

Use of Discourse Markers by Iranian Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

Hossein Khazae, MA

Department of English Translation, Islamic Azad University, Lahijan Branch, Lahijan, Iran

ABSTRACT

Since discourse markers seem to be crucial to the organization of discourse, this study explores the rate of use of discourse markers (DMs) by Iranian teachers of English. For this the researcher chose three teachers who were teaching in the English institutes of Lahijan and Langerud for at least 5 years. They were considered very good users of English in terms of scores obtained in the IELTS exam before taking the job and again 1 year before the current study. The talk of the teachers was recorded for three semesters. This equals to 126 hours of class recording. The teachers were teaching in elementary, intermediate, and advanced classes. After transcription of 126 hours of talk, the researcher found that two of the teachers who had the experience of living in English speaking countries were good users of discourse markers, but one who had no experience of such kind was a weak user of the DMs. The researcher found the evidence that years of living in an ESL setting had an influence on the use of DMs. The researcher believes that having such knowledge of functions and meanings of discourse markers by teachers can help learners of English to develop competence in this regard too. Further studies of this kind seem necessary to increase our knowledge concerning this issue.

KEY WORDS: Discourse markers, English as a foreign language, Competence

1. INTRODUCTION

Looking back to the research done by SLA pioneers and especially second language pragmatics specialists we see that the study of discourse markers has proved rewarding in our understanding of the differences in the ways that native speakers and language learners use conversational language. Studies done regarding this issue have constantly proved that 1: Discourse markers (DMs) perform essential functions in speech, and 2: Non- native speakers very often do not use these pragmatic markers in the same way that native speakers do (Fung and Carter, 2007; Romero Trillo, 2002). Because of the important functions that DMs have in speech and communication, their underuse or misuse in conversation can lead to semantic or pragmatic misunderstandings, both for native speakers and nonnative ones.

While a good deal of research has been conducted on DM use in native speech and even English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, little research has been aimed at the study of how Iranian EFL teachers use discourse markers in their classes both in their monologues and dialogues. The current study aims at finding the rate of discourse markers that Iranian EFL teachers use in their monologues or dialogues. However, this study does not claim to offer detailed study of individual DMs and acknowledges the need of more detailed studies to bring a clearer picture of what happens in teachers' talk in classes.

2-Characteristics of Discourse Markers

Schiffrin (1987) stated that DMs are “linguistic, paralinguistic, or nonverbal elements that signal relations between units of talk by virtue of their syntactic and semantic properties and by virtue of their sequential relations as initial or terminal brackets demarcating discourse units”. Their role in spoken interaction is fundamental. Fung and Carter (2007) mentioned that “recent analyses of corpora of spoken interaction show that they [DMs] are represented among the top ten word forms (Allwood, 1996) and that an ‘utterance particle’ is found in continuous talk on average every 1.5 seconds (Luke, 1987).”

Schiffrin was the first one to examine this area of linguistics [DMs]. In discussing what discourse markers are and what functions and meanings they have Schiffrin defined discourse markers as elements which mark “sequentially-dependent units of discourse”. Fung and Carter (2007) mentioned that “they are ‘sequentially dependent’ in that the units of talk prior to and following a discourse marker are indicative of the kinds of social and pragmatic meaning a speaker communicates or infers”. Schiffrin’s analysis of DMs is based on a theory of discourse coherence. In her 1987 work on discourse markers, she analyzes in detail the 11 discourse markers and, because, but, I mean, now, oh, or, so, then, well, and y’know.

Schiffrin suggested that we cannot put DMs easily into a linguistic class. Actually, paralinguistic features and non-verbal gestures are possible DMs. She wrote that we should

*Corresponding author: Hossein Khazae, Department of English Translation, Islamic Azad University, Lahijan Branch, Lahijan, Iran Email: hosseinkhazaekuhpar@gmail.com

...try to find common characteristics of these items to delimit what linguistic conditions allow an expression to be used as a marker. But such an approach would require not only discovery of the shared characteristics of an extremely diversified set of expressions, in English: it would require analysis across a wide body of typologically diverse language to discover what other linguistic resources are drawn upon for use as markers... It [a DM] has to be syntactically detachable from a sentence. It has to be commonly used in initial position of an utterance. It has to have a range of prosodic contours. It has to be able to operate at both local and global levels of discourse. It has to be able to operate on different planes of discourse.

In terms of the meanings of the discourse markers, Schiffrin mentioned that “except for oh and well ... all the markers I have described have meaning” (p. 314), and she also suggested in several places that each DM has a ‘core meaning’. Schiffrin in her book surveyed only 11 discourse markers and mentioned that her focus was somewhat narrow and suggested a number of other cases which bear consideration as DMs. These are perception verbs such as see, look, and listen, deictics such as here and there, interjections such as gosh and boy, meta-talk such as this is the point and what I mean is, and quantifier phrases such as anyway, anyhow, and whatever (p. 328).

Her main interest was the ways in which DMs function to “add to discourse coherence” (p. 326). She mentioned that coherence is “constructed through relations between adjacent units in discourse” (p. 24), and claimed that there are five distinct and separate planes, each with its own type of coherence (pp. 24-25):

2.1-Exchange Structure

, which reflects the mechanics of the conversational interchange (ethnomethodology) and shows the result of the participant turn-taking and how these alternations are related to each other; **Action Structure**, which reflects the sequence of speech acts which occur within the discourse; **Ideational Structure**, which reflects certain relationships between the ideas (propositions) found within the discourse, including cohesive relations, topic relations, and functional relations; **Participation Framework**, which reflects the ways in which the speakers and hearers can relate to one another as well as orientation toward utterances; and **Information State**, which reflects the ongoing organization and management of knowledge and met knowledge as it evolves over the course of the discourse.

Schiffrin also suggested that DMs provide contextual coordinates for an utterance by: (a) locating the utterance on one or more planes of talk of her discourse model; (b) indexing the utterances to the speaker, the hearer, or both; and (c) indexing the utterances to prior and/or subsequent discourse. She saw DMs as serving an integrative function in discourse and thus contributing to discourse coherence.

Schiffrin claimed that some discourse markers in doing their functions relate only the semantic reality (the ‘facts’) of the two sentences while others, including so, may relate sentences on a logical (epistemic) level and/or a speech act (pragmatic) level. She wrote:

A fact-based causal relation between cause and result holds between idea unit, more precisely, between the event, state, and so on, which they encode. A knowledge-based causal relation holds when a speaker uses some piece(s) of information as a warrant for an inference (a hearer-inference). An action-based causal relation holds when a speaker presents a motive for an action being performed through talk -either his/her own action or an interlocutor’s action.

According to Müller (2004) “while discourse markers seem to be crucial to the organization of native speaker discourse, they are an understudied phenomenon in studies of language learning”. Many language learners seek to gain grammatical language as the ultimate goal of their language learning experiences. “This grammatical target proficiency is often defined as what native speakers of the language consider accurate usage of syntax, phonology, morphology, and semantics so that the propositional content of an utterance is made clear” (Müller, 2004). As Svartik (1980; cited in Müller, 2004) noted, language learners may be corrected for using non-standard morphology but will not be corrected for using a discourse marker in an inappropriate place, even if the lack of that marker taints the learner’s talk as somehow deficient. So the question that arises here is to what extent the teachers themselves are aware of the functions and meanings of the DMs?

3-LITERATURE REVIEW

Hron, Kurbjuhn, Mandl, and Schnotz (1985) tried to find whether the beneficial effects of DMs observed in previous reading research could also be found in L1 listening comprehension. They compared listeners who received the signaled text - text with DMs - with listeners who received the nonsignaled text - text without DMs. They found that the former group recalled significantly more main ideas and performed better on open-ended questions when tested.

Richards, Fajen, Sullivan, and Gillespie (1997) found more evidence for the beneficial effects of DMs on the comprehension of L1 listening. The researchers found that texts with signaling devices (DMs) primed the listeners to have a significant increase in the quantity of their notes both overall and on the main ideas. DMs also helped listeners to recall more information overall, as well as more important information from the text.

The significance of DMs in facilitating spoken text processing received further confirmation in research which focused on the L1 listeners’ comprehension of L2 speakers’ speech. Rounds (1987) reported that the lack or misuse of DMs contributed significantly to L1 listeners’ inability to understand L2 speakers.

Chaudron and Richards (1986) classified DMs into macro- and micromarkers. They believed that macromarkers function at the macro level to signal the relationship among main segments or to mark the major transition points in discourse (e.g., what I am going to talk about today is). Micro-markers according to them function at the micro level to indicate intersentential relations or to function as pause fillers (e.g., and, so, and well). The results showed that macromarkers significantly helped the learners to comprehend

listening lectures, but beneficial effects were not found for micromarkers. Moreover, macromarkers alone proved to be more conducive to lecture comprehension than a combination of micro- and micrometers.

Flowedrow and Tauroza (1995) investigated the effects of naturally occurring micromarkers (following Chaudron and Richards' classification) on L2 listening comprehension. It was found that learners listening to a lecture with micromarkers performed better than those listening to the lecture without them. In this way, Flowedrow and Tauroza demonstrated that micromarkers facilitate comprehension of L2 oral texts.

Jung (1999 as cited in Jung 2003) investigated the effects of DMs on Korean ESL learners' comprehension in a lecture setting. The signaled group who had access to a lecture with markers performed better than the nonsignaled group who had access to the lecture without markers in the recall of high-level information. The signaled group also recalled more low-level information and rated their perceived comprehension higher. Unlike the signaled group, the nonsignaled group misinterpreted the main ideas and became confused about key points in the topic. Moreover, the nonsignaled group confused both the sequences of actions and the details of the information.

Romero Trillo (2002) described the phenomenon of "Pragmatic Fossilization" as one of the main problems that non-native speakers of English face in their learning processes. He (P. 770) claimed that second-language learners tend to follow a "binary track", focusing in the classroom on grammatical and semantic rules of the language, and being left to pick up the subtle cline of rules of use for pragmatic markers in different contexts and registers on their own, or through fairly artificial, decontextualized classroom activities, resulting in "pragmatic fossilization".

In his paper he discusses the possible origins, features, and implications of pragmatic fossilization in the evolution of a second language. He based his analysis on a corpus-driven investigation of discourse markers and focused on the evolution of these pragmatic elements in native and non-native speakers of English—children and adults. His aim was to see to what extent their exposure to spoken pragmatic information in a foreign language is sufficient to acquire pragmatic markers coherently.

He pointed out that the consistent teaching of pragmatic markers should be brought into the language instruction. As Romero Trillo mentioned "this teaching has to be based on sound research studies that categorize and describe the use of these pragmatic elements on the basis of the Index of Pragmatic Use and of other mathematical and statistical methods (Romero Trillo, 2002)".

Jung (2003) found that markers play a significant role in L2 listening comprehension. Also markers facilitated learners' listening comprehension of high- and low-level information, as well as the combination of both. She also has mentioned the need of further research concerning the explicit teaching of these markers to see their effects on the listening comprehension of L1 and L2 learners.

Fung and Carter (2007) studied and compared the production of DMs by native speakers of English on the one hand, and learners of English on the other hand based on a pedagogic sub-corpus from CANCODE - a corpus of spoken British English - and a corpus of interactive classroom discourse of secondary pupils in Hong Kong. They found that "in both groups discourse markers served as useful interactional manoeuvres to structure and organized speech on interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive levels". In their study, they found that the Hong Kong learners displayed "a liberal use of referentially functional discourse markers (and, but, because, OK, so, etc.) but a relatively restricted use of other markers (yeah, really, say, sort of, I see, you see, well, right, actually, cos, you know, etc.)". They also found that native speakers have used DMs for a wider variety of pragmatic functions and they also discussed "some possible pedagogical implications involved in preparing learners to become more interactionally competent speakers". This study suggested "a need to strengthen learners' pragmatic competence in spoken language by creating space to improve their use of DMs". They also have pointed out that "incorporation of DMs into the language curriculum is necessary to enhance fluent and naturalistic conversational skills, to help avoid misunderstanding in communication, and, essentially, to provide learners with a sense of security in L2".

Marzban and Khazae (2007) investigated the explicit teaching of discourse markers in EFL listening comprehension and found that the learners who received explicit teaching regarding the meaning and functions of discourse markers - the experimental group-outperformed the control group in both the summary task and the multiple-choice test. Also, the performance of each group on the two tests showed a high correlation.

3-1-The Research Question

The researcher has the following research question in mind to follow in the study:

What is the amount (rate) of use of discourse markers by Iranian EFL teachers?

4-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to perform the investigation, the researcher chose three Iranian EFL teachers who were teaching at three different levels during the period of the study namely the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels in English language institutes. They were chosen among 40 teachers teaching in the English institutes of Lahijan and Langerud. The criterion to choose them was the scores they had in the IELTS exam before entering the institutes they were teaching in and one year before the current study. These teachers were considered skillful users of English themselves in terms of the scores they had gained in IELTS Academic Version. They all gained scores 8 and even higher in the IELTS Academic version and in this regard they were considered as very good user of English. Of three two were females and one male. Their age was between 25 to 45 years old and two of them had the experience of living in English speaking countries before.

4-1-Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The speech of the three teachers (in the classrooms) was recorded by the researcher. These recordings were in the form of both monologues that teachers had in their classes as well as dialogues they had with students of the class. The researcher recorded 126 hours of speech for each teacher; this equals to three semesters in English language institutes. The teachers had different classes in terms of the level of proficiency of the students but the researcher just focused on one level for each teacher, so Mina the female one was the teacher of the advanced level with 126 hours of speech recorded, and Siavash and Amir were the male teachers of the elementary and intermediate levels each with 126 hours of speech recorded. The researcher then transcribed the speeches of each teacher and diagnosed the number of DMs and their meanings/functions in the speech of the teachers. As Silverman (1993 cited in Fung and Carter, 2007) pointed "transcripts of classroom recordings provide an excellent record of 'naturally occurring' interaction". Data obtained from the teachers were transcribed in standard orthography. Each line represented either a continuing or completed intonation unit, but sometimes the turns were taken or completed by students specially in advanced and intermediate classes where students had reached a certain level of proficiency to participate in free discussion activities. There is no detailed transcription of intonation contours except pauses. Information on pauses is especially important to the analysis because it can distinguish DMs from other parts of speech. The question is to what extent these teachers who were very good users of English themselves were using DMs in their teaching.

4-2-RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results indicate that in teachers' talk in the class- both monologues and dialogues- discourse markers served as useful interactional manoeuvres to structure and organize speech on interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive levels. This was specially the case with Mina and Siavash who spent years of living in English speaking countries. But the case of Amir was somehow different. Below is a brief account of discourse markers use by the three teachers.

The female teacher, Mina, who was teaching the advanced level classes in the whole period of recording, was a good user of discourse markers. She was living in Australia for five years before coming to Iran and taking this job. She also had attended one year of teacher training courses (TTC) to be qualified as a teacher in the institutes. In 126 hours of speech recorded she used more than 90000 discourse markers, this seems to be low but we shouldn't forget that in a class a lot of time is devoted to learners and listening to what they say, doing listening or visual activities, etc. So 126 hours of recording was not wholly devoted to Mina's continuous speech in the class just, but the whole process of teaching was recorded. The same case happened to two other teachers too. Below we see examples of her speech in the class. The role of the discourse markers she used will be highlighted. In (a) below we see that by using ok as a discourse marker she marked boundaries of talk:

(a) Okay so you're all happy with it. Now how are we going to approach it would anyone like to suggest an example?

In (b) below we see that she used the DM I mean to classify things around:

(b) But ah since it's for adults, this can't be too high the price, I mean.

In (c) below she used the DM right to mark a separate tone unit from the utterances that follow.

(c) Right. Very good. What do you think might have happened since she left school that caused this pain to start again?

Another common DM used by Mina to express attitude in many conversational exchanges was well. It almost always occurred in turn- initial position and was used to qualify a response that is not optimally coherent with the preceding question.

(d) She said Well you can risk it.

But Well as I say I'm I'm a bit reluctant...

Next, we see how she used the DM ok to signal the opening and closing of a conversation in which the listener is oriented to the end of a discourse boundary and the beginning of the next.

(e) OK. Now is there any evidence that he might have occluded his graft?
What do you think about the possible symptoms?

In the next example we see how Mina used anyway as a DM to suggest the causal relation.

(f) Ali quit his job. He was tired of the long hours, anyway.

All in all, the researcher saw many cases of using discourse markers with correct functions and meanings in her talk in the class; when asked, even she was aware of the meanings/functions of them, although not like a pragmatics specialist. It seems to the researcher that her level of proficiency in English language and years of living in Australia had a kind of influence on this.

The second teacher, Siavash, was the teacher of the elementary level in the institutes. Although he had classes of other levels, for the sake of consistency the researcher recorded his classes of this level just. He also had the experience of living for 3 years in Canada. After transcription of 126 hours of his classes the researcher found 60000 cases of using discourse markers. Here, examples of his talk in the class are presented. In the first example we see how Siavash used the discourse marker if to indicate that what

follows is a condition on the previous statement (namely, that March 2 is a good date for the midterm exam).

- (a) [Arranging the midterm exam]
Uh ... March second at nine thirty would be, fine. If, that's okay with you as well.

In the next example of his speech we see how he used the discourse marker at the beginning of the turn, to get attention and gain the floor. The scene happens in a class with the topic of foods.

- (b) Oh, I have an ice cream. ... Look, I have an ice cream.

The case of the third teacher, Amir was somehow different. In 126 hours of recording of his classes, he just used three markers well, y'know, and now in 3000 cases correctly. No other case of using DMs was seen in his speech. It seems that his speech was void of essential characteristics of talk namely the discourse markers. When asked, he was not aware of the meanings and functions of discourse markers. He had the idea that these words are common words like any other items of language with no specific function.

5-DISCUSSION LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The good range of using discourse markers by Mina and Siavash indicates the natural linguistic input they have been proposed to when living abroad. Years of living in English speaking countries gave them a great knowledge of these essential items of talk and communication. They were even aware of meanings/functions of DMs, so it's clear that they could bring this knowledge to the mind of learners on and off the class. But the case of Amir was something found in most of the teachers of English in Iran's institutes now. He was trained here in the same institutes he is a teacher now, and the question is why he lacks such an important aspect of communication.

Amir himself learned English in institutes around the city with no experience of living abroad. As a previous EFL learner he was exposed to the traditional grammar-centered pedagogic classes gearing towards the literal or propositional (semantic) meanings of words rather than their pragmatic use in spoken language. Many classes he attended in to learn English while claiming to represent the details of English usage focused primarily on prepositional content rather than on discourse use. For example, the adverb, adjective, and noun meanings of well are frequently emphasized in an EFL classroom, whereas its pragmatic usages in spoken English to indicate one's intention to change a topic, to make a suggestion, criticism, or correction, to express doubt and uncertainty about what has been said, and to mark other emotional states such as amusement, anger, or surprise, etc. are rarely focused upon. It is likely that the low propositional meanings of DMs have devalued their pedagogic significance, and hence contributed to their low status. It is only commonly used for markers in written language such as firstly, secondly, next, however, but, despite, so, because, moreover, etc. that have been frequently attended to in the classroom. A general neglect of knowledge of DMs in the foreign language teaching curriculum seems to be a pedagogic reality (Romero Trillo 2002).

Although the main function of language is conventionally seen to be communicating ideas, it is through language that interpersonal convergence (and, although more rarely, divergence) is achieved. DMs, which constitute an aspect of pragmatic competence that underlies one's ability to use language in culturally, socially, and situation ally appropriate ways, are useful conversational devices, not just for maintaining discourse cohesiveness and communicative effectiveness, but also for interpersonal and cross-cultural interaction.

This study suggests a need to strengthen teachers' pragmatic competence in spoken language by creating space to improve their use of DMs. Incorporation of DMs into the language curriculum and specially in teacher training courses (TTC) is necessary to enhance fluent and naturalistic conversational skills, to help avoid misunderstanding in communication, and, essentially, to provide learners with a sense of security in L2. As this study was performed in the institutes of Lahijan and Langerud in the province of Guilin just, further studies of this kind are required to examine the same case in other places and among teachers of other places too. Hope that we see more detailed works in the future

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