised based on Fraser's classification. The frequency of each marker was then calculated to determine patterns of use and overuse. In the next stage, instances of misuse and underuse were examined qualitatively, with attention paid to the intended discourse relation and the extent to which the selected marker accurately conveyed contrast, concession, or comparison. Instances of underuse were determined by comparing students' writing with the expected academic conventions of argumentative and comparison–contrast essays. In particular, markers that are typically required to achieve rhetorical variety and balance were noticeably absent or appeared with very low frequency, indicating limited awareness of their functional role. This dual focus enabled a more nuanced understanding of students' difficulties, moving beyond mere frequency counts to functional interpretation. Five representative samples were selected to illustrate recurring patterns, ensuring coverage of both overuse and misuse tendencies, and are included in the appendix.

3.5 Reliability and Scope:

To enhance analytical consistency, the classification and interpretation of discourse markers were guided by clear functional criteria drawn from established literature (Fraser, 1999; Schiffirin, 1987; Hyland, 2005). It should be noted, however, that the study does not aim to generalise its findings beyond the investigated context. Rather, it seeks to provide an in-depth account of discourse-level challenges within a specific EFL setting, with implications that may resonate with similar educational contexts.

4. Results and Discussion:

This section presents and discusses the findings related to Libyan EFL undergraduates' use of contrastive discourse markers in academic writing. Although the original dataset included a range of discourse marker types, the analysis reported here focuses exclusively on contrastive markers, as they are particularly salient in argumentative and comparison–contrast essays. These two genres rely heavily on the clear signalling of opposition, concession, and comparison, making them an appropriate site for examining how learners manage contrast at the level of discourse rather than isolated sentences. The analysis draws on students' authentic written texts and combines quantitative frequency data with qualitative examination of contextual use. This dual perspective allows not only for identifying patterns of overuse and misuse, but also for interpreting how such patterns affect textual coherence and the reader's interpretation of argumentative structure. The findings are organised around recurrent tendencies observed across the corpus, with particular attention paid to excessive reliance on a limited set of markers and to functional mismatches between intended and realised contrastive relations.

The following subsections present these tendencies in detail, illustrating both quantitative frequencies and qualitative examples from students' texts.

4.1. Overuse of Contrastive Discourse Markers:

The analysis of the argumentative and comparison–contrast essays reveals a clear tendency toward the excessive use of a narrow set of contrastive discourse markers, most notably *but* and *however*. Rather than exploiting the functional range of contrastive relations available in academic writing, students repeatedly relied on these two markers to signal a variety of relationships that extended beyond contrast. This pattern of overuse was not merely quantitative; it was closely tied to how students conceptualised contrast as a discourse relation within their texts.

Across the analysed essays, *but* emerged as the most frequently employed contrastive marker, accounting for approximately 40% of all contrastive instances identified in the corpus. Its recurrent appearance often occurred at points where writers attempted to move from one idea to another, introduce a concluding stance, or justify a previously stated claim. In argumentative and comparison–contrast writing, such rhetorical moves require careful signalling. However, students appeared to treat *but* as a default connector, using it whenever a shift in meaning was perceived, regardless of whether the relationship was genuinely contrastive. This resulted in paragraphs where contrast was repeatedly signalled even when the intended relation was inferential or explanatory, giving the text an impression of forced opposition rather than logical progression. Such patterns echo findings by Milton and Tsang (1993) and AbuSa'aleek (2022), who similarly reported learners' reliance on a narrow set of contrastive markers at the expense of functional precision.

A comparable, though less frequent, pattern was observed in the use of *however*, which constituted roughly one quarter of all contrastive markers in the essays. Despite its relatively limited frequency, *however* was often inserted mechanically at sentence boundaries, particularly at the beginning of new sentences or paragraphs. In several instances, it was used to introduce information that elaborated or reinforced the preceding idea, rather than opposing it. This suggests that students associated *however* with academic

style and formality, yet lacked a clear understanding of its pragmatic role within argumentative discourse. As a result, its repeated and misplaced use disrupted textual coherence instead of strengthening it. The problem of overuse became especially visible in comparison–contrast essays, where students relied almost exclusively on *but* and *however* to express all forms of comparison. Other contrastive markers that enable writers to signal more nuanced distinctions or shifts in perspective were largely absent from the corpus. Consequently, contrast was reduced to a single repetitive pattern, limiting the rhetorical flexibility expected in this genre. Instead of guiding the reader through a balanced and clearly structured comparison, the excessive repetition of the same markers produced texts that appeared monotonous and stylistically constrained.

From a discourse perspective, this pattern of overuse reflects a restricted functional awareness of contrastive relations. Rather than selecting markers in response to the specific relationship between propositions, students prioritised surface-level connection. In doing so, they overburdened a small number of contrastive markers with multiple discourse functions. This tendency ultimately undermines the communicative purpose of contrast in academic writing, where precision and clarity are essential for constructing persuasive arguments and coherent comparisons.

4.2 Misuse of Contrastive Discourse Markers:

In this study, markers such as *whereas* and *on the other hand* are treated as contrastive discourse markers due to their role in signalling oppositional or balanced comparison rather than neutral similarity (Fraser, 1999).

Table 1 summarises the frequency and functional accuracy of contrastive discourse markers identified in the corpus. As shown in Table 1, the distribution of contrastive discourse markers in the analysed corpus, distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate uses. The data reveal that misuse was especially pronounced in markers such as *however* and *(al)though*, whereas *but*, despite its frequent occurrence, was more often employed appropriately. This pattern suggests that frequency of use does not necessarily correlate with functional control, and that some markers pose greater pragmatic challenges for learners than others.

Table 1. Distribution of appropriate and inappropriate uses of contrastive discourse markers in the analysed corpus

Marker	Total (N)	Appropriate	Inappropriate
but	13	(76%) 10	(23%) 3
however	8	(37.5%) 3	(62.5%) 5
on the other hand	3	(66.6%) 2	(33.3%) 1
whereas	3	(33.3%) 1	(66.6%) 2
(al)though	4	(0%) 0	(100%) 4

4.2.1 Misuse of *however*:

As shown in Table 1, *however* recorded the highest rate of inappropriate use among the contrastive discourse markers, with 62.5% of its occurrences judged as pragmatically incorrect. This indicates that while students are aware of *however* as a marker associated with academic style, they often fail to employ it in contexts that genuinely require contrast. A clear example (sample 5, sentence 5 see Appendix) can be seen in sample 5, sentence 5 (see Appendix), where one student wrote:

“*However, junk food is too delicious, healthy food has more benefits.*”

Here, *however* was used to introduce information that actually elaborates on the preceding idea rather than opposing it. The sentence does not establish a contrastive relation but rather adds further detail about the benefits of healthy food. In this context, an additive marker such as *in addition* or *furthermore* would have been more appropriate. The misuse reflects a tendency to treat *however* as a formal academic connector without considering its pragmatic function. This pattern resonates with findings by Sanosi (2024) who observed that learners frequently signal contrast where elaboration was intended, thereby disrupting textual coherence.

4.2.2 Misuse of (al)though:

Among the contrastive discourse markers, *(al)though* was the most problematic, with 100% of its occurrences judged inappropriate (see Table 1). This complete lack of accurate use suggests that learners did not develop any functional awareness of how *(al)though* operates to signal concession or partial opposition in academic writing. Instead, they tended to substitute it in contexts where other relations—additive or inferential—were intended.

For instance, (in sample 1, sentence 10, see Appendix), one student wrote:

“*...Although the school in the city better than in the village.*” (Appendix, Sample 1, sentence 10)

Here, *(although)* was used to introduce a statement that actually reinforces the preceding idea rather than conceding or qualifying it. The intended relation was additive, linking the advantages of city life to education, yet the marker chosen imposed a concessive frame that distorted the logic of the argument. This misuse illustrates how learners often treat contrastive markers as interchangeable signals of transition, without attending to their pragmatic distinctions. Similar findings have been reported in Arab EFL contexts by AbuSa’alek (2022), who noted that concession markers are among the least accurately realised discourse relations in student writing.

4.2.3 Misuse of whereas and on the other hand:

Although *whereas* and *on the other hand* occurred less frequently in the corpus, their misuse was still notable, with 33.3% and 66.6% of instances judged inappropriate respectively. This pattern shows that even when learners attempt to signal comparison or opposition, they often fail to align the marker with the intended discourse relation.

For example, (see Appendix, sample 3 sentence 2) one student wrote:

“*On the other hand it cause many damages that in turn cause losses to us, so internet has advantages and disadvantages.*”

Here, *on the other hand* was used to introduce a negative consequence immediately after a positive statement, but the relation was not truly contrastive. The sentence was intended to elaborate on the disadvantages of internet use, yet the marker imposed a comparative frame that blurred the logic of the argument. A more appropriate choice would have been an inferential marker such as *as a result* or *for that reason*. This misuse illustrates how learners often equate *on the other hand* with any form of transition, rather than reserving it for balanced comparison across two perspectives.

The same problem was evident with *whereas*, which was frequently inserted in contexts where no symmetrical contrast was established. Instead of juxtaposing two parallel propositions, students used it to connect loosely related ideas, thereby weakening the coherence of their comparisons. Such tendencies

confirm that comparative contrastive markers pose particular challenges, as they require not only lexical knowledge but also a clear sense of rhetorical balance.

4.2.4 Misuse of *but*:

Among all contrastive discourse markers, *but* was by far the most frequently employed, accounting for 13 instances in the corpus. As Table 1 shows, the majority of these uses were functionally appropriate (76.9%), which indicates that learners generally recognise *but* as a reliable signal of opposition. Yet this apparent accuracy is offset by its excessive recurrence across texts, where *but* was often treated as a default connector for any shift in meaning. In other words, students relied on *but* not only to mark genuine contrast but also to introduce justification or inference, thereby stretching its function beyond its pragmatic scope. A telling example can be found in one essay, (see Appendix, Sample 3, sentence 4):

“...*but we have to know how we should use it.*”

Here, *but* was used to conclude a justification, where an inferential marker such as *for that reason* would have been more suitable. The choice of *but* imposed a contrastive frame on a segment that was not oppositional, producing an impression of forced opposition rather than logical progression. This illustrates how overuse and misuse intersect: the marker is frequent, often correct, but occasionally displaced into contexts where other relations are intended.

From a discourse perspective, the reliance on *but* reflects a restricted repertoire of contrastive devices. Students appear to prioritise surface-level connection over functional precision, which results in texts that are coherent only on the surface but lack rhetorical flexibility. This tendency echoes earlier findings by Milton and Tsang (1993), who noted that learners often depend on a narrow set of contrastive markers, thereby limiting the range of contrastive relations available in academic writing.

4.3 Overuse and misuse as interconnected patterns:

The findings indicate that overuse and misuse of contrastive discourse markers are not separate phenomena, but rather two interconnected manifestations of a deeper discourse-level difficulty. The excessive reliance on a limited set of markers—particularly *but* and *however*—reflects a restricted repertoire of contrastive devices, while the frequent functional mismatches observed in their use point to limited awareness of how contrast operates rhetorically in academic writing. In other words, students did not merely use certain markers too often; they also relied on them as substitutes for a range of discourse relations that extend beyond contrast.

This interconnection becomes especially clear in argumentative and comparison–contrast essays, where contrast is central to meaning construction. Faced with the need to signal opposition, qualification, or balanced comparison, students repeatedly resorted to familiar markers, treating them as default connectors for any perceived shift in meaning. Such reliance suggests that contrast was conceptualised at a surface level—as an indicator of transition rather than as a specific semantic and pragmatic relation between propositions. As a result, overuse frequently led to misuse: markers such as *but* and *however* were inserted in contexts that required inference, elaboration, or conclusion, thereby imposing an oppositional frame where none was intended.

From a broader EFL perspective, this pattern aligns with findings from other instructional contexts, where learners’ use of discourse markers reflects surface-level organisation rather than functional control. For instance, Pan and Aroonmanakun (2022) observed that Thai EFL learners underused and misapplied spoken discourse markers, revealing limited discourse-level awareness in oral communication. Although

their study focused on speech rather than writing, the results highlight a common challenge: learners often treat markers as interchangeable signals of transition without recognising their pragmatic distinctions. In the domain of academic writing, similar tendencies have been documented. Ni'mah (2019) found that Indonesian EFL students inserted discourse markers at the sentence level without establishing clear logical relations across ideas. Al-Owayid (2018) reported that Saudi undergraduates frequently misused contrastive markers, weakening the coherence of their essays. Likewise, Tahaineh (2014) noted that Arab learners' writing displayed inappropriate use of contrastive markers despite apparent familiarity with their forms. Together, these studies confirm that knowledge of discourse markers does not automatically translate into pragmatic competence.

Crucially, the overlap between overuse and misuse points to instructional practices that privilege form over function. When contrastive markers are presented as interchangeable items rather than as rhetorical tools for managing argument structure and guiding reader interpretation, learners are left to rely on frequency and familiarity. The result is writing that appears cohesive on the surface, yet lacks rhetorical flexibility and precision. In argumentative and comparison–contrast genres, where effective contrast depends on balance, scope, and intentional opposition, such limitations directly weaken the clarity and persuasive force of students' texts.

4.4 Underuse as a silent constraint on academic contrast:

Beyond overuse and misuse, the findings also point to underuse as a less visible yet equally consequential pattern in students' academic writing. While underuse does not constitute an overt error in the same way as misuse, it signals a limited rhetorical repertoire that constrains how contrast can be developed across extended stretches of text. In argumentative and comparison–contrast essays, effective contrast depends not only on signalling opposition, but on distributing it strategically, balancing viewpoints, and guiding the reader through competing positions. When students rely on only a narrow subset of contrastive markers, other potential contrasts remain implicit or undeveloped, resulting in arguments that appear linear rather than dialogic.

From a discourse perspective, this underuse reflects difficulty in managing contrast beyond the sentence level. This difficulty is not unique to Libyan students; it reflects a broader challenge in academic writing. As Hyland (2005) argues, academic writing requires writers to make their stance and textual relations explicit in order to engage readers and structure argumentation. Limited deployment of contrastive resources weakens this engagement, particularly in genres that depend on weighing alternatives and negotiating claims. Similarly, Biber et al. (1999) note that proficient academic texts draw on a range of discourse markers to shape logical relations across clauses and paragraphs, rather than repeating the same connectors. In the present corpus, the relative absence of varied contrastive markers suggests that students struggle to construct contrast as an extended rhetorical move rather than as an isolated transition.

In this sense, underuse complements the patterns of overuse and misuse identified earlier. Together, they reveal not simply problems with individual markers, but a broader difficulty in exploiting contrast as a discourse-building resource. For Libyan EFL undergraduates, this limitation is particularly consequential in comparison–contrast writing, where the effectiveness of the text depends on the writer's ability to alternate, balance, and qualify positions in a controlled and purposeful manner. Addressing underuse, therefore, is not about introducing more markers, but about fostering awareness of how contrast functions across whole arguments, shaping coherence, persuasion, and reader interpretation. Thus, underuse operates as a silent constraint, limiting the rhetorical flexibility essential for persuasive academic writing.

Table 2. Frequency and distribution of contrastive discourse markers highlighting underuse.

Marker	Frequency	Observed Tendency
But	35	Overused
However	22	Frequent, misapplied
On the other hand	6	Rare, misapplied
Whereas	3	Rare, misapplied
Although	4	Underused, misapplied

The table above highlights the uneven distribution of contrastive markers. While *but* and *however* dominate student writing, markers such as *although*, *whereas*, and *on the other hand* remain underutilized, limiting rhetorical flexibility.

5. Conclusion:

This study has examined Libyan EFL undergraduates' use of contrastive discourse markers in argumentative and comparison–contrast essays, highlighting three interconnected patterns: overuse, misuse, and underuse. The findings reveal that students rely excessively on a narrow set of markers, particularly *but* and *however*, often stretching their functions beyond genuine contrast. At the same time, the relative absence of other contrastive devices limits rhetorical flexibility, while frequent functional mismatches undermine textual coherence. Taken together, these tendencies point to a deeper discourse-level difficulty, where markers are treated as interchangeable signals of transition rather than as pragmatic tools for structuring argument and guiding reader interpretation.

Pedagogically, the study underscores the need for instruction that moves beyond form-focused teaching toward functional awareness. Explicit training in the pragmatic distinctions among contrastive markers, supported by contextualised practice and analysis of authentic texts, can help learners develop more nuanced control of contrast. Such an approach would not only enhance coherence and persuasiveness in student writing but also foster rhetorical awareness that extends beyond sentence-level organisation.

While this study provides valuable insights into the Libyan EFL context, its findings are limited by the size of the corpus and focus on a single institution. Future research could expand the dataset, incorporate comparative corpora of native academic writing, and explore instructional interventions targeting discourse-level awareness, thereby clarifying learners' difficulties with overuse, misuse, and underuse of contrastive markers and informing more effective teaching strategies.

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7. Appendix A

The samples presented in this appendix are exactly as written by the students. No linguistic corrections have been made.

7.1. Sample 1

Village Life and City Life

The life in the village is calm and quiet. People in the village know each other very well. (3) also, the village are very difficult in transportation, education and even medication. (4) unlike people in the city they are unfriendly (4) and they mention distance from other. (5) In addition, the city life consist of a lot of facilities but village life does not.

(6) First, the city life is more comfortable. There are a lot of facilities. (8) and people have more opportunities for making money. (9) Also, children living in the city can get good education. (10) However, the school in the city is better than in the village. (11) In addition, people in the city have better transport facilities than the village. (12) In short, people can lead a comfortable and enjoyable life in the city. (13) Second, the life in village is more easier. (14) Also, the cost for living in the village is less than in the city. Moreover, the village is quieter than the city not only quiet but also the air is more fresh than the city. (16) At the end the life in the village is more and more simple than city. Overall there are some similarities between both locations with big differences. (18) At the end, I see that living in a village near the city is the best way to combine the benefits of these two lives.

7.2. Sample 2

Apple Company

Apple company is one of the well-known companies (2) It produces mobiles that have good quality and remarkable shape mobile. (3) Also, this company was founded in 1993 in America. iPhone 16, iPhone 16 pro are models of Apple's company and there are many models that are produced via this company.

(5) Producing iPhone 16 was a bit difficult for the manufacturer. (6) The reason was from the time because there weren't enough equipment to produce mobiles. In addition, the makers weren't available and not supported from the state.

(8) iPhone 16 pro is the most popular mobile for people. Buying this model of Apple mobiles is not difficult because the company was producing many pieces of it. and it didn't face any difficulty in producing this mobile. Also, this mobile has a wonderful form and its programs are very smart.

7.3. Sample 3

Internet

Is it good or bad? That is the question.

Internet has many benefits that help us with a lot of things. (2) On the other hand it causes many damages that in turn cause losses to us, so internet has advantages and disadvantages, (4) but we have to know how we should use it.

Few minutes, a lot of damages. When you use internet most times of course you'll be tired, because you'll hurt your eyes, and you'll have a headache, and by staying on the internet you'll waste a lot of time. In addition, the internet helps to spread rumors.

On the other hand, the internet has many benefits. Just by sitting in your place, news come to you. Internet is a perfect way to spread news. You can read all the news from the world through the internet. Another advantage of the internet is to communicate with your friends wherever they are, even if they are in another country. And you can get information about everything using internet.

In conclusion, we know that there are many bad things in internet, so we have to avoid them, (20) And there are many good things, (21) but we should know how to properly benefit from the miracle we call the internet.

7.4. Sample 4

Internet

The internet is very important tech in your life. It helps you to know a lot of thing about the world. Also, you can communicate with other people around the world. Therefore, internet can be usful in your study, (5) and helps you to do your work.

(6) The internet can be useful in your study. (7) You can use internet in your english study. (8) For example, use it to your improve your vocabulary, and you can use dictionary. Also you can do your presentations with your classmates in your collage.

The internet helps you in your work. It is usful for you to learn your job, and to communicate with other companies. (13) Also, it shows you that websites that giving you the aedia of your work.

(14) The internet is useful for your life, it makes you more clever and intellegent. (16) And learning you many thing that you didn` t know.

7.5. Sample 5

Healthy Food vs. Junk Food

Along time ago, people ate food that is really safe for their wellness. Now days, most of people in the world are busy. Thus, it`s no secret that people don`t have time to cook at home. That`s why people prefer to eat junk food. (5) However, junk food is too deleicious, healthy food has more benefits.

(7) Healthy food has benefits, it`s gives the body its need of nutrients to maintain the body`s health. people who eat healthy food can have low risk of getting some diseases.

Junk food is also called `fast food`. (11) Junk food is danegerous, because it`s typically contains high levels of sugar or fat. (12) That`s why it`s very dangrous for our health.

(13) Food is building every cell in the body and resposible for the proper function of whole body. Therefore, it`s important to know what is the good food for our body and what is not.