

FREQUENCY AND GRAMMATICALITY OF CONDITIONAL CLAUSES IN ESSAYS WRITTEN BY IUS FRESHMAN STUDENTS

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Abstract: This research paper is a descriptive study that analyzes the use of conditional clauses in 170 argumentative essays written by freshman students at the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) in the spring semester of 2023. The essays were written as part of their assessment in the ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing course, which is a mandatory freshman course at the IUS. The aim of the paper is to investigate the frequency at which conditional clauses occur, their different types, and their grammaticality. Moreover, the paper examines the link between the frequency and grammaticality of the used conditional clauses and the assigned essay topics. The results show that the overall accuracy/grammaticality when it comes to the usage of English conditional clauses is high. As expected, the most frequently used conditional type is the first conditional.

Keywords: conditional clauses, frequency, grammaticality, argumentative essays, freshmen students

1. Introduction

This study examines how freshman students at the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) use conditional sentences in their quizzes and exams. It examines the frequency of the usage of certain types of conditional sentences in their writing tasks and exams, as well as the link between certain assignment topics and the usage of conditional clauses.

The complex semantics of the various types of conditional clauses are hard for even native speakers to grasp. Additionally, English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) students need to have a firm grasp of the English tense-aspect system, modal auxiliaries, and negation

before they can handle the full range of conditional sentences in English. Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that ESL/EFL textbooks and grammar books tend to oversimplify the information (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 545).

The aim of the research is three-fold: a) to examine the frequency of the usage of different types of English conditional sentences, b) to identify certain errors in the usage and their link to the respective sentence structure(s), and c) to identify the link between certain assignment topics and the usage of conditional clauses.

This is because, as far as we are aware, no such study has been produced as of yet, and we think that carrying out one could help us better understand the frequency and grammaticality of English conditional sentences that learners use, especially when we talk about the importance of conditional clauses in academic writing, such as speculating/hypothesizing and rhetorical functions, to name just a few.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter deals with the significance of English conditional clauses in English language acquisition, and it presents previous research on conditional clauses in terms of their acquisition, grammaticality, and frequency. Moreover, it presents the anticipated problem regarding the usage and grammaticality of conditional clauses in students' essays and identifies gaps in research that we aim to address.

2.1. (Second) Language Acquisition

English conditional clauses play a crucial role in English language acquisition, both in written and oral form, especially in academic contexts, due to their frequent usage and different functions (speculating/hypothesizing, rhetorical, among others), as well as their categorized types.

According to certain theories (Chomsky; Pinker; White 2), Universal Grammar (UG) is a part of an innate biologically endowed language capacity that enables the L1 learner to arrive at a grammar based on linguistic experience (exposure to input).

UG is driven by learnability arguments, as it underdetermines unconscious language knowledge. This discrepancy causes the stimulus poverty problem, or logical difficulty of language acquisition. UG explains how language learners unconsciously acquire features of grammar that transcend input, which can be used to their advantage

when learning a language (Baker and McCarthy; Hornstein and Lightfoot; White 4).

Examples of the skills that begin to emerge early in human development include the ability to conceptually and perceptually categorize “similar” objects and events (Tomasello 4) and the ability to build sensory-motor schemas out of recurrent patterns of perception and action (Piaget; Schneider; Conway and Christiansen; Tomasello 4).

Second language acquisition (SLA) refers to how students learn a second or more foreign languages. Beyond education, second languages play a crucial role in society, especially English, which is widely used in business, science, and international relations, with up to 1.4 billion people using it as a second language (Crystal; Larsen-Freeman and Long 36).

It has been widely held that while acquiring a second language, learners significantly depend on their first language (Gass and Selinker 89). When it comes to the impact of one’s L1 on SLA, Lado (2) states that:

[...] individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture - both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

Some individuals learn second languages more effectively due to factors like age, motivation, and socio-psychological influences. The phenomenon of fossilization, recognized since the mid-20th century, suggests learners struggle to progress as much as native-speaking children, impacting nearly all learners, even those advanced, and often stems from personal issues (Han; Gass and Selinker 395).

Learning a second language remains a rational challenge. In simpler terms, we require a theory to clarify why learners ultimately grasp more about a language than they could learn by solely depending on the input they receive. The suggestion is that learners of both first and second languages need to have access to the understanding of UG (Cook; Lighbown and Spada 105).

Usage-based learning focuses on the frequency with which learners encounter specific linguistic features in input. Increased exposure strengthens associations between language characteristics and contexts, creating robust links when they frequently co-occur and

weaker connections when they occur less often (Ellis; Lighbown and Spada 111).

The question of whether exposure timing - whether in a controlled setting or through spontaneous interactions - affects learning, is at the heart of the controversy surrounding the influence of age on second language acquisition. According to some scholars (Genesee, Neufeld), learning a second language works consistently and is equally beneficial for adults and children. They claim that because adults learn more quickly, they might even have an advantage. Others, on the other hand, claim that the evidence is equivocal and that adults might face difficulties, especially in phonology, while younger students might succeed, particularly in reaching high fluency levels, including native-like accents. Numerous studies (e.g. Oyama, Krashen et al.), which emphasize the potential advantage younger people have in learning a second language, support this viewpoint.

We understand that the acquisition of English conditional clauses is made easier because of their rather frequent usage/occurrence in both oral and written communication. Moreover, most of our participants started learning English at a very young age (school / English language courses), which also contributes to faster second language acquisition. What is also important to note here is that the structure of the conditional clauses in their respective mother tongues (BOS/CRO/MNG/SER – ako, kad(a), da; Turkish – the -se/-sa suffix, eğer) is like their structure in English. Consequently, it is expected that the grammaticality of English conditional clauses in their essays will be high.

2.2. Previous Research on Conditional Clauses/Background Studies

ESL /EFL instructors and students face challenges in teaching/learning conditional clauses, which are sophisticated constructions with diverse meanings. These sentences can be difficult to describe due to their semantic nuances, cognitive reasoning, and psychological intent. Despite extensive research, no simple explanation or solution has been provided for practical classroom use (Norris 39).

Fareh (162-168) evaluated Arab EFL learners' recognition and production of conditional sentences. With an overall mastery level of only 44.25% in recognition and production, the study showed that Arab university students studying English had a difficult time learning conditional sentences (167). Given that these students were junior or senior English majors and had been studying English for more than

fifteen years — often since grade one in public or private schools — this low proficiency raised questions about the efficacy of English language instruction in schools and universities.

Akbana (111-118) investigated the impact of hypothetical conditional clauses on interlanguage in argumentative essays written by Turkish students in Turkish and English. The study used four corpora: Turkish University Corpus, Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays, Turkish International Corpus of Learner English, and Japanese International Corpus of Learner English. Results showed that the difference between Japanese and Turkish students was that Japanese students use hypothetical conditional clauses more similarly to native norms, but additional research was needed to confirm these findings.

According to Salimi (199-201), cognitive linguistics was a crucial framework for comprehending language learning and usage, especially for second language learners who had trouble with intricate structures like English if-clauses. Form was frequently prioritized over contextual usage in traditional EFL grammar texts, which left out important details. This study looked at how 60 postgraduate English language learners learned if-clauses using cognitively oriented and task-oriented teaching approaches. The results showed that the cognitively oriented group outperformed the task-focused and control groups, suggesting a more thorough comprehension of if-clauses in a variety of situations. These findings could be important for curriculum designers and English language instructors looking to incorporate cognitive linguistics into language teaching materials.

The goal of Ko's study (157–174) was to find out how L2 English speakers who were fluent in Spanish and Korean learned if-conditionals at varying levels. It looked at how L1 influence, grammatical complexity, and input frequencies affected this acquisition. The results showed that, in line with L1 acquisition patterns, lower hypotheticality if-conditionals were learned before those with higher hypotheticality. Differentiating between their influences was made more difficult by the overlap between input frequencies and typological universals. Furthermore, although L1 had an impact on non-target forms, the if-conditionals learning sequence was the same for all L1 backgrounds. Higher-level L2 learners' production was also significantly impacted by training.

The semantic properties of English "if" clauses were examined in the study by Yavuz (1-5), which also evaluated the awareness of these features by English language learners and the effect of awareness-raising activities on their comprehension. The study included 98 participants who finished pretests and posttests. It emphasized how

crucial the acquisition of a language item was to improving language proficiency and reaching communicative competence. Notably, because of their intricate semantics, "if" clauses posed difficulties for learners. A t-test revealed a statistically significant increase in comprehension after the intervention.

Negotić (87) examined 157 Portuguese and 122 Croatian sentences to compare conditional sentences in the two languages. The study examined the common verb tenses in the protases (p) and apodoses (q) of conditional sentences, relevant conjunctions, and clause orders in both Portuguese and Croatian. Both p–q and q–p clause orders were deemed appropriate in both languages. While "li" was useful in some situations, the Portuguese "se" was equivalent to the Croatian "ako" for real conditionals, "kad(a)" for potential, and "da" for unreal conditionals. The study drew attention to unusual constructions, such as asyndetic sentences devoid of conjunctions and conditional speech acts. Additionally, it highlighted the semantic distinctions in predictiveness between pragmatic, content, and epistemic sentences, highlighting the fact that causality is present in predictive sentences, but succession was primarily needed for predictive content-domain conditionals. This pointed to a nuanced relationship between conditional sentence structure and semantics that needed more research.

Lastrez López's study (53-55) examined the use of if-clauses from a corpus-based cross-linguistic perspective. It highlighted that, while politeness features were emphasized in English and Spanish, French if-clauses primarily expressed sorrow. The analysis revealed differing frequencies of if-clauses across the three languages, with English having more hypothetical conditions. Spanish showed greater marker variety compared to English's constraints. The study also noted that unmarked protases were common, particularly in French, and that nested if-clauses were more frequent than unnested ones.

The purpose of another study (Al Rdaat and Gardner 5-9) was to determine whether Arab students could evaluate the grammaticality of conditional sentences and explain their mistakes. Even though many of the participants had studied in English-speaking countries, the results revealed that almost 50% of them had trouble recognizing the right sentences. 47% correctly chose the right answers, indicating that more than half had trouble with grammatical conditionals. Furthermore, 42% of respondents gave justifications for their answers, suggesting that challenges were common. The findings raised questions about why

fewer participants accurately judged the grammar compared to those who could explain their incorrect choices.

A study by Brdarević Čeljo et al. (19-20) looked at the difficulties 103 Bosnian English majors at the university level had creating past counterfactual conditional clauses as opposed to present/future hypothetical/counterfactual conditional clauses on a variety of tests. The main conclusions showed that students did better overall when using past counterfactual clauses, especially when it came to the English-Bosnian translation and rewriting tasks. The study also showed that the usage of these conditional clauses was highly influenced by grade level and GPA from grammar-teaching courses.

To compare conditional clauses in Arabic and English, Hammadi (110-113) addressed the difficulties that students and English language learners encountered when attempting to comprehend and translate these structures. Like difficult puzzles, conditional sentences could be confusing to learners. Forty lecturers were interviewed for the study to determine the difficulties in learning these clauses. It explained how conditional clauses were categorized in both languages, pointing out their parallels and divergences, analyzing the challenges that students face, and investigating efficient conditional clause teaching techniques.

As can be observed, the issues that have been mentioned in the studies above that require further research are as follows: the usage of conditional clauses for hypothesizing, the difficulty (or the lack of it) of their acquisition due to the learners' L1 or their teaching/learning environment, as well as their grammaticality.

2.3. Statement of the Problem

ESL/EFL students often struggle to understand that clauses like: "If I had the money, I would take a vacation." (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 545) refer to the present/future rather than the past because they have been taught to equate past tense with past time. Another issue is that we do not yet know to what extent our students use conditional clauses for hypothesizing since it is an important part of academic writing, especially writing argumentative essays.

3. Research Methodology and Findings

This study aims to provide a deeper insight into the frequency of the usage, grammaticality, and topic dependency of English conditional clauses in 170 argumentative essays written by IUS freshman students.

3.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses:

1. What is the frequency and function of each conditional sentences type used by students in their essays? (%)
2. Do they use the zero conditional to refer to truths and facts in the present? If yes, how often? (%)
3. Do they use the first conditional to refer to possible situations in the present/future? If yes, how often? (%)
4. Do they use the second conditional to refer to hypothetical situations in the present/future? If yes, how often? (%)
5. Do they use the third conditional to refer to the past? If yes, how often? (%)
6. Do they use mixed conditionals to show the relationship between the past and present? If yes, how often? (%)
7. What are the most common errors in the usage of conditional sentences?

Based on the research questions, the study will examine the following hypotheses:

H1: All types of conditional clauses will be used.

H2: The zero conditional will be rarely used.

H3: The first conditional will be the most represented and used clause type.

H4: The second conditional will be used sporadically.

H5: The third conditional will be rarely used.

H6: The mixed conditionals will be rarely used.

H7: The most common errors will relate to the usage of the second conditional to refer to the past.

3.2. Data Collection, Research Design and Participants

The samples for this research are 170 argumentative essays written by the ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing Course students at the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) in the spring semester of 2023. The first author of this study was the course instructor, and all the essays were written in exam conditions in class. The authors of the study then analyzed the data manually and transcribed the essays to archive them in their electronic versions.

ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing is a 15-week-long, freshman English course at the IUS that focuses on developing students' critical thinking skills through exposure to different reading and writing tasks. They are asked to critically analyze and debate reading texts/material,

as well as to write argumentative essays on topics such as artificial intelligence (AI), social media, and discrimination, to name just a few. They are also taught how to use different types of arguments, persuasive strategies (ethos, pathos, and logos), inductive and deductive reasoning, as well as how to identify and omit logical fallacies.

The participants were freshman English students in three ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing Course sections (ELIT200.4, ELIT200.5, and ELIT200.6). They are proficient in English (B2 or C1), as determined by the Placement/Proficiency Exam that is organized by the IUS English Language School (ELS) before the start of each academic year and/or semester. After successfully passing this exam, students enroll in their respective study programs. They were asked to write an argumentative essay for the quiz before the final exam, as well as on the final exam. The corpus was divided into three sections (ELIT200.4, ELIT200.5, and ELIT200.6) because the students were placed in different sections of the same course due to their large numbers. They had different quiz topics but identical exam ones.

ELIT200.4

As for ELIT200.4, out of 34 registered students, 26 did the quiz/assignment and took the final exam.

Table 1. Gender (ELIT200.4)

Female	14
Male	12

Table 2. Nationality (ELIT200.4)

Bosnian	20
Turkish	6

The assignment/quiz topics were the following:

- 1) Fast food should come with a warning, like cigarettes or alcohol (14 students, 54%);
- 2) Life today is better than a hundred years ago (11 students, 42%);
- 3) Being expelled from school/university is a suitable punishment for plagiarism (1 student, 4%).

The average word count was 618 words.

The final exam topics were the following:

- 1) Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms (18 students, 69%);

- 2) Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come (5 students, 19%);
- 3) In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees (3 students, 12%).

The average word count was 655 words.

As can be observed from the above-listed data, the most “popular” topics were related to fast food (54%), and social media (69%), which can be explained by the fact that the participants are in their late teens and those two topics were the closest to them in terms of their interests and life experiences. A surprising fact here is that only 5 students decided to write about artificial intelligence (AI) despite its popularity.

ELIT200.5

As for ELIT200.5, out of 35 registered students, 32 did the quiz/assignment and 34 took the final exam.

Table 3. Gender (ELIT200.5)

Female	15
Male	19

Table 4. Nationality (ELIT200.5)

Bosnian	28
Turkish	6

The assignment/quiz topics were the following:

- 1) A China-style lockdown is the only way to stop a global pandemic (11 students, 34%);
- 2) Online education is a perfect substitute for traditional learning (15 students, 47%);
- 3) Companies should not be allowed to collect user data (6 students, 19%).

The average word count was 666 words.

The final exam topics were the following:

- 1) Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms (20 students, 59%);
- 2) Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come (9 students, 26%);

- 3) In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees (5 students, 15%).

The average word count was 710 words.

As can be observed from the above-listed data, the most “popular” topics were related to online education (47%), and social media (59%), which again can be explained by the fact that those two topics were the closest to them in terms of their interests and life experiences. The topics concerning companies being allowed to collect user data (6 students) and discrimination by private businesses (5 students) were probably selected by fewer students due to the lack of relevant life experience.

ELIT200.6

As for ELIT200.6, out of 28 registered students, 26 did the quiz/assignment and took the final exam.

Table 5. Gender (ELIT200.6)

Female	9
Male	17

Table 6. Nationality (ELIT200.6)

Bosnian	21
Turkish	5

The assignment/quiz topics were the following:

- 1) Children vaccination should be obligatory (6 students, 23%);
- 2) Climate change is a hoax (8 students, 31%);
- 3) The legal driving age should be raised to 21 (12 students, 46%).

The average word count was 519 words (due to some extremely short, underdeveloped essays).

The final exam topics were the following:

- 1) Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms (17 students, 65%);
- 2) Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come (7 students, 27%);
- 3) In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees (2 students, 8%).

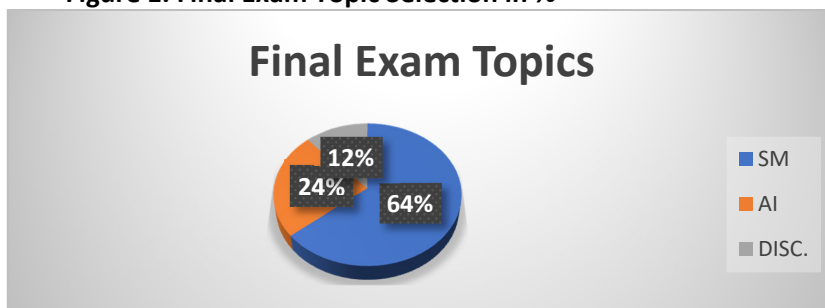
The average word count was 615 words.

As can be observed from the above-listed data, the selection and distribution of the quiz/assignment topics were much closer than in the cases of ELIT200.4 and ELIT200.5. However, the topic related to the legal driving age (46%) was still more “popular” than the other two probably because, at their age, most students are eager to pass a driving test, get a car, and start driving as soon as possible. Yet again, the topic concerning social media (65%) was the most selected one on the final exam.

FINAL EXAM (ELIT200.4 + ELIT200.5 + ELIT200.6)

Concerning the final exam, it is interesting to note the following fact: out of 86 students in total who took the final exam, 55 students (64%) chose the topic concerning social media, 21 students (24%) chose the topic related to artificial intelligence (AI), and 10 students (12%) chose the topic related to discrimination by private businesses. This can easily be explained by the fact that social media are dominating and are present in all important segments of their lives, from education to socialization, and that they would not be able to imagine their lives without the internet, their smart phones, and social media.

Figure 1. Final Exam Topic Selection in %



3.3. Results

This chapter deals with the presentation and analysis of the results regarding the frequency, grammaticality, and topic distribution of conditional clauses in the given corpus (170 argumentative essays).

3.3.1. Frequency

Below is the frequency rating for the given corpus that contains 294 conditional clauses in total.

ELIT200.4 + ELIT200.5 + ELIT200.6 (QUIZZES – OVERALL)**Table 7. Frequency of usage of conditional clauses overall – 3 quizzes**

Structure	Type	Writing (118 conditional clauses)
If + present s. / present s. / present cont.	Zero: Factual present	24 (20.33%)
If + present s. / will (+ be) + verb (+ ing)	First: Probable/predictive future	19 (16.10%)
If + present s. / can/may/should/must/have to + verb	First: Factual present/future inference with somewhat uncertain results	43 (36.44%)
If + past s. / would + verb	Second: Hypothetical/counterfactual present	14 (11.86%)

*The other structures/types occur less than 5%, which makes them statistically irrelevant.

ELIT200.4 + ELIT200.5 + ELIT200.6 (FINAL EXAM – OVERALL)**Table 8. Frequency of usage of conditional clauses – overall**

Structure	Type	Writing (176 conditional clauses)
If + present s. / present s. / present cont.	Zero: Factual present	32 (18.18%)
If + present s. / will (+ be) + verb (+ ing)	First: Probable/predictive future	30 (17.04%)
If + present s. / can/may/should/must/have to + verb	First: Factual present/future inference with somewhat uncertain results	48 (27.27%)
If + past s. / would + verb	Second: Hypothetical/counterfactual present	21 (11.93%)

*The other structures/types occur less than 5%, which makes them statistically irrelevant.

ELIT200.4 + ELIT200.5 + ELIT200.6 (QUIZZES AND FINAL EXAM – OVERALL)

Table 9. Frequency of usage of conditional clauses – overall

Structure	Type	Writing (294 conditional clauses)
If + present s. / present s. / present cont.	Zero: Factual present	56 (19.05%)
If + present s. / will (+ be) + verb (+ ing)	First: Probable/predictive future	49 (16.66%)
If + present s. / can/may/should/must/have to + verb	First: Factual present/future inference with somewhat uncertain results	91 (30.95%)
If + past s. / would + verb	Second: Hypothetical/counterfactual present	35 (11.90%)

*The other structures/types occur less than 5%, which makes them statistically irrelevant.

Tables 7, 8, and 9 show that the most frequently used conditional clause structure was “if + present simple / modal + verb” to describe factual present and future inferences with somewhat uncertain results (91 out of 294 conditional clauses in total – 30.95%). Overall, the first conditional is used in 140 sentences out of 294 in total, making it 47.61%.

As for the least used type “if + past simple / would + verb”, it accounts for only 11.90% (35 out of 294 sentences in total). It is surprising since it is used to speculate about hypothetical and/or counterfactual situations in the present.

3.3.2. Grammaticality

As far as the grammaticality of conditional clauses in the essays is concerned, the fact that only a small portion of the 294 conditional sentences are incorrect (18 in total – making it 6.12%) suggests that participants’ grammatical proficiency is generally high (93.88%).

... Of the 294 sentences, only 18 (6.12% of the total) have form, logic, or style issues. There is only one error in the zero conditional, four in the first conditional, six in the second

conditional, four in the third conditional, and three in mixed conditionals.

- ... Rather than total misinterpretations of conditional structures, most of these errors involve awkward wording, redundancy, or inversion issues. This implies that even though students are usually skilled at creating conditionals, they still occasionally make grammatical, stylistic, and logical mistakes, particularly in more intricate or rhetorically charged contexts. One clear example where the second conditional is used, but the third is more appropriate, is the following sentence: *However, if we **did not have** social media in the time when the coronavirus appeared, we **would not be** informed about the importance of it.* (did not have – had not had; would not be – would not have been!)

3.3.3. Topic Distribution/Dependency

Below is the topic distribution/dependency rating for the given corpus.

Table 10. Topic Distribution/Dependency

Topic	Writing (Out of 294 conditional clauses in total)
Fast food should come with a warning, like cigarettes or alcohol	21 (7.14%)
Life today is better than a hundred years ago	11 (3.74%)
Being expelled from school/university is a suitable punishment for plagiarism	10 (3.40%)
A China-style lockdown is the only way to stop a global pandemic	9 (3.06%)
Online education is a perfect substitute for traditional learning	33 (11.22%)
Companies should not be allowed to collect user data	5 (1.70%)
Children vaccination should be obligatory	4 (1.36%)
Climate change is a hoax	7 (2.38%)
The legal driving age should be raised to 21	18 (6.12%)

Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms (ELIT200.4)	33 (11.22%)
Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms (ELIT200.5)	35 (11.90%)
Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms (ELIT200.6)	26 (8.84%)
Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come (ELIT200.4)	13 (4.42%)
Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come (ELIT200.5)	21 (7.14%)
Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come (ELIT200.6)	14 (4.76%)
In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees (ELIT200.4)	9 (3.06%)
In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees (ELIT200.5)	15 (5.10%)
In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees (ELIT200.6)	10 (3.40%)

Regarding the topic distribution/dependency, we can see that “Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media sites” (ELIT200.4 – 33 clauses – 11.22% and ELIT200.5 – 35 clauses – 11.90%) and “Online education is a perfect substitute for traditional learning” (33 clauses – 11.22%) are the topics with the highest number of conditional clauses.

On the other hand, “Companies should not be allowed to collect user data” (5 clauses – 1.70%), “Children vaccination should be

obligatory” (4 clauses – 1.36%), and “Climate change is a hoax” (7 clauses – 2.38%) are the ones with the lowest numbers of conditional clauses.

3.3.4. Findings Related to the Posed Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the study has examined the following hypotheses and come to the following findings:

H1: All types of conditional clauses will be used. – Accepted, all types of conditional clauses have been used.

H2: The zero conditional will be rarely used. – Rejected, it is used sporadically – 56 out of 294 sentences in total, making it 19.05%.

H3: The first conditional will be the most represented and used clause type. – Accepted, the first conditional is the most represented and used clause type, with almost half of the sentences being in the first conditional (140 out of 294 conditional clauses in total, making it 47.61%); however, it does not use “will” but verbs like “can”, “may”, “must”, and similar ones almost twice as often to show degrees of certainty, probability, necessity, and/or obligation (91 out of 294 conditional clauses in total – making it 30.95%).

H4: The second conditional will be used sporadically. – Accepted, 35 clauses out of 294 in total, making it 11.90%.

H5: The third conditional will be rarely used. – Accepted, there are 5 out of 294 clauses in total, making it 1.7% (statistically insignificant).

H6: The mixed conditionals will be rarely used. – Accepted, there are 7 out of 294 clauses in total, making it 2.4% (statistically insignificant).

H7: The most common errors will relate to the usage of the second conditional to refer to the past. – Rejected, most of these errors involved awkward wording, redundancy, or inversion issues. There is only one sentence where the second conditional is used instead of the third conditional.

As for the topic distribution/dependency, the topics with the highest number of conditional clauses are “Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media sites” (ELIT200.4 – 33 clauses – 11.22% and ELIT200.5 – 35 clauses – 11.90%) and “Online education is a perfect substitute for traditional learning” (33 clauses – 11.22%), whereas the topics with the lowest number of conditional clauses are “Companies should not be allowed to collect user data” (5 clauses – 1.70%), “Children vaccination should be obligatory” (4 clauses – 1.36%), and “Climate change is a hoax” (7 clauses – 2.38%).

4. Conclusion

The grammaticality of conditional clauses in the essays is generally high.

The most frequently used conditional clause structure was “if + present simple / modal + verb” to describe factual present and future inferences with somewhat uncertain results. This may be the case because, to write an argumentative essay, one needs to use speculative language, thus the modal verbs and not “will”, as the latter is used to describe a more probable and/or predictive future. And students might believe that when it comes to writing argumentative essays, it is more important to share facts than to speculate.

As for the least used type, “if + past simple / would + verb”, it is surprising that it is not used more frequently since it is used to speculate about hypothetical and/or counterfactual situations in the present. This is especially true given that topics like “Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media platforms”, “Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) technology in different professions will increase unemployment in the years to come”, and “In a democratic society, private businesses should have the right to discriminate against their future employees” offer ample opportunity for hypothesizing and speculation. What can be noted is that the students opted for more factual and predictive structures while using verbs like “can”, “may”, “must”, and similar ones to show degrees of certainty, probability, necessity, and/or obligation.

Regarding the topic distribution/dependency, we have seen that “Governments should be allowed to ban certain social media sites” and “Online education is a perfect substitute for traditional learning” are the topics with the highest number of conditional clauses. This is probably because social media and online education are very relevant to them and parts of their everyday lives. It is impossible for them to imagine their lives without their smartphones, internet access, social media, and, as of relatively recently, artificial intelligence (AI).

On the other hand, “Companies should not be allowed to collect user data”, “Children vaccination should be obligatory”, and “Climate change is a hoax” are the ones with the lowest numbers of conditional clauses. This could be explained by the fact that most students still do not work or if they do, it is for their pocket money, so they are not too worried about what companies do with people’s data. Furthermore, it is their parents who worry about and take care of their vaccinations. Last but not least, they do not see the seriousness of climate change as they

cannot yet perceive the full consequences of it in the part(s) of the world where they live.

When it comes to the limitations of the study, some future research and studies might focus on a wider range of topics, which might be more “inviting” to speculate and use conditional clauses more often, and which might provide a more detailed insight into why/to what purposes students use conditional clauses in academic writing. Moreover, some apps, software programs, and other similar tools could be employed on a larger corpus of essays and on a broader scale.

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Učestalost i gramatičnost kondicionalnih rečenica u esejima brucoša IUS-

a

Ovaj istraživački rad je deskriptivna studija koja analizira upotrebu kondicionalnih rečenica u 170 argumentativnih eseja koje su napisali studenti

brucoši na Internacionalnom univerzitetu u Sarajevu (IUS) u proljetnom semestru 2023. Eseji su napisani kao dio njihovog ocjenjivanja na predmetu ELIT200 Kritičko čitanje i pisanje, koji je obavezan predmet za brucoše na IUS-u. Cilj rada je istražiti učestalost pojavljivanja kondicionalnih rečenica, njihove različite vrste i njihovu gramatičnost. Također, u radu se ispituje povezanost učestalosti i gramatičnosti korištenih kondicionalnih rečenica i zadanih tema eseja. Rezultati pokazuju da je tačnost/gramatičnost kada je u pitanju upotreba engleskih kondicionalnih rečenica visoka. Kao što se i očekivalo, najčešće korišteni tip kondicionala je prvi kondicional.

Ključne riječi: kondicionalne rečenice, učestalost, gramatičnost, argumentativni eseji, brucoši