

Investigating Discourse Markers in Paragraph Writing of EFL Female-students At Najran University

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Abstract

Discourse markers are connecting words that have an important role in writing. The aim of the study was to investigate discourse markers in paragraph writing of twenty-six EFL Saudi female students at Najran University (college of Languages & Translation). The study adopted Fraser's (2009) taxonomy to classify the targeted discourse markers. The results indicated that the 'Elaborative' markers had the highest frequency, followed by the 'Inferential' markers, then the 'Contrastive' markers and the 'Temporal' markers were the least employed. In addition, variation of the number of usages among markers existed, in that, 'and', 'but', 'because' counted the highest frequencies. These results confirmed the study hypotheses. Finally, the researchers recommend enhancing writing by intensive presentation of discourse markers. Employing the appropriate English discourse marker, definitely promotes producing the communicative language skills.

Keywords: discourse markers, frequency, EFL students' writings quality

1. Introduction

The study of Discourse Markers is attributable to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work about cohesion in English language. Their work or cohesion analysis was primarily based on written texts including words such as "and, but, because, I mean, by the way, to sum up", which later on have been labelled markers. They (markers) better interpret semantic relations in a text than random collections of unrelated sentences. These connecting expressions have an essential part in an utterance interpretation and structure. Hence, the production of a coherent discourse is an interactive process that requires learners to draw attention upon several various types of communicative knowledge of the grammar of sound, form and meaning. This linguistic competence consolidates organizing and conveying a message, within a piece of language longer than a sentence (Schiffrin 2001, p. 54-55). In addition, discourse is a unit of connected speech or writing longer or larger than a single sentence with a coherent meaning and clear purpose (electronic site June 2023). Accordingly, Yule (2010, p.142) shows that discourse refers to "language beyond the sentence" and afterward she adds that discourse analysis is related to "the study of language in text and conversation" cited in Fahgih and Mousaee (2015, p.13).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

As experienced instructors of the English language, the investigators have broadly noticed that some ELF undergraduate students make mistakes when employing English discourse markers in paragraph writing such as overuse or misuse of these markers.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The goal of the present study is to investigate the use of DMs in writing 3 course by EFL Saudi female students at Najran university (Faculty of Languages and Translation). Hence, the study compares the frequencies and types of DMs used in the paragraph writings.

1.3 The Study Hypotheses

H1 There are various DMs and their relevant categories in paragraph writing produced by the Saudi undergraduate female EFL students at Najran university in the faculty of Languages and Translation?

H2. There are significant differences between the EDMs classes frequencies employed in writing paragraphs of the EFL learners in focus?

2. Reviewing the Relevant Literature

In the related literature, the researchers have indicated the definitions of discourses markers, their major and subclasses, besides reviewing the previous studies.

2.1 Definitions of Discourse Markers

At the beginning, Schiffrin (1987a) indicated that a discourse marker is a dependent element that brackets a unit of talk. Discourse Markers (henceforth DMs) are expressions that function in cognitive, expressive, social, and textual domains; and they consist of members of word classes such as conjunctions (e.g. *and, but, so*), interjections (*oh, well*), adverbs (*now, first, then*), and lexicalized phrases (*you know, I mean*) stated Schiffrin (2001, p.57). A discourse marker is essentially binding word or phrase in a spoken or written piece of language. Along with this line, Fraser (1999, p.931) defines DMs as "a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. With certain exceptions, they signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment, S1 (They) relate the explicit interpretation conveyed by S2 with some aspect associated with the segment, S1; and relate the topic of S2 to that of S1".

Researchers who have conducted studies related to discourse connecting words in the different branches of linguistics and fields are numerous. Then, DMs are handled under a variety of labels: **discourse connectives** (Blakemore, 1987, 1992), **discourse operators** (Redeker, 1990, 1991), **discourse particles** (Schorup, 1985), **discourse signaling devices** (Polanyi and Scha, 1983), **phatic connectives** (Bazanella, 1990), **pragmatic connectives** (van Dijk, 1979; Stubbs, 1983), **pragmatic expressions** (Erman, 1992), **pragmatic formatives** (Fraser, 1987), **pragmatic markers** (Fraser, 1988, 1990; Schiffrin, 1987), **pragmatic operators** (Ariel, 1994), **pragmatic particles** (Ostman, 1995), **semantic conjuncts** (Quirk et al., 1985), **sentence connectives** (Halliday and Hasan, 1976); explains Fraser (1999, p.932).

To Fraser (2009, p.297) DMs constitute three heterogeneous syntactic groups. 1- conjunctions: *and, but, or, nor, yet, although, whereas, unless, while,...* 2- adverbials: *anyway, besides, consequently, in addition, furthermore, still, however,...* 3- prepositional phrases: *above all, after all, as a consequence, as a result, on the contrary, on the other hand, in other words, rather than, regardless of that, ...etc.* Fraser (ibid, p.298-299) proposes that "For an expression to be a DM it must be acceptable in the sequence S1-DM+S2, where S1 (sentence one) and S2 (sentence two) are discourse segments, each representing an Illocutionary Act, although elision may have occurred. There are three necessary and sufficient conditions that a DM must meet. Condition 1: A DM is a lexical expression, for example, *but, so, and in addition* Condition 2: In a sequence of discourse segments S1-S2, a DM must occur as a part of the second discourse segment, S2..... Condition 3: A DM does not contribute to the semantic meaning of the segment but signals a specific semantic relationship which holds between the interpretation of the two Illocutionary Act segments, S1 and S2."

The following are classes of EDMs (hence after English Discourse Markers) in which the primary DM of each class is written in bold, while the other members are being ordinary. DMs of English are divided to three functional categories in accordance with their semantic relationships as indicated in Fraser taxonomy (2009, p.300/301):

A. Contrastive markers: ***but***, *alternatively, although, contrariwise, contrary to expectations, conversely, despite, even so, however, in spite of, in comparison, in contrast, instead of, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, on the other hand, on the contrary, rather, regardless, still, though, whereas, yet.*

B. Elaborative markers: ***and***, *after all, above all, also, alternatively, analogously, besides, by the same token, correspondingly, equally, for example, for instance, furthermore, in addition, in other words, in particular, likewise, more accurately, more importantly, more precisely, more to the point, moreover, on that basis, on top of it all, or, otherwise, rather, similarly, that is to say.*

C. Inferential markers: ***so***, *all things considered, as a conclusion, as a consequence, as a result, because, consequently, for this/that reason, hence, it follows that, accordingly, in this/that/any case, on this/that condition, on these/those grounds, then, therefore, thus.*

In sequence, in each case, the English DM is either indicating contrast between two sentences, or elaboration in sentence two to the information contained in sentence one, or the first utterance provides a basis for inferring the second utterance.

D. Temporal discourse markers In addition to that, another fourth class of DMs is presented in Fraser's (2005) taxonomy pinpointed in Ali and Mahadin (2016, p.26) which regards the temporal class of pragmatic markers as a subclass of DMs and, then, in Fraser's (2009) this class is excluded and this deletion is approved by the supposition that "DMs only reflect semantic relationships between discourse segments. However, it should be pointed out that DMs do not exclusively reflect semantic relationships between discourse segments; rather, these markers can also display discourse relations". Thus, the for coming is Fraser's (2005) Temporal discourse markers category which implies: ***then***, *after, as soon as, before, eventually, finally, first, immediately afterwards, meantime, meanwhile, originally, second, subsequently, when* (Fraser, 2005, p.197).

Beside the above mentioned four classes of EDMs, other discourse markers are related to the spoken language pointed out by Fung (2003, p.84) cited from Ali and Mahadin (2016, p.26) include: see, you see, you know, listen, well, really, I think, obviously, absolutely, basically, actually, exactly, sort of, kind of, like, to be frank, to be honest, oh, okay, right, alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh great, sure...

2.2 Previous Studies

Martinez (2004) has adopted Fraser's taxonomy (1999) to explore the application of DMs in written discourse by non-native speakers of English. Thus, 78 Spanish undergraduate students are asked to write expository compositions. The researcher has found out that the Spanish students utilize a variety of EDMs with different degrees of frequency. She points out that the discourse markers that indicate the highest degree of frequency in the students' writings are the elaborative markers. The second most frequently employed type of DMs is the contrastive markers, followed by causative markers, inferential markers and topic relating markers. The high frequency of elaborative DMs is attributed to the fact that expository compositions often require an elaboration of ideas which might be signaled by the use of these markers. Martinez states that statistically there is a positive relationship which relates the high frequencies of DMs to the best scores of writings. Then, she claims the DMs: elaborative, contrastive and topic relating markers are connected with high score essays.

Another study based on Fraser's taxonomy has been conducted by Jalilifar (2008) to investigate the English discourse markers in descriptive composition writings of 90 Iranian learners. The participants are randomly selected from two universities. Three groups: 30 junior, 30 senior and 30 MA students are taken as the study sample. The subjects are required to write descriptive composition on a topic that supposed to be familiar for them at different times without any previous instructions. The results of the research indicated that students employ discourse markers with varied frequency degrees. The most frequently utilized discourse markers are the elaborative, followed by inferential, contrastive, causative, and topic relating respectively. Besides, there is a significant relationship between the uses of EDMs and the students' knowledge of writing, i.e. MA group proposes the best quality of composition writings.

To pinpoint the frequency and type of DMs employed by Iranian EFL undergraduate students in the expository and argumentative essay writings, Rahimi (2011) has carried out a study following Fraser's (1999) taxonomy of DMs. The sample consists of 56 participants with intermediate language proficiency. The findings of the research show that the subjects do not apply a large variety of EDMs. The most frequently employed type of DMs in the students' essays are the elaborative markers with the highest frequency of the marker "and", followed by contrastive markers, and inferential markers respectively. Rahimi (ibid) claims that the overuse of the DM 'and' is a sign of weakness as the participants writings do not expose a similar rate of frequency for the other markers. Besides, he provides that the relationship between the utilization of DMs and the quality of the expository and argumentative compositions is not a significant indicator for the quality of writing.

Alghamdi (2014) has conducted a study entitled 'Discourse Markers in ESL Personal Narrative and Argumentative Papers: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis'. The paper adopted Fraser Taxonomy of DMs. The researcher investigated 30 papers of undergraduate students (15 native speakers and 15 nonnative speakers). The result indicated that variations in employing DMs were insignificant. However, in both writings the elaborative, contrastive and reason markers have got higher frequencies in comparison with the other categories of EDMs. Besides, the misuse and frequency of DMs has indicated the quality of ESL writings.

Ali & Mahadin (2016) have undertaken a study that adopted a functional approach to examine the use of DMs in expository essay writings by Jordanian EFL students with varied standards of English language proficiency. The researchers have followed Fraser's (2009, 2005) taxonomy to implement the target investigation. The sample of the study is divided into two groups to carry out a comparison. The first is forty advanced students drawn from master degree program in English. The second consists of eighty-seven intermediate undergraduate EFL students. For data collection, the participants have been asked to write an expository essay on a familiar topic justified by their instructors. The collected data are coded and analyzed using percentages. Ali and Mahadin (ibid) conclude that the students' level of language proficiency influences employing EDMs in their expository writings, that is to say, the intermediate learners have used limited and redundant sets of EDMs in comparison with their counterparts.

Li (2022) investigated the utilization of discourse markers in argumentative writings in English by Chinese learners. The researcher has found that most of the 'Inferential' discourse markers have been employed by the learners. In addition, the high frequency markers are 'so' and 'therefore'. Besides, learners have made mistakes such as 'misuse' or 'overuse'.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were twenty-six fresh students majoring in English as a Foreign Language. They were studying at Najran University at the Faculty of Languages and Translation during the academic year 2022. They were all Saudi females, their ages ranged between 19-20, and Arabic is their mother tongue. The subjects have already passed three writing courses, and they were supposed to be familiar with all the appropriate writing skills techniques. Another rationale for selecting writing three is that, in case if there is any defect, improvement can be done in the coming writing courses.

3.2 Data Collection

To gather data for the present study, the researchers have used the final examination papers as an instrument. Then, it is worth mentioning that the present study is based on Fraser's (2005, 2009) taxonomy which was mentioned earlier in this study, and has been adopted by various previous researchers, namely, Martinez (2004), Rahimi (2011), Jalilifar (2008), Fahgih and Mousae (2015), Ali and Mahadin (2016) who agree that Fraser's classifications of EDMs are likely to be the best and most comprehensive one in written discourse. Then, a small corpus has been adopted which includes:

- Elaborative discourse markers
- Contrastive discourse markers

Discourse Marker	Frequency	Percentage
because	13	46%

- Inferential discourse markers
- Temporal discourse markers

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

The frequencies of DMs have been coded and calculated manually by the investigators. That is, tables and graphs were employed to summarize and display the gathered data for interpretation.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of DMs

Discourse Marker	Frequency	Percentage
Elaborative	91	55%
Inferential	28	17%
Contrastive	26	16%
Temporal	19	12%
Total	164	100%

According to the frequencies and percentages of the statistical analysis in Table 1 above, the 'Elaborative' discourse markers have been employed most frequently (55%), followed by the 'Inferential' discourse markers (17%), the 'Contrastive' discourse markers (16%), and then the 'Temporal' discourse markers

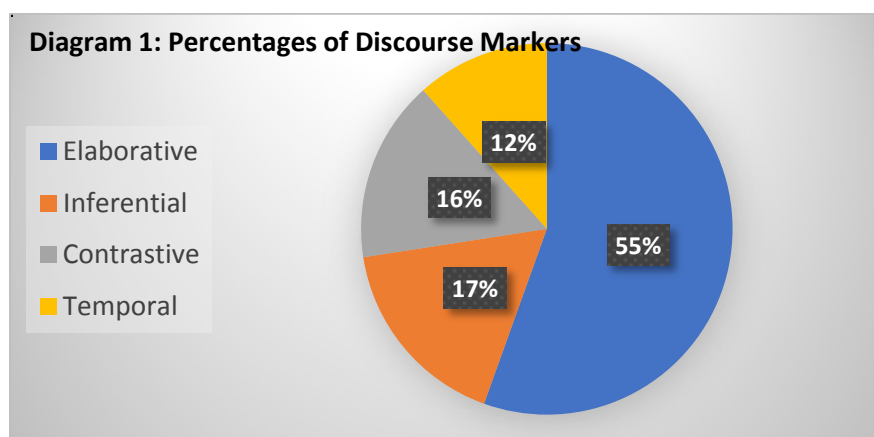


Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Elaborative Markers

so	8	28%
then	4	15%
therefore	3	11%
Total	28	100%

DMs	Frequency	Percentage
and	66	72%
also	14	16%
or	7	8%
for example for instance,	2	2%
Such as	2	2%
Total	91	100%
Discourse Marker	Frequency	Percentage

The statistical analysis in the above table 2 reveals that the discourse marker 'and' has largely been utilized (72%), the marker 'also' (16%), the marker 'or' (8%), whereas the markers 'for example, such as' have been employed about (2%) respectively.

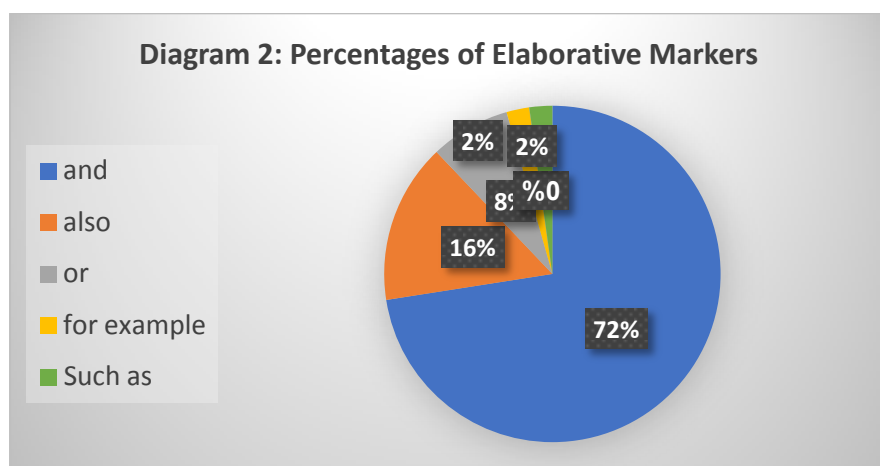
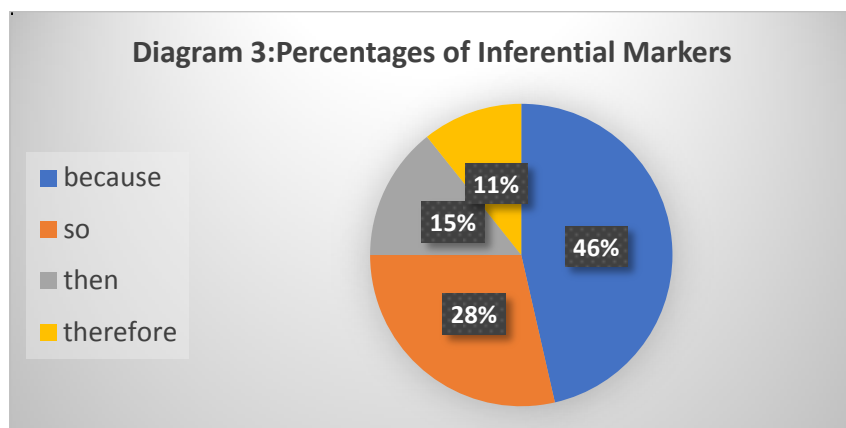


Table 3. Frequency and Percentage of Inferential Markers

Among the Inferential markers in the previous Table 3, the marker 'because' has got the highest frequency (46%), whereas the marker 'therefore' has the lowest frequency. Accordingly, the marker 'then' has been employed (15%), and 'therefore' (11%).

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage of Contrastive Markers



but	12	46%
on the other hand,	7	28%
although,	4	15%
however,	3	11%
Total	26	100%

It is apparent that the discourse marker 'also' has been the most frequently used in Table 4 among the 'Contrastive' markers (46), followed by 'on the other hand' marker (28%), then 'although' marker (15%) finally the marker 'however' (11%).

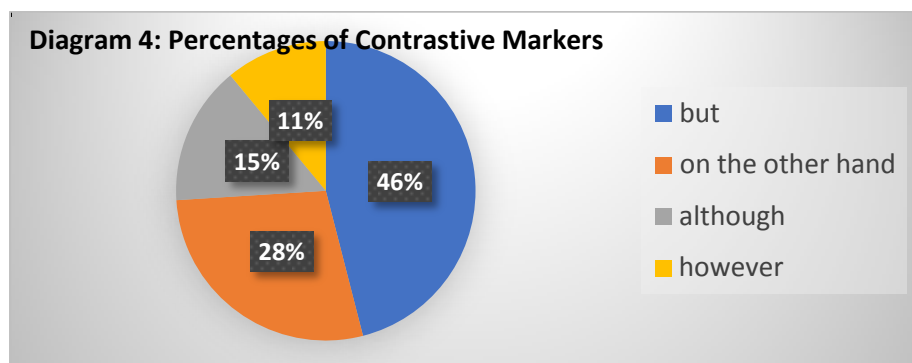
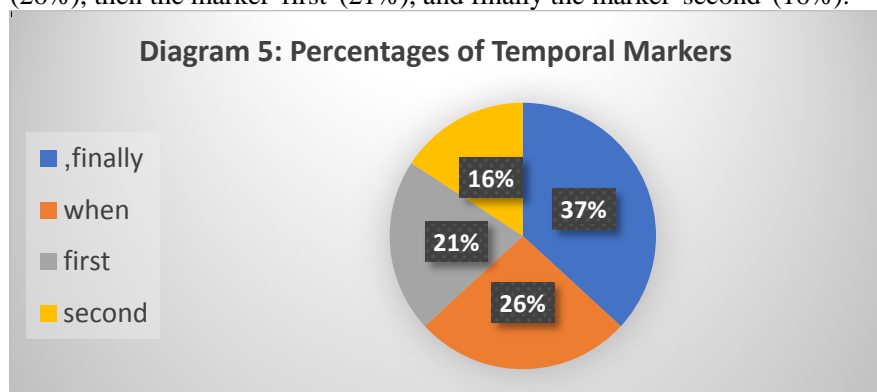


Table 5. Frequency and Percentage of Temporal Markers

Discourse Marker	Frequency	Percentage
finally,	7	37%
when	5	26%
first	4	21%
second	3	16%
Total	19	100%

In Table 5 above, the most frequently utilized is 'finally' marker (37%), followed by the discourse maker 'when' (26%), then the marker 'first' (21%), and finally the marker 'second' (16%).



5. Discussions and Conclusion

This paper investigated the DMs which have been employed by non-native speakers of English in paragraph writing. As apparent in the previous Table 1, there are statistically significant differences in the frequencies of the EDMs utilized by Saudi female students in writing paragraphs. Typically, these results interpret the first hypothesis of this study:

H 1 There are various DMs and their relevant categories in texts writing produced by the Saudi undergraduate female EFL students at Najran university in the faculty of Languages and Translation.

The total number of the EDMs that have been presented is 164, among these the most frequently used are the 'Elaborative markers (55%), followed by the 'Inferential' discourse markers (17%), the 'Contrastive' discourse markers (16%), and finally the 'Temporal' discourse markers (12%).

Additionally, these findings of the study agree with Jalilifar's (2008) Elaborative markers were most frequently employed, followed by inferential markers and then the contrastive markers. The intensive utilization of the 'Elaborative' markers by the EFL students might be attributed to the fact that descriptive writing- two out the three paragraphs which the subjects in focus were asked to write about- require elaboration of ideas. This finding is in accordance with Ali & Mahadin (2016, P. 27).

With reference to Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5, there are noticeable variations among main classes and sub-classes of EDMs number of usages. Consequently, these usages validate the second hypothesis of the current study:

H 2 There are significant differences between the EDMs classes frequencies employed in writing paragraphs of the EFL learners in focus.

The most frequently used among the 'Elaborative' markers set (and, also, for example/instance, such as) in Table 2 is the main item 'and' (72%). Hence, more attention can be better directed to the other elaborative markers. On the other hand, the differences in number among the other discourse markers employed in paragraph writing, to some extent, are acceptable.

The overuse of a very limited set of DMs make students' writings dull and hard to read. Thus, in their teaching, (EFL) teachers should incorporate the teaching of a wide range of DMs and encourage their students to vary their use of DMs (Alghamdi 2014, P. 304).

In sequence, the researchers recommend enhancing writing by intensive presentation of the discourse markers. Employing the appropriate English discourse marker, definitely promotes performance of the communicative target skills.

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