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## **The Unseen Threads: Investigating the Mastery of Transition Signals Among EFL Students in English for Economics Classes**

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### ABSTRACT

While numerous studies have explored the use of discourse markers in general writing contexts, little attention has been given to their mastery in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in English for Economics. This study seeks to address this gap by examining students' proficiency in transition signals across three dimensions: recognition, comprehension, and application. Using a quantitative design, a test instrument was administered to 42 undergraduate students (24 female and 18 male) to measure their performance. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and categorized into four proficiency levels: high, upper-intermediate, intermediate, and low. The results indicate that most students achieved an upper-intermediate level, showing strong recognition of additive and sequential markers. However, difficulties remained in applying transition signals functionally, especially in causal, adversative, and conclusive categories. The study underscores the importance of explicit instruction and scaffolded practice in enhancing students' proficiency. It also highlights the value of diagnostic assessment in identifying specific weaknesses, thereby offering practical implications for curriculum design and teaching strategies in ESP contexts.



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## INTRODUCTION

Coherence is a central criterion of successful academic writing: readers must be able to follow logical links among propositions so that an argument or explanation unfolds smoothly. One of the most relevant linguistic resources for achieving coherence is the set of transition signals, which are also called transition words, linking devices, or discourse markers (Ampa et al., 2019). Transition signals perform discursive functions such as showing addition, contrast, cause-and-effect, exemplification, sequence, or conclusion; by doing so, they guide readers through the writer's line of reasoning and make paragraph-level relations explicit (Halliday & Hasan, 1989).

For students of English as a foreign language (EFL), acquiring an operative knowledge of transition signals is often difficult (Djahimo, 2018; Mahendra & Dewi, 2017; Thummanuruk, 2024). Empirical studies report different kinds of problems—e.g., limited range of transitions used, overreliance on simple connectors (such as *and*, *but*), misuse of more complex items (e.g., *nevertheless*, *consequently*), and inappropriate placement that weakens cohesion (Djahimo, 2018; Mahendra & Dewi, 2017). These difficulties reduce clarity and may negatively affect raters' perceptions of organization and coherence in student writing.

The pedagogical stakes are particularly high in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts such as English for Economics. Students in economics-related programs are required to read and produce specialized texts such as reports, policy briefs, and analytical paragraphs, where precise logical relations and argumentative sequencing are essential for meaning and professional communication. However, many students face difficulties in organizing ideas, maintaining coherence, and applying discipline-specific writing conventions, which often results in weak arguments and unclear analysis. Prior studies have shown that EFL learners in academic programs struggle with structuring logical arguments, integrating evidence effectively, and using appropriate academic style in writing (Andriani et al., 2021; Perveen, 2021). These challenges highlight the need for targeted writing instruction and support that address both language proficiency and the rhetorical demands of economics-related texts. In such disciplinary contexts, accurate and varied use of transition signals helps writers present evidence, articulate cause-and-effect relations, and construct persuasive conclusions (Nurkamto et al., 2024; Oktafia et al., 2023).

Recent international research has deepened understanding of how EFL writers handle transitions, often differentiating recognition (awareness of form) from functional competence (appropriate use in context). For example, Thummanuruk (2024) found that some university writers could identify basic linking functions but lacked metalinguistic awareness of interpersonal or rhetorical uses of transitions; they

sometimes used transitions mechanically without strategic sensitivity to rhetorical purpose. Likewise, large-sample studies have demonstrated that frequency counts alone (how often transitions appear) do not tell the whole story: many students repeatedly use a narrow set of simple connectors while neglecting a wider repertoire needed for academic argumentation (Aidinlou & Shahrokhi Mehr, 2012).

National and regional studies reinforce these international patterns. Research in Indonesian EFL contexts has reported uneven mastery of transition types: temporal transitions tend to be used more accurately, while causal and contrastive signals often cause problems for students (Piri, 2018). These studies typically rely on textual analysis of student essays, which is valuable for identifying usage patterns and common errors but has limitations when the objective is to measure proficiency systematically.

An increasing component of the literature, therefore, argues for more nuanced measurement approaches that go beyond frequency or error counts. Studies combining corpus/text analysis with metalinguistic interviews (e.g., Mahendra & Dewi, 2017; Okuyama, 2020) show that productive control over transitions involves both knowledge (recognition and function) and skill (contextual selection and placement). Such work suggests that effective assessment of transition-signal competence should include tasks that test recognition, function identification, and controlled production under test conditions.

Despite these advances, several important gaps remain. Much of the existing research still focuses on English-major populations or uncontrolled writing samples, while non-language majors, such as economics students, have been less frequently examined (Diana et al., 2022; Thitivesa, 2014). This is problematic since discipline-specific writing imposes different rhetorical demands, and findings from English departments may not generalize to students with limited exposure to academic English. Furthermore, although corpus- and essay-based analyses are common, relatively little research employs structured, test-based instruments to quantify students' ability to recognize and apply transition signals under standardized conditions, even though such measures provide more reliable indicators for curriculum design (Liliawati et al., 2018). In addition, most studies report general difficulties without identifying which categories of transition signals, such as additive, adversative, causal, sequential, exemplification, or conclusive, are most problematic, even though such fine-grained evidence is crucial for targeted instruction (Ampa et al., 2019; Maru et al., 2020). Finally, metadiscoursal and interactional aspects of transitions, particularly devices that signal stance or engage readers, remain underexplored, even though research shows these higher-order rhetorical connectors are less reliably used than basic ideational ones (Djahimo, 2018; Mahendra & Dewi, 2017).

Related to these gaps, the present study adopts a quantitative, test-based approach to measure Economics students' proficiency in understanding transition signals at paragraph level. The instrument is designed to assess three interrelated domains: (a) recognition (ability to identify transition signals), (b) functional

comprehension (ability to select the correct function/type), and (c) contextual application (ability to insert or choose transitions that produce coherent paragraph-level relations). Using these domains, the study quantifies proficiency across a sample of undergraduate economics students.

The focus on economics students contributes to ESP research by examining a non-language-major population whose disciplinary writing needs differ from those of English majors (Ampa et al., 2019; Gultom, 2016). Empirically establishing proficiency levels for such a group allows educators to calibrate expectations, refine syllabus design, and create targeted learning modules for transition-signal instruction that are relevant to economics topics.

Methodologically, the study's standardized test format complements previous essay-analysis studies, where corpus research indicates usage patterns and common errors, a test-based design produces comparable scores amenable to psychometric evaluation (e.g., reliability analysis, item difficulty). This combination supports both diagnostic and evaluative purposes, diagnosing specific problem areas and evaluating the effectiveness of instruction over time (Romova & Andrew, 2011).

Pedagogically, the study aims to produce actionable recommendations. If the data reveal systematic weaknesses in particular transition categories (e.g., causal or adversative markers), instructors can implement focused interventions—such as explicit teaching of semantic constraints, controlled practice, and disciplinary examples—then use the same instrument for pre-/post-testing to evaluate gains. Moreover, findings about metadiscoursal versus ideational transitions can inform whether instruction should prioritize rhetorical stance and reader-management strategies, in addition to basic linking.

Therefore, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the overall proficiency level of undergraduate economics students in (a) recognizing, (b) understanding the function of, and (c) applying transition signals in paragraph contexts under test conditions?
2. Which categories of transition signals (additive, adversative/contrastive, causal, sequential/temporal, exemplification, conclusive) do economics students perform most and least accurately on?
3. What pedagogical implications follow from observed proficiency patterns for the design of English for Economics instruction?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to analyse university students' proficiency levels in understanding transition signals in writing form within English for Economics classes. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate because the main objective was to obtain measurable evidence of students' recognition, functional comprehension, and application of transition signals

in paragraph contexts. Unlike purely qualitative approaches, which explore students' perceptions or strategies, a quantitative test-based design allowed for the systematic measurement of proficiency and the identification of patterns across a relatively large (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The design followed a cross-sectional format, in which data were collected at a single point in time from one cohort of undergraduate economics students. This format is suitable for profiling proficiency levels and identifying relative strengths and weaknesses across categories of transition signals, rather than tracing developmental changes over time. The data consisted of test scores generated from a researcher-developed instrument that included recognition, functional comprehension, and contextual application items.

Furthermore, the research was descriptive in nature, as the study did not manipulate variables or implement instructional interventions but rather sought to describe and quantify existing levels of ability (Murata, 2021). However, the design also integrated elements of diagnostic assessment, as the test results were expected to highlight specific problem areas (e.g., causal, adversative, or conclusive transitions) that could inform pedagogical decisions in English for Economics courses.

By applying this design, the study ensured objectivity in evaluating students' skill levels while maintaining relevance to classroom practice. The descriptive-quantitative framework also made it possible to conduct statistical analyses, including measures of central tendency, distribution, and item-level performance, thus yielding both general proficiency profiles and detailed diagnostic information.

## **Participants**

The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an English for Economics course at a public university in Indonesia during the 2024/2025 academic year. A total of 42 students participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling on the basis that they had completed at least one semester of English for General Purposes and were currently studying English for Economics. The sample included 24 female and 18 male students.

All participants were non-English majors whose primary exposure to English writing occurred in classroom settings, particularly in ESP courses. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. To ensure ethical compliance, anonymity was guaranteed, and no identifying personal information was reported in the study.

## **Instrument**

The primary instrument was a Transition Signals Proficiency Test developed by the researcher to assess three dimensions of ability: 1) Recognition – Students identified transition signals from a list of lexical items and distinguished them from non-transition words. (20 items, multiple-choice). 2) Functional comprehension – Students matched transition signals with their appropriate discourse functions (e.g.,

additive, adversative, causal, sequential, exemplification, conclusive). (20 items, multiple-choice)

1. Contextual application – Students selected or inserted the most appropriate transition signal to complete sentences or short paragraphs so that coherence was achieved. (20 items, multiple-choice and completion tasks)

The test contained a total of 60 items and was administered in a paper-based format during a regular class session. Content validity was established through expert judgment: three lecturers specializing in English for Specific Purposes reviewed the instrument to ensure representativeness of transition categories. A pilot test with 30 students from a different cohort was conducted to check item clarity and reliability. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the final version of the test was 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The data were collected in three stages. First, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. Second, the Transition Signals Proficiency Test was administered under standardized conditions during a 90-minute class session. Students were instructed to work individually without external aids such as dictionaries or electronic devices. Third, answer sheets were collected immediately after completion and coded for analysis.

The data collection process was carried out over two consecutive weeks in March 2025. The first week was devoted to the pilot test and instrument revision, while the second week was used for the main data collection with the target sample. To reduce potential test anxiety, students were informed that the results would not affect their course grades.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The collected data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive and inferential statistics. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and frequency distributions) were computed to profile the overall proficiency levels. Second, performance was analysed by transition category (additive, adversative, causal, sequential, exemplification, conclusive) to identify areas of strength and weakness. The findings were then interpreted in relation to previous literature to highlight similarities, differences, and new insights into the skill levels of economics students in using transition signals.

## **FINDINGS**

This study presents the results of the Transition Signals Proficiency Test, which was administered to 42 undergraduate students (24 females and 18 males) enrolled in the English for Economics course. The test measured three dimensions: recognition, functional comprehension, and contextual application of transition signals. The general results are presented in the following table.

**Table 1**  
*Students' Proficiency Levels in Transition Signals*

Dimension	Mean (M)	SD	Min	Max	Interpretation
Recognition	15.8/20	2.1	11	20	High
Functional comprehension	14.2/20	2.7	8	19	Upper-Intermediate
Contextual application	12.6/20	3.0	7	19	Intermediate
<b>Total (60 items)</b>	<b>42.6/60</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>Upper-Intermediate</b>

The results indicate that students performed best in recognizing transition signals (M = 15.8), suggesting that they were familiar with common connectors such as *however*, *therefore*, and *in addition*. Their performance was somewhat lower in functional comprehension (M = 14.2) and contextual application (M = 12.6), reflecting challenges in correctly matching signals with discourse functions and applying them in extended written contexts. Overall, the average score of 42.6 out of 60 places the group in the upper-intermediate range.

In addition, it is important to consider how they performed across different categories of transition signals. Such analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of which types of transitions students handle with relative ease and which categories pose greater challenges. Table 2 presents the mean scores and interpretations for each transition signal category.

**Table 2**  
*Performance by Transition Signal Category*

Transition Category	Mean Score (%)	Interpretation
Additive (e.g., moreover, furthermore)	76%	High
Adversative (e.g., however, on the other hand)	72%	Upper-Intermediate
Causal (e.g., because, therefore)	69%	Upper-Intermediate
Sequential (e.g., first, next, finally)	80%	High
Exemplification (e.g., for example, namely)	73%	Upper-Intermediate
Conclusive (e.g., in conclusion, thus)	66%	Intermediate

The data reveal that students were most proficient in using sequential (80%) and additive (76%) transitions, both of which are commonly encountered in academic and non-academic texts. In contrast, the lowest performance was found in the conclusive category (66%), indicating that students struggled to select appropriate signals to close or summarize arguments effectively.

In addition to analyzing performance by category, it is also essential to examine how students' overall scores are distributed across proficiency levels. This distribution provides a clearer profile of the cohort, highlighting the proportion of students who demonstrate high mastery, those who perform at an intermediate level, and those who may require additional instructional support. The following table summarizes the frequency and percentage of students within each proficiency band.

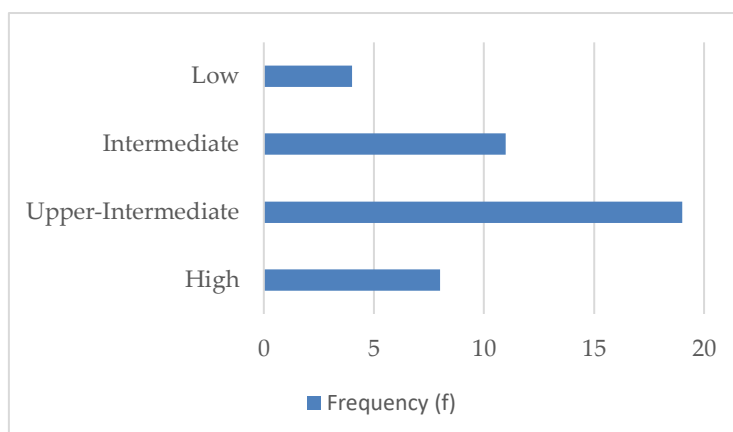
**Table 3**

*Distribution of Students' Proficiency Levels in Transition Signals*

Proficiency Level	Score Range	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
High	51–60	8	19.0%
Upper-Intermediate	41–50	19	45.2%
Intermediate	31–40	11	26.2%
Low	≤ 30	4	9.5%
<b>Total</b>	—	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>

The results demonstrate that nearly two-thirds of the students (64.2%) achieved scores within the upper-intermediate to high proficiency range, confirming that most participants had a solid understanding of transition signals. However, a notable proportion (26.2%) still fell into the intermediate category, while 9.5% were classified as low proficiency, indicating persistent difficulties in applying transition signals effectively in academic writing contexts.

This distribution provides a clearer picture of how students are spread across proficiency levels, reinforcing the earlier finding that the group as a whole is positioned in the upper-intermediate range, with only a minority requiring substantial remedial support.



**Figure 1.** *Distribution of Students' Proficiency Levels in Transition Signals*

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that students achieved a relatively strong performance in recognizing transition signals, with a mean score that placed this dimension in the high proficiency range. Recognition is the most fundamental stage in developing cohesive writing, and the ability to identify appropriate transition markers indicates that students have acquired a lexical awareness of discourse connectors. This pattern is consistent with Djahimo (2018), who found that EFL students tend to excel in surface-level recognition tasks due to frequent exposure in textbooks and classroom instruction. In this study, additive and sequential signals were the most successfully recognized, which may reflect their frequent appearance in both general English texts and economics-related materials.

A closer examination of category-level performance confirms that sequential and additive transitions scored the highest, with mean percentages of 80% and 76%, respectively. Sequential markers, such as *first*, *next*, and *finally*, are commonly reinforced in academic tasks that involve ordering ideas or outlining processes, which are especially relevant in English for Economics courses where procedural explanations are frequent. Additive markers like *moreover* and *furthermore* similarly receive emphasis in instructional materials that encourage students to expand arguments. Mahendra & Dewi (2017) also noted that Indonesian students tend to master simpler, linear discourse markers earlier than more abstract categories, which supports the present findings.

Despite their strengths, students displayed weaknesses in both functional comprehension and contextual application of transition signals. While recognition involves surface-level awareness, comprehension and application demand a deeper understanding of the rhetorical functions of connectors and their integration into coherent discourse. In this study, students scored moderately in these dimensions, with difficulties most pronounced in conclusive transitions. The lower performance suggests that students may not have received adequate instruction in summarizing and synthesizing arguments, which are essential for academic writing. This echoes the observations of Utami et al. (2021), who reported that Indonesian students frequently misuse or omit conclusive markers, leading to weak paragraph endings.

The relative weakness in applying causal and adversative signals also deserves attention. Signals such as *because*, *therefore*, *however*, and *on the other hand* are critical in constructing logical relationships, yet the study found that these categories were mastered at a lower rate compared to additive or sequential markers. This finding is in line with Thummanuruk (2024), who observed that students often lack the metalinguistic awareness needed to deploy connectors that highlight contrast or causality. In English for Economics, where arguments often depend on cause-and-effect relationships, this weakness could undermine students' ability to construct coherent academic arguments.

Another difficulty lies in the disparity between recognition and application. While students may readily identify correct transition signals when presented in multiple-choice formats, they struggle to employ them correctly when writing independently. This suggests a transfer problem, where knowledge of linguistic forms does not automatically translate into accurate communicative use. Local studies, such as (Jasrial et al., 2025), highlight the need for task-based and scaffolded approaches that bridge the gap between recognition and productive application. Without such pedagogical reinforcement, students risk stagnating at the recognition level without progressing toward functional mastery.

The findings carry several implications for the design of English for Economics instruction. First, there is a clear need for explicit instruction in underdeveloped transition categories, especially conclusive, causal, and adversative markers. Teachers should allocate classroom time to activities that model the use of these transitions in

authentic texts, followed by controlled and free practice. Exercises such as completing argumentative paragraphs, writing summaries, and peer-editing tasks could directly target the integration of transitions at the discourse level. Such explicit focus is consistent with recommendations in (Mahendra & Dewi, 2017), who emphasized that higher-order connectors require deliberate and repeated practice.

Second, scaffolded approaches appear particularly promising for addressing application gaps. Jasrial et al., (2025) demonstrated how creative scaffolding in drawing-based writing tasks improved cohesion in younger students' descriptive writing. Although their context differs from higher education, the principle remains relevant: scaffolds can guide students in moving from recognition to application. For example, university instructors could employ graphic organizers that highlight logical relationships, sentence-combining tasks that encourage causal or adversative connections, or structured templates for writing conclusions. These strategies help students internalize the rhetorical functions of transitions beyond memorization.

Third, the use of diagnostic assessment instruments, like the proficiency test applied in this study, can provide instructors with precise feedback on student weaknesses. Regular administration of such assessments enables instructors to track progress and adjust instruction accordingly. This practice also aligns with the broader movement in ESP pedagogy toward evidence-based instruction that responds to students' actual performance profiles (Djahimo, 2018). By identifying that conclusive and causal markers are problem areas, teachers can design targeted interventions that address these deficiencies systematically.

While the study yields meaningful insights, several limitations constrain its interpretation. The sample size of 42 students, though adequate for descriptive analysis, may not capture the full range of proficiency levels among economics students across different universities. Generalizability is therefore limited, and caution should be exercised in applying these findings to other contexts. Larger samples would provide a stronger basis for extrapolating trends at the national or regional level.

Another limitation concerns the cross-sectional design, which captures proficiency at a single point in time. Transition signal mastery is a developmental process, and cross-sectional snapshots may fail to reveal whether difficulties with conclusive or adversative signals persist, diminish, or worsen over time. Longitudinal research would be needed to determine whether targeted instruction can lead to measurable improvement in functional application. Additionally, the reliance on a written test instrument, while systematic and reliable, may not fully reflect students' performance in authentic classroom writing tasks where multiple cognitive and linguistic demands interact.

Lastly, while the test instrument covered recognition, comprehension, and application, it did not incorporate a qualitative dimension such as think-aloud protocols or interviews. As a result, the data cannot reveal the cognitive or affective factors underlying students' performance. For instance, students who fail to use

conclusive transitions may lack awareness of rhetorical conventions, confidence in their writing, or exposure to models of academic closure. Mixed-method approaches could therefore complement quantitative findings by providing a richer understanding of learner challenges.

Future research should build on the present study by expanding both its scope and methodology. Larger-scale investigations involving multiple institutions could provide a more representative picture of EFL students' transition signal proficiency across Indonesia. Such studies could also compare results across different academic disciplines, as students in humanities, sciences, or engineering may exhibit distinct patterns of discourse marker use. By broadening the participant base, future work could assess the extent to which these findings are specific to English for Economics or generalizable across ESP contexts.

Longitudinal studies represent another promising direction. Tracking student performance across a semester or academic year would reveal the impact of targeted instruction on transition signal mastery. Pre- and post-tests could evaluate whether scaffolding techniques, explicit strategy instruction, or technology-enhanced learning tools significantly improve performance. This would also help educators identify which interventions yield the most sustainable gains in contextual application. Ampa et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of continuous exposure and reinforcement, and longitudinal research could empirically validate this principle.

Finally, future studies could integrate mixed-methods approaches to capture not only quantitative scores but also students' perceptions, strategies, and challenges. Interviews or reflective journals might reveal why students find conclusive and adversative transitions more difficult, whether due to limited exposure, cultural rhetorical preferences, or gaps in instruction. By combining diagnostic tests with qualitative insights, researchers could design pedagogical models that are both empirically grounded and contextually responsive. Such holistic approaches would further advance understanding of transition signals as a critical component of academic writing proficiency in EFL settings.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate EFL students' proficiency in using transition signals within the context of English for Economics, focusing on recognition, comprehension, and application. The findings revealed that while students demonstrated strong recognition skills, particularly in sequential and additive categories, their proficiency declined when tasks demanded deeper functional understanding and contextual application. In particular, causal, adversative, and conclusive transitions emerged as areas of weakness, suggesting that students are more comfortable with linear and additive connectors than with those that require nuanced rhetorical control. These results provide an empirical basis for understanding the uneven mastery of discourse markers among university-level EFL students.

The relative strength in recognition but weakness in application highlights a significant pedagogical challenge. Students are able to identify transition signals when they appear in isolated test items, but they often struggle to integrate them naturally into extended writing. This gap underscores the necessity of instructional approaches that bridge declarative knowledge and procedural use. Explicit teaching, scaffolded practice, and targeted feedback can play critical roles in helping students internalize the rhetorical functions of transitions. Without such interventions, students risk remaining at a surface level of awareness, unable to produce cohesive and logically organized texts in their academic writing.

The study also demonstrates the value of diagnostic assessment in revealing specific areas of difficulty. By categorizing performance across recognition, comprehension, and application, educators can move beyond general impressions of writing proficiency and address students' needs with greater precision. The finding that gender differences were minimal further indicates that interventions can be applied broadly across student populations without substantial differentiation. This evidence-based approach aligns with current trends in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy, which prioritize responsiveness to students' actual performance data rather than relying solely on assumed challenges.

While the study has clear implications, it is not without limitations. The relatively small and context-specific sample limits generalizability, and the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of learner proficiency. Nevertheless, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on transition signals in EFL contexts, offering insights that can inform both pedagogy and future inquiry. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to track developmental patterns and explore students' perspectives on transition use. In sum, this study affirms the central role of transition signals in achieving cohesive academic writing and highlights the pedagogical importance of supporting students in moving from recognition to effective, contextualized application.

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