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## Discourse markers errors performed by EFL Iraqi learners

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### Abstract

Discourse markers are words and phrases that play role as linking words or linking phrases, they develop ideas and relate them to one another. People use most of the discourse markers in formal context when presenting complicated information in discourse. Discourse markers contribute to discourse cohesion and coherence, at the same time the using too much of them make the discourse heavy or artificial. The problem of this study is that most EFL Iraqi learners find difficulties in selecting the suitable discourse marker in order to link two ideas or sentences. As for aims, the study tries to put a basis to treat with this topic. The data is limited to (30) students who are in third year Iraqi EFL learners/ Tikrit University/ College of Education for Humanities/English Department. In order to perform the aim of the current study, it is hypothesized that students' ability to use discourse markers is limited. It is also hypothesized that the most common errors that are committed by Iraqi EFL learners in using discourse markers are related to textual class.

**Keywords:** Discourse markers, formal context, education, humanities, English

### 1. Introduction

According to Redeker (1991:168) <sup>[10]</sup> discourse marker is "a word or phrase, a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context, *like well, Oh, but you know,*..... etc. Discourse markers underline the relationships between text spans, they include features as headings or indentations which contribute to the progressing of the textual and translate the communicative strategy of the author. This study consists of two sections. The first section gives the definition of discourse markers and their functions. While the second section deals with the practical side and the result of the analysis.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Discourse Markers (DMs): An Overview

According to Lenk (1998:117) <sup>[9]</sup>, a discourse marker is a word or phrase that is relatively syntax-independent and does not change the meaning of the sentence, and has a somewhat empty meaning, while, Swan (2005:13) <sup>[12]</sup> defines a *discourse marker* as "a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context". For him, it is something that first, connects a sentence to what comes before or after and second, indicates a speaker's attitude to what he is saying. Therefore, *discourse markers* can be defined as linguistic expressions of varying length which carry pragmatic meaning and can facilitate the discourse. The main classification of discourse markers will be mentioned in the next section.

Discourse markers considered as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin, 1987: 31) <sup>[11]</sup>; Holker (1991:78-79) <sup>[7]</sup> presents a detailed summary on discourse markers characteristics as follows:

1. Semantically they neither affect the truth conditions nor add anything to the propositional content of the utterance;
2. Logically they are related to the speech situation instead of the situation talked about; and
3. Their purpose is emotive, expressive function rather than a referential donative function".

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### 2.1.1 Classification of Discourse Markers

Hyland and Tse (2004:156-177) <sup>[8]</sup> state that discourse markers are categorized into two main types which are essentially and eventually interpersonal, and one of their main aims is to convince the person who hears or reads a certain text. They classify discourse markers into the functional headings of interpersonal and textual markers. Textual discourse markers refer to the organization of discourse. They also fulfill a persuasive function and attain a persuasive effect, while the *interpersonal* reflects the writer's stance towards both the content of the text and the potential reader, (ibid).

#### 2.1.1.1 Textual Discourse Markers

Hyland and Tse (2004:156-177) <sup>[8]</sup> divide textual discourse markers into seven categories which are mentioned as follows:

1. **Logical markers:** are markers which express semantic and structural relationships between discourse stretches, and help readers interpret pragmatic connections, which are:
  - a) **Additive** (and, furthermore...)
 

The marker "and" has both cohesive and structural roles; structural because they link two (or more) syntactic units such as clauses, phrases or verbs, and cohesive because the interpretation of the whole conjunctive utterance depends on the combination of both conjuncts. Also, "and", can precede support units of talk (explanation, evidence and clarification to previous units). It can also have a pragmatic effect in the sense that it indicates a speaker's continuation. However, "and" does not provide information about what is being continued. Such information is derived from the discourse content and structure. Also it is used to indicate the speaker's continuation (Schiffrin, 1987: 150) <sup>[11]</sup>.
  - b) **Adversative** (but, however...)
  - c) **Conclusive** relationships (finally, in sum...) in the text.
  - d) **Causatives** (so, because, as a result). According to Schiffrin (1987:330), "because" is used by the speaker to indicate a relation of 'cause and result'. "So" is used to indicate a relation of 'premise and conclusion' and also indicating a result and to establish a causal link among events.
2. **Sequencers:** are markers which indicate particular positions in a series and serve to guide the reader in the presentation of different arguments in a particular order (in the first place, secondly).
3. **Reminders:** are markers that refer back to previous sections in the text in order to retake an argument, amplify it or summaries some of the previous argumentation. For example (as...said)
4. **Topicalisers:** are markers that explicitly indicate some type of topic shift to the reader so that the argumentation can be easily followed. For example (now).
 

Schiffrin (1987:241) <sup>[11]</sup> claims that "now" is used to indicate a speaker's progression through a discourse which contains an ordered sequence of subordinating parts. It is also used to indicate the upcoming shift in talk, or when the speaker wants to negotiate the right to control what will happen next in talk.
5. **Code glosses:** are markers that explain, rephrase, expand or exemplify propositional content. Overall,

they reflect the writer's expectations about the audience's knowledge or ability to follow the argument (that is, in other words, for instance).

6. **Illocutionary markers:** are markers that explicitly name the act the writer performs through the text (I hope to persuade, I back up this idea...)
7. **Announcements:** are markers which refer forward to future sections in the text in order to prepare the reader for prospective argumentation (ibid.).

#### 2.1.1.2 Interpersonal Discourse Markers

Hyland and Tse (2004:156-177) <sup>[8]</sup> classify interpersonal markers into five main categories which are illustrated as follows:

1. **Hedges:** are markers which refer to markers that withhold full commitment to the statements displayed in the text. From a linguistic point of view, epistemic verbs (may, might, would), probability adverbs (perhaps, maybe) and epistemic expressions (it is likely, it is probable...) have been analyzed.
2. **Certainty markers:** are markers that express full commitment to the statements presented by the writer (undoubtedly, of course, naturally, in fact, you know). Schiffrin (1987:268) <sup>[11]</sup> maintains that "know" has two discourse functions: a marker of meta-knowledge about what speakers and hearers share, and a marker of metaknowledge about what is generally known. It is also used to indicate a situation in which the speaker knows that the hearer shares some knowledge about a particular piece of information.
3. **Attributors:** are markers that perform a double function in the text. They refer explicitly to the source of the information (as the Prime Minister indicated), or at the same time using these references of authoritative value with persuasive goals.(ibid)
4. **Attitude markers:** are markers which express the writer's affective values towards the reader and the content presented in the text. Linguistically, these markers can adopt the following form:
  - a) **Denotic verbs:** (must, have to...)
  - b) **Attitudinal adverbs:** (surprisingly...)
  - c) **Adjectival constructions:** such as (it is difficult, impossible...)
  - d) **Cognitive verbs:** such as (I think, I believe...)
5. **Commentaries:** These markers help to establish and maintain rapport with the audience by means of **rhetorical questions** (is this the right attitude?), direct appeals (dear reader, you), personalisations (I, we, me, my feelings).

Personalisers, contribute to the development of a relationship with the reader. A relationship that, ultimately, may convince or not but that is inherently persuasive (ibid). Besides, Yumin (2007:22) <sup>[15]</sup> mentions that the aim behind using the personal marker (*we*), is to shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience, regardless of their disparity in age, social status and professions and it may include both the speaker and the listener into the same arena, and thus make the audience feel close to the speaker and his points.

### 2.2 Functions of Discourse Markers

Brinton (2010) <sup>[1]</sup> maintain that discourse markers are grammatically optional and semantically empty but they are not pragmatically optional or superfluous, instead, they have

a variety of pragmatic functions. An inventory functions which she groups into two main categories. First, the textual function which belongs to the way the speaker structures meaning as text, creating cohesive passages of discourse. Second, the interpersonal function which refers to the nature of the social exchange, that is, the role of the speaker and the role assigned to the hearer, (ibid).

Hellerman and Vergun's (1992:951) <sup>[6]</sup> state that discourse markers are words or phrases that function within the linguistic system to obtain relationships between topics or grammatical units in discourse, that is words such as so, well, and then. They also have pragmatic functions, as a speaker uses them to comment on the state of understanding of the information about to be expressed using phrases as you know, I mean. They may be used to express a change of state, such as the particle Oh; or for comment by the most relevant context is not appropriate e.g. well.

### 2.3 The Importance of Discourse Markers

Learning a language means learning four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In writing we need to rely on using certain expressions to produce a coherent text. Using discourse markers is an important step towards good writing. Texts are called to be effective if they achieve their communicative goals. Writers are concerned with presenting the content in a way that fulfills their communicative intentions. When the reader is able to recognize these intentions we can say that the producer achieves the text's purpose. Using DMs in writing is very essential rather than in speaking simply because when speaking it is easy for the listener to get what the speaker wants through the use of gestures and body language.

In contrast, the writer needs to use DMs to help the reader moves freely from an idea to another (Haselow, 2011: 3604) <sup>[5]</sup>. DMs play an essential part in writing since they participate in helping the reader to connect the backward sentence with the foreword and figure out their relation. Here, it seems important to rise the following question: how do DMs contribute to produce a coherent and cohesive text? To answer this question, it is significant to shed light on coherence and cohesion. In discourse analysis, coherence and cohesion are inseparable terms. They are the two crucial textual elements that have been identified as seminal characteristics of "good" writing Cohesion is first studied by Halliday and Hasan, when they publish their book *Cohesion in English* in (1976). In their opinion the concept of cohesion refers to "relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as text", (ibid: 4).

In their theory, they focus on cohesion across sentence boundaries. For them, a sentence is referred to as a unit for cohesion. Halliday and Hasan's study aims at identifying a text as "a unified whole". So cohesion refers to non-structural relations above the sentence. Thus, cohesion emphasizes written text as product. On the other hand, coherence refers to the use of synonyms, pronouns and transitional words and is defined as a semantic property that is related to the individual's interpretations of sentence's relation to other sentence. Halliday and Hasan argue that two conditions must be available to consider the text coherent. The first condition is that a text should be consisted with content in which it is created. The second condition is that a text must use cohesion devices. So, we need to use DMs and cohesion devices to convey the right meaning, ideas and information of the written text

### 2.4 Topic Boundary Markers

In the discourse sometimes anyone can identify the topic boundary markers. The topic boundary markers refer to the markers that mark when the topic is changed or shift from one topic to another topic. This term is known as topic shift. Topic shift is often employed as a device by speakers, to make a point or to introduce new information. The topic boundary markers also can be seen in the paragraph since the topic in every paragraph is changing or shift.

### 2.5 Paragraphs

It might seem that identifying the formal demarcation of chunks of written or printed discourse is a relatively simple task. Written discourse is divided into paragraphs whose boundaries are marked by indentations. Topic-shifts in written discourse could be identified with the beginning of each new paragraph. Brown and Yule (1983: 89) <sup>[2]</sup> appeal to languages other than English for evidence that there are formal linguistic markers of the beginning and end of paragraphs. What is noticeable of these markers is that they are genre-specific. There are ways of indicating the beginning of a new paragraph in a piece of narrative, for example, which are not used in explanatory discourse.

This general point is also made by them, who describes the marking of paragraph boundaries as one form of 'partitioning in discourse'. The principles on which partitioning depends are related to change of 'setting' (time or place) and 'theme' (the person or thing talked about) in narrative discourse, at least. On the basis of such genre-specific descriptions of 'topic-shift' markers, it should be possible to make linguistic statements about the structure of English written discourse which reflect the writer's purpose. Thus, in producing a narrative, the writer must provide some indications of change of time and place, as Grimes (1975: 102) has pointed out. In presenting a philosophical argument, however, the writer can range over different times and places within a single paragraph, but must mark out changes in the direction of his argument. Eventually, it should also be possible to specify those markers of 'topic-shift' which occur in all forms of written discourse. It might be found that it is indeed the case that the use of 'But' at the beginning of a paragraph as described by van Dijk (2009: 139) <sup>[13]</sup>, is a very general marker of topic change. Other examples of what he (ibid) terms macro-structure connectives are 'furthermore', 'however', and 'so'.

### 3. Methodology

The present section associates with the analysis of EFL Iraqi learners' answers and investigate Iraqi EFL learners' difficulties in the area of discourse marker in both recognition and production levels. The sample of this study is (30) students who are second-year students of the Department of English/College of Education for Humanities/ University of Tikrit for the academic year 2022-2023. Concerning the model of the current study, the researcher will adopt Hyland and Tse (2004)'s <sup>[8]</sup> model.

#### 3.1 Instrument

A quantitative method is employed in the current study. Williams (2011: 14) <sup>[14]</sup> states that such method denotes measuring and analyzing variables to reach certain outcomes. A quantitative method includes utilizing and

analyzing numeral data via using certain statistical procedures to reach certain responses to the concerned test.

### 3.2 Validity and Reliability

In order to making a study instrument more consistent and appropriately designed, it is useful to perform the two indispensable preconditions of reliability and validity. Concerning validity of a test, Heaton (1974: 78) <sup>[4]</sup> maintains that it is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed measuring and nothing else. Tests should be as valid as their instructors make them. The test must aim to provide a true measure of the particular skill which it is intended to measure. As for reliability, it should do with stability of marks for the same learners. If their scores are stable, the test will be reliable; if they tend to fluctuate with no clear reason, it will be unreliable, (Harmer, 2001: 90) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3.3 Final Administration

The final version of the test was carried out by utilizing online educational program which is Telegram on 10 of

February 2023 on (20) students selected randomly from the 4th year students/ Department of English/College of Arts/University of Tikrit. The EFL Iraqi learners took only (45) minutes to write their responses. Additionally, they have been inform not to write down their names avoiding any possible embarrassment. Some responses of students are attached in the appendix.

### 3.4 Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed to look at the most popular kinds of DMs that EFL learners use incorrectly i.e. errors related to textual discourse markers which involves logical markers, sequencers, reminders. Topicalisers, code glosses, illocutionary markers and announcements as well as interpersonal discourse markers which includes hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers and commentaries. The researcher herself correct the papers to show how Iraqi EFL learners use DMs. The following tables will show the errors of the whole types of DMs:

**Table 1:** The errors of the whole types of DMs

Types of DMs	Correct Answers	%	Incorrect Answers	%
Textual Discourse Markers	3	10%	27	90%
Interpersonal Discourse Markers	11	37%	19	63%
Total	14	47%	46	153%

As stated in the above table, the highest number of average correct answers for textual discourse markers is 3 with the percentage of 10% while the highest number of average correct answers for interpersonal discourse markers is 11 with the percentage of 37%. As for incorrect answers for textual discourse markers is 27 with the percentage of 90% while the highest number of average correct answers for interpersonal discourse markers is 19 with the percentage of 63%. The result reflects that both textual discourse markers and interpersonal discourse markers are both confused by EFL Iraqi learners since they may not have enough comprehension and they may not have an adequate practice exercises related to this issues on one hand. On the other hand, instructors may not follow contemporary approaches to teach their students.

**Table 2:** Table shows Textual Discourse Markers, Correct and Incorrect Answers

Textual Discourse Markers	Correct Answers	%	Incorrect Answers	%
Logical markers	1	3%	6	02%
Sequencers	1	3%	8	26%
Reminders	0	0%	9	30%
Topicalisers	1	3%	4	13%
Total	3	10%	27	90%

Concerning the above table, the correct answers for logical markers is 1 with the percentage of 3%. Concerning sequencers, the correct answers account 1 with the percentage of 3%. As for the correct answers for reminders, they score 0 with the percentage of 0%. Additionally, the correct answers for Topicalisers, they score 1 with the percentage of 3%. As for the incorrect answers, logical markers constitute 6 with the percentage of 20%. The incorrect answers of sequencer textual discourse markers form 8 with the percentage of 26%. Regarding the incorrect answers of reminders, they score 9 with the percentage of

30% which represent the highest incorrect answers among all textual discourse markers. Finally, the incorrect answers of Topicalisers score 4 with the percentage of 13%.

**Table 3:** Table shows Interpersonal Discourse Markers, Correct and Incorrect Answers

Interpersonal Discourse Markers	Correct Answers	%	Incorrect Answers	%
Hedges	3	10%	5	16%
Certainty markers	1	3%	1	3%
Attributors	3	10%	4	13%
Attitude markers	2	6.6%	5	16%
Commentaries	2	6.6%	4	13%
Total	11	36.6%	19	63%

In relation to the preceding table, the correct answers for both hedges and attributes are 3 with the percentage of 10%. In terms of certainty markers, the correct answers account 1 with the percentage of 3%. Regarding the correct answers for attitude markers and commonalities, they score 2 with the percentage of 6.6%. As for the incorrect answers, hedges and attitude markers constitute 5 with the percentage of 16%. Regarding the incorrect answers of both certainty markers, they score 1 with the percentage of 3%. Finally, the incorrect answers of attributors and commentaries score 4 with the percentage of 13%.

Generally speaking, most discourse markers are found to be more difficult to be produced by Iraqi EFL university learners. Thus, Iraqi EFL students typically have no capacity to produce all these markers within the sentences existing in the concerned test. This is related to their difficulty in learning the EFL syntactic or semantic systems, which has been linked to elements like interference from the discorsal system in their mother tongue. On this basis, students' ability to use discourse markers is limited. It is also hypothesized that the most common errors that are

committed by Iraqi EFL learners in using discourse markers are related to textual class.

#### 4. Conclusion

##### 4.1 The following points are worth mentioning:

1. Discourse marker is "a word or phrase, a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context, like well, Oh, but you know,..... etc.
2. Discourse markers characteristics as follows:
  - **Semantically** they neither affect the truth conditions nor add anything to the propositional content of the utterance;
  - **Logically** they are related to the speech situation instead of the situation talked about; and
  - **Their purpose is emotive**, expressive function rather than a referential donative function”.
3. Discourse markers can be classified into two main types which are textual discourse markers and interpersonal discourse markers.
4. Discourse markers are grammatically optional and semantically empty but they are not pragmatically optional or superfluous, instead, they have a variety of pragmatic functions.
5. In the discourse sometimes anyone can identify the topic boundary markers. The topic boundary markers refer to the markers that mark when the topic is changed or shift from one topic to another topic. This term is known as topic shift.
6. Students' ability to use discourse markers is limited. Additionally, the most common errors that are committed by Iraqi EFL learners in using discourse markers are related to textual class. Thus, the two hypotheses of the current study are confirmed.

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#### 6. Appendix

##### Q/ Use a suitable discourse marker to fill blanks in the following sentences:

1. The citizens of America are..... joined in a great national effort to rebuild their country..... restore its promise for all of their people.
2. We will confront hardships, but we will get the job done.
3. Today's ceremony has very special meaning..... today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another..... we are transferring power from Washington, D.C..... giving it back to you, the people.
4. She spoke quietly..... she didn't want Catherine to hear.
5. I absolutely must see him,....., painful it may be for me.
6. .... being stressful, high level positions can also be harmful to your health.
7. Smoking is proved to be dangerous to the health....., 40% of the population smokes.
8. Jack thinks we're ready to begin..... Tom things we still need to wait.
9. Football is popular in England,..... in Australia they prefer cricket.
10. High level positions are stressful at times,..... can be harmful to your health.