Investigating the influence of conjunctions in L2 reading comprehension – focus on causal and adversative meanings

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The aim of this article is to exhibit findings from an empirical study of the influence of adversative and causal conjunctions the comprehension process and summarization practice of a group of adult L2 students. The theories guiding this research are from the field of reading and comprehension and discourse processing (Gagné, C. W. Yekovich, & F. R. Yekovich, 1993; Kinsch & van Dijk, 1978; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), and include the Theory of Cohesion in order to define, describe and categorize cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Although there are several studies devoted to the topic of the influence of conjunctions in reading comprehension, findings are still inconclusive. Moreover, the field can benefit from studies about the impact on conjunctions in L2 reading, which is the case of the present study. In order to carry out this investigation, data was collected from 12 participants from the Letras -Secretariado Executivo em Inglês course at Universidade Federal de Santa Catariana, who were all attending the fourth semester. The activities performed by the participants consisted of a summary task, a reading comprehension task, a gap-filling task with conjunctions and a retrospective questionnaire. Data were analyzed mainly qualitatively, although quantitative data were taken into account as well. This study’s findings indicate a facilitative effect of conjunctions. Moreover, results suggest that conjunctions’ signaling potential may assist readers in the selection process of relevant information, and that seems to be a contributing part in comprehension and summarization processes.

1. Introduction

This article is based on a study that was carried out as an MA thesis (Winfield, 2010), which aimed at contributing to the understanding of the influence of conjunctions in L2 reading comprehension, a topic that has been widely discussed in the area of Applied Linguistics, but lacks consensus. Previous studies about conjunctions have not reached a common conclusion over their impact in reading comprehension, on one hand, several studies corroborated their facilitative effect on reading comprehension (Chapman, 1983; Sanders & Leo, 2000; Scherer & Tomitch, 2008) and on the other hand, other studies negated that effect (Geva, 1986; Irwin, 1982). In addition to this controversy, Murray’s (1995) findings suggested that adversative conjunctions are more likely to impact reading, and that causal conjunctions deserve further investigation.

Given the aforementioned controversy as regards the facilitating effect of conjunctions in reading comprehension, the following research questions were posed:

1. Does the omission of adversative and causal conjunctions from the source text affect the identification of the controlling idea, central ideas and secondary ideas expressed in the summarized text?
2. Does the omission of adversative and causal conjunctions hinder L2 readers’ comprehension according to the readers’ answers to comprehension questions?
3. Do results from participants’ gap-filling task with conjunctions have any relationship with the participants’ performance in the summary task and in the answers to reading comprehension questions?
4. How does the omission of conjunctions affect the production of summaries by the participants in terms of number and type of conjunctions used in the summaries?

The classifications and description of conjunctions used for this study were based on Halliday and Hasan’s Theory of Cohesion (1976), also, the effect of conjunctions on reading comprehension as discussed by Murray (1995), Scherer and Tomitch (2008) were reviewed and support the results analysis in this research. In addition, previous studies that described reading comprehension processes were discussed including Gagné, C. W. Yekovich, & F. R. Yekovich (1993), which described the component processes involved in reading comprehension, in addition to the textbase model (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978) and the situation model (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

2. Method

In this section the study design is briefly described, it comprehends the participants, instruments and the procedures adopted for data collection.
2.1 Participants, instruments and procedures

Participants: 12 Brazilian undergraduate students from the fourth semester of the Letras - Secretariado Executivo course at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, UFSC, Brazil. For this experimental study participants were distributed into two groups, a control group and an experiment group. Each group had six participants.

Instruments: the instruments used for this study are listed below:
- A text in the participants L2 (English) ‘Getting to the airport’ was presented in two versions C (Appendix A) – i.e. with conjunctions, and NC, i.e., no conjunctions, as in the NC version this all the adversative and causal conjunctions were omitted from the text (Appendix B).
- A summary task (performed in English (L2), with no time limit imposed, but limited to 30 lines of written text).
- A reading comprehension task (performed in English (L2)).
- A gap-filling task
- A retrospective questionnaire (performed in Portuguese (L1)).

Procedures: before the main data collection took place, there were two pilot studies, when the instruments and instructions were tested and refined (Winfield, 2010). Prior to data collection, the participants were invited to read and sign an Informed Consent Form, as required by the Ethics Committees in Brazil. After that, they received instructions both, verbally and in writing in their L1 (Portuguese). For further discussion over decisions taken as regards the use of L2 and L1 in this research, please refer to Winfield (2010).

Initially, participants were divided into two groups, one group read text version C and the other read text version NC. Afterwards, participants were asked to summarize the text in their L2. At this point, they did not have access to the text. When participants finished the summarization task, they handed their summaries to the researcher and received the study text back. Subsequently, they performed a reading comprehension task. After this task was finished, the participants completed a gap-filling task. Upon completion, the participants answered a retrospective questionnaire in their L1 (for further information on this study’s instruments, please refer to Winfield, 2010).

2.2 Data analysis: model of analysis for the summaries and parameters for the reading comprehension questions

In order to provide the study with reliability these researchers created a model of analysis for the summary task and parameters for the reading comprehension questions, respectively illustrated by tables 1 and 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Propositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CRI</td>
<td>The differences between early-airport people and late airport people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI1</td>
<td>The <strong>advantages</strong> and <strong>disadvantages/consequences</strong> of being an early-airport person or a late-airport person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI2</td>
<td>There should be <strong>justice</strong> for the early x late people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI1</td>
<td>Early-airport people suffer from <strong>illnesses</strong> and <strong>nervousness</strong>, as well as abuse such as being called <strong>cowards</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI2</td>
<td>Having to waiting for their <strong>luggage</strong>, and not getting the seat they want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI3</td>
<td>The author <strong>accidently changed from being an early-airport person to being a late-airport person</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CRI = Controlling Idea   SI = Secondary Idea   CI = Central Idea
Table 2. Parameters for the analysis for the reading comprehension questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kind of people does the text talk about in relation to arriving at the airport to catch a plane?</td>
<td>The people who arrive early at the airport AND those who arrive late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of person is the author?</td>
<td>The author was an early-airport person, but he changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the main advantages late-airport people have over early-airport people?</td>
<td>The late-airport people are not physically or emotionally XX, in other words, they do not suffer anxiety-related sickness and get their luggage first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the first paragraph, why does the author consider the world to be ‘unjust’?</td>
<td>Because early-airport people should get rewards, like getting their luggage first or getting the best seat; instead, they suffer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>According to the text, how would a late-airport person react in case they missed a flight?</td>
<td>They would probably shrug; in fact the late-airport person would not care about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does the author think that there is a conspiracy against early-airport people?</td>
<td>Because early-airport people make an effort about arriving early and do not get the seat they want because somebody else had booked that seat in advance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did the author explain his lateness when a passenger confronted him with the following statement: “You should get to the airport earlier...”? Was his answer precise? Please justify your answer.</td>
<td>No, he just said that he was early and then he wasn’t. His answer was not precise, because he did not explain the reasons for his lateness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How come the author arrived late at the airport? Wasn’t he an early-airport person? Explain the reason for his arriving late.</td>
<td>He was not late. He was in early for his 9:15 flight and he was so early that the check-in assistant offered in a seat in an earlier flight: the 7:15 flight and he accepted it. All of a sudden he was.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For both, the model of analysis for the summary task and the answers to comprehension questions, this researcher counted on raters, four of them were Brazilian graduate students who were studying for an MA in Applied Linguistics and one of them was an Education Studies graduate, who was a native speaker of English.

3. Results and discussion

In this section, results from the study tasks are analyzed. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data seem to confirm the signaling potential of adversative and causal conjunctions. (Murray, 1995; Winfield, 2010).

3.1 Examining the impact of conjunctions in summarization and in participants’ answers to reading comprehension questions

As the graph below shows, data from the summary task indicates the facilitative effect of conjunctions observable in this study’s results.

Graph 1. Results of the summary task for Group A (C) and B (NC) in percentages

CRI = Controlling Idea  SI = Secondary Idea  CI = Central Idea

In quantitative terms, the differences between Group A and Group B as regards the summary task were more striking for the Controlling Idea (CRI) and the secondary ideas (SI1, SI2, SI3).
Besides presenting quantitative data, as this study counted on small number of participants, data was analyzed qualitatively as well. For that, the extract below is presented, containing data from the summary produced by participant 7, who read the text with no causal or adversative conjunctions:

**P7 - The text was about people who plans [sic] every detail in life to avoid making a mistake and those who procrastinate every single thing they can.**

In this case, the participant attempted to reconstruct the controlling idea of the text, but was not successful, since her reconstruction is not textually restricted (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1976), rather than that, it can be seen as an elaboration for the inclusion of information that is not present in the text read (Tomitch, 2003).

The aforementioned extract seems to indicate the possibility of the participant trying to recover the main idea of the text, but including information that was exactly textually-restricted.

The processing demands for the identification of CI1 (The advantages and disadvantages/consequences of being an early-airport person or a late-airport person) involve comprehension of implicit information. Thus, it is clear that only counting on information that is explicitly stated will not lead to successful reading comprehension (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1976; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

Differently from the participants who read the text with no conjunctions, i.e. text version NC, show that the participants in Group A (C) were able to identify CI1 in a satisfactory manner, as illustrated below:

**Group A (C):**

- **P1** – The author of the text starts by discussing the ‘real’ advantages of going to the airport early. He states that there is no advantage to those who plan early... As an argument to the disadvantages of arriving early, he mentions the fact the late-airport person will be the last ones to check in the luggage.

- **P6** – The text shows negative and positive points of being the late type and the early type.

Comparing the aforementioned data from Group A (C) with Group B (NC), it is possible to observe that the propositions produced in group A (C) are more concise, and involve superordination in comparison to those in group B (NC), which is characteristically more fragmentary and list-like (Koerich & Dellagnello, 2008), as the data below suggest:

**Group B (NC)**

- **P8** – People who get early at the airports should get a reward... while the ones who get there when they [sic] pilot is about to turn on the plane end up getting the best advantages and fly with no concern at all.

- **P12** – The author’s describe some situations that happened to him, he was a [sic] early-people

As for the identification of secondary ideas, 100% of participants in group A (C) were able to identify SI1, as against 58% participants in group B. A greater difference was noticed in SI2, for which group A (C) results were 100% correct, whereas Group B results were 33% correct.

Analyzing SI2 in more detail it is possible to consider that the conjunctions may have added strength to the text sections that follow them, which, in turn, may have added relevance to these sections (Zadeh, 2006), which happened to contain SI2. The extracts from text version (C) below demonstrate that the conjunctions precede SI2:

As a matter of fact, I was an early-airport person for years. My **luggage** will get on the plane first, I told myself. Indeed it will. Which makes it the last luggage they take off the plane when you land. You know who really gets his luggage first? The late-airport person, who walks into the airport three minutes before the plane takes off. **Though if** I get there real, real early, I told my old coward self, I will get the best **seat**. Well, just try to show up early and get the best seat. Well, just try to show up early and get the seat you want. Go ahead and try. **No matter** how early I showed up, I was always told that someone called two or three years ahead of me and asked for that **seat**. I figured it was a conspiracy. I figured there was someone in America who called every airline every day and said: “Is that coward Simon flying somewhere today?” If he is, give me his seat.”

It is worth mentioning that the accidental change is preceded by a conjunction that has an emphatic meaning “as **matter of fact**” in which an avowal meaning is perceived (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The identification of SI3 “The author accidently changed from being an early-airport person to being a late-airport person”, implies that the reader apprehended information that was implicit in the text, i.e. the accidental change, hence introducing higher cognitive demands from the reader.
Also, he tells that one day, he arrived early at the airport and went to buy a ticket to [sic] 9 a.m. NY and the salesperson offered a ticket to [sic] 7:05 a.m. and it was 7 a.m. He accepted and when he went into the plane the ‘aeromoça’ said [sic] him that he should arrive early to the airport. And he arrived. (P.1)

Nevertheless, he concludes his point on the advantages of being a late-airport person telling a story that happened to him when he arrived so early to his 9 o’clock flight, leaving a few minutes after the time he had arrived. Suddenly, he became the late-airport person. (P.2)

The problem is when someone arrives so early that he or she can be place [sic] in a earlier plane, so this person could be considered a late passenger. (P.3)

Once I got too early in [sic] the airport and became myself a late-airport people [sic]. (P.5)

P8 - … when he got so early in the airport that he had enough time to get the previous fly [sic] and a woman complained he was late. (P.8)

P12 – He describes the most embarised [sic] situation that he past [sic] for been [sic] a early-person, he came to the airport two hours earlier, and the ‘balconista’ said that if he run he can get the flight earlier. He was so embarised to tell her that he just like to get earlier that he took the plane, and get [sic] late. (P.12)

Considering that underlying theme as the accidental change recounted in the text, I would suggest that participants 2 and 3 in Group A were able to bring bringing the underlying theme to the surface and state that in their summaries. As previously mentioned, the presence of the emphatic conjunction may have render its preceding information more noticeable, thus examining data from the summary task in more detail, it is possible to detect the signaling effect of adversative and causal conjunctions (Murray, 1995). All in all, it seems that participants 2 and 3 were able to delete unnecessary information, group the ideas from the text reconstruct SI3 (Kintsch & van Dijk 1978).

As far as the reading comprehension task is concerned, overall results seem to corroborate those from the summary task, as displayed in the graph below:

Graph 2. Results of the Reading Comprehension Task for Group A (C) and B (NC) in percentages

A brief observation of quantitative data shows that more significant differences between Group A and Group B were noticeable regarding comprehension questions 1, 5, and 6.

Firstly, it is possible to observe that all participants in group A (C) were able to reconstruct the controlling idea as demanded by question 1, ”What kind of people does the text talk about in relation to arriving at the airport to catch a plane?”, differently from Group A (NC), in which group results corresponded to 75%. It is interesting to point out that the controlling idea was explicitly stated in the text, as the extract below shows:

After years of study, I have determined there are only two types of people in this world: those who get to the airport early and those who walk in the plane as it is about to take off. If there was any justice in this world, the early-airport people would get rewards for doing the right thing. And the late-airport people would be punished.

In this specific section of the text, it is possible that the deletion of the causal conjunction “if” disturbed the causal relation at the level of the sentence, and impaired readers’ processing of the text. As Murray has pointed out in his 1995
study, causal conjunctions are quite complex and deserve further investigation. From the analysis of the data from this study, I have tried to begin to understand the complexity around these cohesive mechanisms, which seem not only to signal, but to promote causal relations (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

As far as question 5 is concerned, According to the text, how would a late-airport person react in case they missed a flight?, select information from the text and generate a plausible hypothesis about how late-airport people’s reactions. The total score for group A (C) was 100%, against 66.66% for group B (NC). Overall results for question 6 were similar, with group A (C) outperforming group B (NC), as illustrated in graph 2.

To sum up the quantitative analysis of the reading comprehension questions, where group A (C) appears to have had an advantage over group B (NC), where overall results for group A were 88% as against 76% for group B (NC), answers to question 3 reveal an advantage for the participants who read the text without conjunctions whereas answers to questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8 showed more advantages for the participants who read the text with conjunctions, whereas answers for questions 4 can be considered to represent similar results.

All in all, quantitative and qualitative analysis point to the fact that answers to the reading comprehension questions from Group A (C) were significantly distinct from those of Group (NC), therefore pointing to an advantage for the group that read the text with conjunctions. Let us refer back to the reading time scores that were previously mentioned for the point is worth discussing.

3.2 Data from retrospective questionnaire and the gap-filling task in relation to participants’ performance in the summary task and reading comprehension questions

The retrospective questionnaire was applied in this research in order to provide this researcher with access to the participants’ perception and impressions over the tasks they performed for this study. On the other hand, the gap-filling task was intended to check participants’ knowledge of how to use conjunctions.

From this questionnaire, the effect of familiarity with the topic on participants’ comprehension and text difficulty perceived by participants were measured quantitatively. Qualitative data were provided by the other items in the retrospective questionnaire. Quantitative results are described below:

Table 3. Quantitative Data from the Retrospective Questionnaire regarding text difficulty and familiarity for Group A (C) and Group B (NC) adapted from Tomitch (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAS</th>
<th>GROUP A</th>
<th>GROUP B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference to text difficulty</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of familiarity</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GAS= Group Average Score
Likert scales:
Perception of difficulty: 1 corresponds to very easy and 6 to very difficult.
Level of familiarity: 1 corresponds to very familiar and 6 to very unfamiliar.

Compared to results from the summary task and the reading comprehension questions, results from the retrospective questionnaire are unexpected, as participants in Group A (C) expressed higher scores than Group B (NC) for reference to text difficulty. This suggests participants in Group B (NC) may have not noticed the deletion of the adversative and causal conjunctions, possibly generating inferences to compensate for that disruption (Stanovich, 1981).

Moving on to the gap-filling task, overall results show that Group A scored 66%, while Group B scored 73% as exhibited in table 4:

Table 4. Results from the Gap-filling task with conjunctions in percentage terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GTS = Group Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GTS for Group A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTS for Group B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results are unexpected in the sense that although Group A performed worse at the gap-filling task, participants in this group performed better at both the summary and comprehension questions tasks. Incidentally, participants in Group A read the texts with adversative and causal conjunctions, therefore results indicate the beneficial effect of adversative and causal conjunctions in summarization and reading comprehension (Murray, 1995, Winfield, 2010).

3.3 A closer look at adversative and causal conjunctions

Although this research focuses on the effect of conjunctions in comprehension processes and not in production processes, the summaries produced by the participants in Groups A and B were analyzed in terms of number and type of conjunctions produced, given the fact that in summarization practice there is an interface between reading comprehension and writing. Thus, it was my intention to verify whether the absence of conjunctions in text version NC,
read and summarized by participants in Group B, affected the cohesiveness of the summaries produced as regards the use of conjunctions. Table 5 exhibits these results as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conjunction type</th>
<th>Group A (C)</th>
<th>Group B (NC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additive</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adversative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results confirm Murray’s suggestions that adversative conjunctions are more restricting than the other type, therefore having an influence on the integration of the sentences they precede. Integration may be fostered by sentence expectancy, as the following quote indicates:

Adversative connectives are highly constrained. They specify solely that the subsequent text is likely to contrast or limit the scope of the content of the preceding text. The content of the immediately preceding sentence combines with these constraints to create the expectancy that the subsequent sentence is likely to contrast with the preceding sentence (Murray, 1995, p. 120).

Somehow, expectancy may control inference, which, in the case of summarization practice, affects both comprehension and production. Considering summarization in terms of production, in this specific study some inferences were stated in participants’ summary from the group who read the text with conjunctions. In other words, the aforementioned participants were able to bring implicit information to the foreground which suggests that these participants were able to notice relevant implicit information.

3. Conclusion

This study’s hypothesis about the facilitative effect of adversative and causal conjunctions seemed to be confirmed by this study’s findings, for the specific research situation hereby reported. Having said that, results cannot be generalized, given the reduced number of participants involved in this study. We also acknowledge the fact that participants did not undergo a proficiency test as a limitation to the study.

After conducting the study, we perceived another avenue for exploration: the hypothesis that causal conjunctions may not only indicate hypothetical meanings, but establish them. Further studies are needed to examine this possibility.

References


Appendix A

**Name:** _______________________________

**Timing:** _______ minutes

**Instruction:** You are going to read a text and summarize it in English. After that you will answer comprehension questions.

**Reminder:** You won’t have access to the text during the summary task.

Getting to the airport C

After years of study, I have determined there are only two types of people in this world: those who get to the airport early and those who walk in the plane as it is about to take off.

If there were any justice in this world, the early-airport people would get rewards for doing the right thing. And the late-airport people would be punished. But there is no justice in this world. The early-airport people get ulcers, heart attacks and are anxious. The late-airport people do not show any sign of concern when they are flying.

I once found myself in an airport bar with a man on the same flight as me. Our flight had been called three times, but he insisted we stay for another round.

“If we miss this one, there’s always another plane in an hour,” he said, signaling for two more drinks.

“To Recife, Brazil!?” I said. “There isn’t another flight for a week.”

“I have a theory,” he said. “If you miss your flight, it’s because God didn’t want you to go.”

This is clearly a guy who is never going to get an ulcer. Early-airport people suffer another abuse. They are called exactly what they are: cowards. I know. As a matter of fact, I was an early-airport person for years. My luggage will get on the plane first, I told myself. Indeed it will. Which makes it the last luggage they take off the plane when you land. You know who really gets his luggage first? The late-airport person, who walks into the airport three minutes before the plane takes off.

The pilot is practically in the air when these people are still paying off the taxi. Then they make a big fuss at the gate in order to get their luggage be the first off the plane, but it is probably sitting on top of our luggage, crushing our shirts.

Though if I get there real, real early, I told my old coward self, I will get the best seat. Well, just try to show up early and get the best seat. Well, just try to show up early and get the seat you want. Go ahead and try. No matter how early I showed up, I was always told that someone called two or three years ahead of me and asked for that seat. I figured it was a conspiracy. I figured there was someone in America who called every airline every day and said: “Is that coward Simon flying somewhere today?” If he is, give me his seat.”

The ultimate embarrassment of the early-airport person happened to me a few years ago when I was flying from London – Heathrow to JFK-New York. When I got to the ticket counter, the person there said: “Sir, you have a seat on the 9:15 a.m. flight to New York, is that right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, it’s only 7 a.m., and the 7:05 a.m. flight has not left yet. If you hurry, you can make it.”

I was too embarrassed to say that I arrived at airports early so I wouldn’t have to hurry. Instead, I ran down the corridor to the plane. I climbed on board, out of breath, red-faced, and tripped over a woman’s legs to get to the last unoccupied seat. The woman I stepped over was no coward. She had the courage to complain.

“You should get to the airport earlier!” she snapped at me.

“I was here early,” I said weakly. “But then somehow I wasn’t anymore.”

After a lifetime of arguing over whether I really have to pack 24 hours in advance and set the alarm clock four hours ahead, I have learned one fact about early-airport people and the late-airport people: they always marry each other.

Adapted from: Genuine Articles: Authentic reading texts for intermediate students of American English. (Walter, 1986).

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1 In this study, C stands for text with causal and adversative conjunctions and NC means text with no adversative or causal conjunctions. It is important to point out that in the versions received by the participants the texts were not labelled C or NC so that participants were not influenced by these labels.
Appendix B

Name: _______________________________ Timing: ______ minutes

Instruction: You are going to read a text and summarize it in English. After that you will answer comprehension questions.
Reminder: You won’t have access to the text during the summary task.

Getting to the airport NC

After years of study, I have determined there are only two types of people in this world: those who get to the airport early and those who walk in the plane as it is about to take off.

There was any justice in this world, the early-airport people would get rewards for doing the right thing. And the late-airport people would be punished. There is no justice in this world. The early-airport people get ulcers, heart attacks and are anxious. The late-airport people do not show any sign of concern when they are flying.

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“Yes,” I said.
“Now, it’s only 7 a.m., and the 7:05 a.m. flight has not left yet. You hurry, you can make it.”

I was too embarrassed to say that I arrived at airports early - I wouldn’t have to hurry. I ran down the corridor to the plane. I climbed on board, out of breath, red-faced, and tripped over a woman’s legs to get to the last unoccupied seat. The woman I stepped over was no coward. She had the courage to complain.

“You should get to the airport earlier!” she snapped at me.

“I was here early,” I said weakly. “I wasn’t anymore.”

After a lifetime of arguing over – Do I really have to pack 24 hours in advance and set the alarm clock four hours ahead? I have learned one fact about early-airport people and the late-airport people: they always marry each other.

Adapted from: Genuine Articles: Authentic reading texts for intermediate students of American English. (Walter, 1986).