CHAPTER 7  Clauses in combination

1  Identifying conjunction in text

The first extract below is from a draft of a Master’s dissertation describing an experiment in which the MA student asked subjects who learnt English as a second language to read newspaper articles in English from Britain and from their own country. She also asked British subjects to read the same articles. She was interested in investigating how well the two groups of subjects understood culturally-specific references in the articles. The second extract is from an examiner’s report on that dissertation in its final form.

First, analyse the conjunctive relations in the two extracts, identifying both the logical dependency and the logico-semantic relations. (Ignore any embedded clauses.)

from the dissertation

The results showed that the non-native speakers’ understanding of the headline of the article from their own country was extremely high and that they could easily predict the content of the article, which suggests that they already had the background knowledge on politics and that they would have certain expectations from that text. On the other hand, the British subjects had great difficulty in guessing its content judging only from the title as they could only talk generally about it, being unable to make a successful prediction. The non-native speaker subjects encountered more difficulties with the article from their country on a religious scandal, maybe because this scandal happened during their absence from home and they were not really informed. On the other hand, they had few problems with the political article because this was mainly based on their general knowledge about politics rather than on the specific event that was being described.

When they came to read the British article, the non-native speaker subjects faced many difficulties as many of them did not know basic concepts such as what is ‘Labour’ and which are the most important parties in the United Kingdom. Of course, the subjects who had spent more years in the United Kingdom were able to predict the article’s content more successfully but at the time they could not reach a total understanding of what it was going to talk about, because their knowledge of the political situation in Britain was still restricted.

What is more surprising is that the British subjects did not have a high understanding of the title because, like the non-native speaker subjects, they did not mention the reason that would cause Labour to lose safe seats. Of course this is not an indication that they do not know the way elections work in the UK, but maybe they did not consider it was worth mentioning.

from the examiner’s comments
In the Relevant Research Background chapter, there could be a little less weight on general factors which affect reading comprehension, and a little more on cultural factors specifically, but you show familiarity with, and understanding of, a good range of concepts, and there is a clear sense of development through most of the chapter, with different authors brought in in a way which suggests that the ideas have been assimilated. The methodology chapter is successful: you worked out a fairly complex procedure for setting up the various stages of the data collection and analysis, and you not only carry it through skilfully but explain it carefully and clearly. Although the fact that your non-native speaker subjects had such different amounts and types of experience of British culture makes it a little harder to compare the results, the inclusion of the English native speaker subjects is sensible and provides some unexpected side-lights on the topic. The results are presented in a clear way, and you use the concepts introduced in the Research Background reasonably systematically. The discussion of the results is thorough and sensible though it mostly stays at a relatively simple level: you achieve some perceptive interpretation, but in places the analysis could be pushed deeper – for example, I would have liked some discussion of the process by which, in a few cases, the readers managed to work out the meanings of initially unknown expressions by the end of the reading. It is useful to look at three case studies to illustrate the general findings, but the relatively low scores of the NS readers could have been exploited a bit more since they reinforce the importance of background knowledge rather than linguistic proficiency. The conclusions answer your research questions explicitly and appropriately, but, on the other hand, the outline of teaching implications is rather thin and generalised.

2 Discussing conjunction in text
Now consider the ways in which the differences in conjunctive relations that you have identified reflect the different purpose of the two extracts.