
Misuse of “Besides” in Spoken English: Error Patterns in Chinese University Students’ Group Discussions

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Abstract

Conjunctions are essential for organizing discourse and signaling relationships between ideas, yet second language learners often struggle to use them accurately in spoken English. Among these, “besides” is particularly challenging due to its nuanced semantic and pragmatic functions. This qualitative study adopts Conversation Analysis (CA) to investigate the use of “besides” by Chinese university students in advanced English group discussions. Drawing on 15.9 hours of recorded interactional data from five Chinese undergraduates, the study identifies non-target-like uses of “besides” in naturally occurring talk. Five error types are found: misuse as a simple listing connector, misuse as an afterthought marker, overuse to connect aligned ideas, overuse as a redundant connector, and underuse as a clarifying connector. These errors stem from the complexity of “besides”, negative transfer from native-language conjunctions, instructional emphasis on surface-level coherence, and limited systematic training in spoken and written academic English. The study highlights the importance of understanding connectives in both semantic and pragmatic contexts and suggests pedagogical strategies to improve learners’ accurate and contextually appropriate use of “besides” in spoken English.

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1. Introduction

Conjunctions play a crucial role in organizing discourse, signaling logical relationships between ideas, and facilitating comprehension in reading, writing, and speaking. Scholars have emphasized their importance for interclausal integration and overall coherence (Geva, 1992; Millis & Just, 1994). At the same time, research in second language acquisition has consistently highlighted the challenges that English learners face in using connectives appropriately (Yeung, 2009; Larsen-Walker, 2017). Common issues include overuse, underuse, and misuse, with overuse particularly leading to problems in discourse coherence and clarity (Yeung, 2009).

However, despite the centrality of conjunctions for discourse development, most studies have focused on writing and reading, often using corpus-based analyses to examine the frequency and distribution of specific connectives. While these approaches have yielded valuable insights into patterns of misuse and overuse, they provide limited understanding of how conjunctions function in spoken interaction, where learners must deploy them in real time to maintain coherence, manage turn-taking, and respond to peers. Furthermore, previous research has typically examined connectives collectively rather than investigating individual

items, leaving questions about the distinct functions and difficulties associated with specific words largely unexplored.

Among additive conjunctions, “besides” is particularly interesting. Although it appears simple and commonly used in everyday English, it carries nuanced pragmatic and rhetorical functions, making it prone to errors in learner speech. Understanding how learners use “besides” in spoken English can provide insights into broader challenges of connective use in L2 discourse, inform teaching practices, and help address the gap between written-focused research and the realities of classroom interaction.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a conversational analysis approach to examine learners’ use of “besides” in peer group discussions. By focusing on real-time speech, this research aims to identify how learners deploy this conjunction and the types of non-target-like usage that occur. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: What are the specific error patterns in Chinese university students’ spoken English involving the conjunction “besides”, and what linguistic or pedagogical factors contribute to these errors?

By bridging pragmatic and discourse-analytic perspectives, this study contributes to applied linguistics by offering a fine-grained account of connective use in spoken L2 interaction and by providing pedagogically relevant insights into the teaching of discourse cohesion in classroom contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Functional and Pragmatic Uses of “Besides” as a Conjunction

Conjunctions are lexical items that serve as key cohesive devices, marking abstract relationships—such as additivity, causality, adversity, and temporality—between idea units in written and spoken discourse (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 226). Along with other cohesive resources, they contribute to the logical organization and coherence of texts. Within this system, “besides” is typically categorized as an additive conjunction.

A corpus-based study of native English usage identifies five main functions of “besides”: as a rhetorical discourse link connecting argumentative discourse; as an operator of pragmatic force introducing propositions that reinforce claims; as a marker of final point signaling a decisive reason; as a marker introducing an alternative viewpoint; and as an afterthought marker adding supplementary reasons to an argument that is already interactionally complete. These functions highlight the pragmatic versatility of “besides” and its sensitivity to discourse context (Yeung, 2009).

2.2 Conjunctions in L2 Discourse: Functions, Debates, and Difficulties

2.2.1 Significance of Conjunctions in Meaning Construction

Conjunctions play a crucial role in organizing discourse and enhancing comprehension in both spoken and written language (Geva, 1992; Millis & Just, 1994). Knowledge of conjunctions also contributes to reading comprehension beyond vocabulary (Crosson & Lesaux, 2013) and is related to overall text quality in L2 writing (Chiang, 2003; Hinkel, 2001). Beyond cohesion, conjunctions support temporal and causal meanings, with interpretation depending on context and pragmatic factors rather than fixed semantics (Xu & Steinbach,

2024). This underscores that conjunctions are resources for meaning construction, not merely formal markers.

2.2.2 Debates on Conjunction Use in L2 Performance

While conjunctions are essential for discourse cohesion, their relationship with language performance is debated. Some studies link frequent conjunction use to learners' ability to construct complex arguments and higher writing quality (Appel & Szeib, 2018; Leedham & Cai, 2013; Perrez, 2004; Spooren & Sanders, 2008; Yang & Sun, 2012), and they have been used as indicators of L2 speaking performance (Michel, 2013). However, overuse or misuse may lead to redundant or superficial coherence (Crewe, 1990; Lei, 2012). Research also suggests that conjunction choice reflects cumulative linguistic experience rather than categorical proficiency differences (Torres Cacoullos & LaCasse, 2025). This debate points to a tension between quantity-oriented measures of conjunction use and qualitatively informed accounts that attend to how connectives function in discourse contexts.

2.2.3 Challenges in Learning and Using Conjunctions

Conjunctions—especially linking adverbials—are widely recognized as challenging for L2 learners (Larsen-Walker, 2017; Lindstrom & Lubinska, 2022; Yeung, 2009). Difficulties stem from their abstract and discourse-dependent nature, requiring learners to infer relations between propositions that are not explicitly marked (Fraser et al., 2021). In particular, Fraser et al. (2021) emphasize that learners' difficulty lies not only in recognizing logical relations, but also in interpreting the pragmatic force of connectives as they are deployed in context. Cross-linguistic differences further complicate learning, as mismatches in semantic and pragmatic properties between languages can lead to persistent transfer errors (Gao et al., 2025). Gao et al. (2025) further show that such transfer effects are especially pronounced in discourse-pragmatic choices, where learners rely on L1-based assumptions about appropriateness rather than formal semantic equivalence.

2.3 Research Gap

Research has highlighted the importance of conjunctions and documented the challenges L2 learners face. However, most studies focus on reading and writing, with limited attention to spoken discourse. Research on specific connectives, including “besides”, has mainly used corpus-based and quantitative approaches, emphasizing patterns of overuse, underuse, or misuse, while offering little insight into their production and interpretation in real-time interaction. While corpus-based studies provide valuable statistical insights into connective frequency and distribution, they often overlook the interactional contingencies through which connectives acquire meaning in moment-to-moment talk.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a Conversation Analysis (CA) approach to examine learners' use of “besides” in peer group discussions. By analyzing student–student interaction, it investigates how non-target-like uses emerge within specific sequential contexts, complementing frequency-based accounts and providing pedagogically relevant insights for teaching conjunctions in spoken English.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: What specific errors arise in spoken English when Chinese university students lack sufficient knowledge and mastery of the correct use of “besides”?

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Conversation Analysis and Connective Use

Conversation Analysis (CA) provides a micro-analytic framework for examining how meaning is constructed through sequential organization in naturally occurring interaction. Rather than treating linguistic items as context-independent forms, CA emphasizes how participants deploy resources such as connectives to accomplish social and interactional actions in real time. From a CA perspective, connectives like “besides” are not merely markers of logical relations, but interactional resources whose pragmatic functions depend on their sequential positioning, turn design, and recipients’ uptake. This framework is particularly well suited to the study of connective misuse in L2 spoken discourse, as it allows researchers to examine how non-target-like uses arise, are oriented to, or remain unnoticed within ongoing interaction. By linking connective errors to their local interactional environments, CA enables a deeper understanding of why certain uses are problematic beyond frequency-based descriptions, thereby bridging corpus-based findings and discourse-pragmatic accounts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context and Participants

This study investigates the types of errors in the use of the conjunction “besides” by Chinese English learners in academic oral discussions, with a focus on group interactions. Participants are third-year undergraduates enrolled in an advanced English course. Compared with high school learners, their higher proficiency makes any errors, especially in the use of “besides”, particularly noteworthy.

The study centers on one group of five students—Ming, Gina, Shea, Kelly, and Morty—recognized for their dynamic discussions and smooth interactions, making them ideal for in-depth analysis. Across 13 discussion sessions, each lasting 45 minutes to 2 hours, the group contributed 15.9 hours of recorded data. Analysis focuses on sessions three through eleven, excluding the first and final sessions to minimize adjustment effects and potential disengagement. The focus on a single group reflects a qualitative, case-oriented research design that prioritizes depth of interactional analysis over sample size. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, this design allows for close examination of recurrent patterns of connective use within a stable interactional environment. The findings are therefore intended to be analytically transferable to similar instructional contexts.

Discussions involved various texts, including literary excerpts (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Great Gatsby*) as well as expository and argumentative passages. Each session included multiple segments: Language comprehension, Narrative comprehension, Narrative production, Critical evaluation, and Collaborative reasoning. Following Yeung (2009), the study specifically targets the Collaborative reasoning segment, where students present multiple perspectives and justify their points, providing an ideal context for examining the rhetorical and functional use of “besides” in spoken academic discourse.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to data collection. To ensure ethical compliance, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper, and all audio recordings and transcripts were used solely for research purposes.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected via weekly audio recordings of the group discussions. Students were divided into six groups at the course outset, and this study focuses on the group with the most dynamic interaction. Discussions were designed to elicit authentic academic language, emphasizing argumentative reasoning and collaborative idea development.

Recordings were transcribed using Folker (version 1.3.1), applying a modified Jeffersonian notation adapted for group interaction (see Appendix). Transcripts captured turn-taking, pauses, overlaps, and other interactional features essential for Conversation Analysis (CA), the study's methodological framework.

3.3 Data Analysis

Conversation Analysis (CA) was employed to examine learners' use of "besides" and identify errors. The analysis proceeded in two steps: first, all instances of "besides" in the targeted segments were identified; second, each instance was evaluated for appropriateness, guided by Yeung's (2009) five key uses.

Following initial identification, each instance was examined in its sequential context, with attention to turn position, interactional function, and participants' responses, in line with CA principles. To ensure analytical reliability, the transcriptions and preliminary analyses were independently reviewed by two applied linguistics researchers familiar with CA. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This validation process strengthens the trustworthiness of the analysis by ensuring consistency in the identification and interpretation of non-target-like uses.

This approach enables a detailed exploration of error types and their implications for academic spoken English. By focusing on authentic, interactionally rich discussions, the study sheds light on learners' real-time linguistic choices and how they negotiate meaning and construct arguments in English.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This study categorizes the errors made by Chinese English-major undergraduates in using "besides" into three types: misuse, overuse, and underuse (see Table 1). Five interaction excerpts were selected for detailed conversational analysis.

Table 1

Incorrect Uses of "Besides" in Spoken English by Chinese Learners

Error Type	Specific Error	Corresponding Examples
Misuse	1. Misuse as a simple listing connector	<i>Example 1</i>
	2. Misuse as an afterthought maker	<i>Example 2</i>

Overuse	3. Overuse as a connector for aligned ideas	<i>Example 3</i>
	4. Overuse as a redundant connector	<i>Example 4</i>
Underuse	5. Underuse as a clarifying connector	<i>Example 5</i>

4.1.1 Misuse

(1) Misuse as a Simple Listing Connector

Participants are asked to take a position and debate whether college students should read literary classics for humanistic thinking or focus on scientific thinking. All additive connectors are bolded, and “besides” is bolded and italicized.

Example 1

→ **001 Morty** I think it’s important for college students to read more literary classics. ***Besides*** (2.0), reading novels can improve communication skills, **and, and** they help us understand different cultures. (3.0) **Furthermore**, they can help us become more caring.

002 Gina I don’t agree with you. I believe students should focus more on developing scientific thinking to keep up with technological advances.

In this example, Morty’s use of “besides” (line 001) is inappropriate because it functions as a simple listing connector rather than serving an argumentative role. Instead of strengthening the preceding claim, “besides” merely introduces an additional factual point—namely, that reading novels improves communication skills—resulting in a list-like structure rather than a coherent argument.

A more appropriate connector in this context would be “in addition” or “moreover”, which are better suited to elaborating factual points without invoking argumentative reinforcement. “Besides” would have been appropriate only if the speaker had intended to frame the point as further support for the central claim rather than as an additional fact.

Corrected version:

Morty: I think it’s important for college students to read more literary classics. **In addition**, reading novels can improve communication skills, and they help us understand different cultures. **Moreover**, they can help us become more caring.

(2) Misuse as an Afterthought Maker

The discussion topic concerns whether Alice should follow the rabbit into the hole. Students were asked to take a position and support it with evidence from the text or their own experience.

Example 2

001 Ming I believe Alice should follow the rabbit, because (1.0) if she hadn’t, she would have missed the entire adventure and the lessons she learned along the way. I think it’s a key moment for her personal growth.

002 Gina But don’t you think it was too:: dangerous? She didn’t know (2.0) where the hole would lead. She may get hurt. It is a [hasty decision.]

003 Shea [Yes, yes.]

004 (2.0)

005 Ming But, but sometimes taking risks is part of growing, you know. Following the rabbit led her to discover new worlds. **And** finally, it was an opportunity for her to face those challenges and grow stronger.

006 (3.0)

→ **007 Ming** *Besides*, the rabbit itself stands for curiosity and adventure, which are central themes in the story.

In this example, “besides” functions as an afterthought marker, introducing a new idea after the speaker has already produced a concluding move (“And finally, it was an opportunity for her to face challenges and grow stronger”). As a result, the use of “besides” disrupts the sequential organization of the argument and creates uncertainty about whether the speaker is extending or reopening the discussion.

(3) Summary of Misuse

Overall, misuse of “besides” in these two cases stems from learners’ difficulty in aligning the connector with the argumentative stage of discourse. When treated as a neutral listing device or used after a closing move, “besides” fails to perform its pragmatic function of reinforcing an ongoing argument, thereby weakening coherence in spoken interaction.

4.1.2 Overuse

(1) Overuse as a Connector for Aligned Ideas

The following discussion concerns whether students agree with Mr. Darcy’s description of an accomplished woman.

Example 3

001 Shea I think Jane Austen’s description of an accomplished woman is too narrow. For instance, she argues that a woman must excel in many areas (1.0) such as music, drawing, and languages. This was really unrealistic at that time.

→ **002 Ming** Yes, I agree, but we also need to consider that in Austen’s time, these skills were very important. (2.0) *Besides*, u:::h, *besides* they were seen as part of a, I mean, well-rounded education that was important for social [class].

→ **003 Morty** [Yeah?], but I still think people focused too::: much on superficial qualities. (3.0) *Besides*, a woman’s character and intellectual depth should also be prioritized.

In this excerpt, “besides” (line 002, 003) is repeatedly used to connect ideas that are already aligned with the same stance. Rather than introducing a new perspective or shifting rhetorical focus, “besides” redundantly restates support for an existing position, interrupting the natural flow of the discussion.

(2) Overuse as a Redundant Connector

This excerpt discusses the same topic as the previous one.

Example 4

- 001 Morty** I think Mr. Darcy’s definition of an accomplished woman is rooted in social class and accomplishments that please society.
- 002 Ming** Yes, but he also mentions that an accomplished woman must improve her mind through extensive reading, right? That’s the most important part of the description, I think.
- **003 Gina** I agree with your idea. **And besides** (2.0), **besides**, u::h (1.0) it highlights how Darcy’s view of an accomplished woman is more about status than personal fulfillment.
- 004 Shea** His ideas were more about conforming to societal [expectations.]
- 005 Gina** [Yeah.]

Here, “besides” appears after “and” (line 003), resulting in functional duplication. The hesitation and repetition suggest that “besides” is used as a filler rather than a purposeful connective, increasing redundancy and weakening discourse clarity.

Corrected version:

Gina: And it highlights how Darcy’s view of an accomplished woman is more about status than personal fulfillment.

(3) Summary of Overuse

Across both cases, overuse of “besides” reflects learners’ attempts to impose surface-level cohesion without rhetorical necessity. Excessive connector use does not enhance coherence and may instead obscure logical progression in spoken discourse.

4.1.3 Underuse as a Clarifying Connector

Although misuse and overuse were more frequent, instances of underuse were also observed. The following excerpt concerns whether characters in *The Great Gatsby* should attend Gatsby’s funeral.

Example 5

- 001 Shea** I think they should come to Gatsby’s funeral. It’s the right thing to do. (1.0) They should show respect for someone (1.0) who was part of their lives. Gatsby was loyal to his friends, even when they weren’t loyal to him.
- 002 Ming** But they didn’t really care about him when he was alive. Everyone wa:::s, everyone just used him for his parties. It seems unfair to show up now that he’s dead.
- **003 Morty** Yes, but they should still come to show respect. It’s a matter of responsibility. They should have been there for him in life. (2.0) They can, they could show up at his funeral to make up for their past mistakes. (3.0)
- **004 Kelly** You mean they should come to apologize for not respecting him before?

In this interaction, Morty (line 003) fails to mark the second justification as an additional rather than explanatory point. Without an explicit additive connector such as “besides”, Kelly (line 004) interprets the utterance as a clarification, leading to a breakdown in mutual understanding.

Corrected version:

Morty: They should come to show respect for Gatsby. *Besides*, it’s a chance to make up for their past mistakes.

4.2 Discussion

The present study categorized errors in the use of “besides” by Chinese English-major undergraduates into three broad types—misuse, overuse, and underuse—and illustrated five specific error patterns through selected interactional excerpts. By examining learners’ use of “besides” in academic oral discussions, this study both corroborates previous findings on conjunction use and extends them by revealing how such errors emerge in real-time peer interaction.

Previous research has emphasized the role of conjunctions in discourse cohesion and comprehension (Geva, 1992; Millis & Just, 1994; Crosson & Lesaux, 2013). Consistent with this literature, our findings show that inappropriate use of “besides” can disrupt coherence in spoken discourse. However, much prior work has relied on corpus-based or quantitative approaches (Yeung, 2009; Hinkel, 2001; Chiang, 2003), focusing on distributional patterns rather than interactional deployment. By adopting an interaction-based analysis, the present study addresses this gap and demonstrates how learners mobilize “besides” moment by moment in peer discussion.

Misuse of “besides” occurred mainly as a simple listing connector or as an afterthought marker. These patterns align with previous claims that conjunctions are abstract and context-sensitive, posing challenges for L2 learners (Fraser et al., 2021; Larsen-Walker, 2017). Importantly, the present findings indicate that such misuse is not only lexical but interactional in nature. In spoken discourse, misuse often reflects limited interactional competence, particularly learners’ difficulty in aligning connective choice with sequential positioning and projecting argumentative structure in real time.

Overuse, including the use of “besides” to connect already aligned ideas or as a redundant marker, echoes instructional influences noted in earlier studies (Crewe, 1990; Lei, 2012). Our analysis suggests that in spoken interaction, overuse often functions as a compensatory strategy through which learners attempt to impose surface-level cohesion or enhance the perceived organization of their speech. This supports previous cautions that frequent conjunction use does not necessarily indicate higher discourse competence (Perrez, 2004; Spooren & Sanders, 2008), particularly in oral contexts.

Underuse of “besides” is consistent with observations that L2 learners may struggle with the pragmatic deployment of connectives (Xu & Steinbach, 2024; Gao et al., 2025). In spoken interaction, underuse appears less related to insufficient knowledge than to cognitive load during spontaneous speech. When learners simultaneously formulate ideas, monitor peer

contributions, and maintain participation, explicit marking of additive relations may be deprioritized.

Overall, learners’ difficulties with “besides” reflect the combined influence of linguistic complexity, potential L1 transfer, and instructional practices. By situating these errors in naturalistic interaction, this study extends previous research on additive conjunctions and offers pedagogical implications. Teaching materials should move beyond presenting “besides” as a general additive synonym and instead highlight its pragmatic and interactional functions in spoken discourse. Activities such as discourse reconstruction, guided role-play, and comparison of learner and target-like examples may help learners develop greater sensitivity to connective use.

While the present findings offer interactional insights into learners’ use of “besides” in spoken discourse, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study draws on a relatively small dataset and focuses on learners sharing the same L1 background, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The analysis is also restricted to selected excerpts rather than longitudinal developmental data. Future research could address these limitations by expanding participant diversity, adopting cross-linguistic or comparative designs, and examining how instructional input shapes the spoken use of additive connectives over time. Such work would further clarify whether the patterns identified here reflect broader tendencies in L2 interaction or context-specific practices.

5. Conclusion

This study identified three broad types of errors in Chinese English-major undergraduates’ use of “besides”—misuse, overuse, and underuse—realized through five recurrent patterns. By analyzing these errors in naturalistic peer interaction, the study contributes to research on conjunction use by highlighting interactional deployment in spoken discourse rather than merely distributional patterns. The findings underscore that learners’ difficulties with “besides” are closely tied to discourse organization in real time. This interaction-sensitive perspective complements previous corpus-based research and highlights the importance of considering connectives as tools for meaning-making in spoken communication. Pedagogically, instruction should go beyond treating “besides” as a neutral additive synonym and instead emphasize its pragmatic positioning and discourse function. Raising learners’ awareness of when and why “besides” is interactionally appropriate may support more coherent and purposeful spoken argumentation. Although limited by sample size and participant homogeneity, the study lays the groundwork for future research to examine additive connectives across diverse L1 backgrounds, instructional contexts, and developmental stages. Overall, this study underscores the importance of integrating pragmatic and interactional perspectives into L2 instruction, highlighting that mastery of connectives such as “besides” requires not only lexical knowledge but discourse sensitivity.

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Appendix: Transcription Notations

- (.) untimed perceptible pause within a turn underline stress
- .
- ? yes/no question rising intonation, phrase-final intonation
- : lengthened vowel sound
- = latch
- highlights point of analysis
- [] overlapped talk