

## Constructing an Organized and Coherent Text: How Discourse Markers Are Viewed by Iranian Post-Graduate Students?

**Seyed Ali Rezvani Kalajahi**

Department of Language and Humanities Education  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
University Putra Malaysia  
43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor  
Malaysia

**Ain Nadzimah Bt Abdullah**

Department of English Studies  
Faculty of Modern Language and Communication  
University Putra Malaysia,  
Selangor, Malaysia

**Roselan Baki**

University Putra Malaysia  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Selangor, Malaysia

### Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to explore how five Iranian post-graduate students view discourse markers (DMs) and if there is any distinction between what is expressed in the interview and their writing samples. A qualitative method is being employed in the study. Purposive sampling is conducted in selecting the students. The findings indicate that all informants are fully aware of applying DMs in their writing but they do not have sufficient knowledge for the proper use and choosing appropriate ones. The findings are very specific and never mentioned in the previous research studies. However, more research needs to be undertaken in order to address the diversity of students with a bigger sample and various methodology.*

**Keywords:** Applied Linguistics, Qualitative Method, Discourse Markers, Iranian Post-Graduate Students, types of DMs used.

### 1. Introduction

Discourse markers (DMs) are linguistic components such as *however, so, because*, etc. They are a set of words which create cohesiveness, coherence and meaning in a text.

According to Carter and McCarthy (2006),

“Discourse markers are words and phrases which function to link segments of the discourse to one another in ways which reflect choices of monitoring, organisation and management exercised by the speaker. The most common discourse markers in everyday informal spoken language are single words such as *anyway, because, fine, good, great, like, now, oh, okay, right, so, well*, and phrasal and clausal items such as *you know, I mean, as I say, for a start, mind you*” (p. 208).

Within the past fifteen years or so there has been an increasing interest in the theoretical status of DMs focusing on what they are, what they mean, and what functions they manifest in texts. Fraser (1999) proposes that discourse markers are conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that connect two sentences or clauses together. Fraser’s taxonomy includes three main subclasses namely, **(a) contrastive markers** that signal that the explicit interpretation of the second sentence contrasts with an interpretation of the first sentence. **(b) Elaborative markers** that signal a quasi-parallel relationship between the sentences. And **(c) inferential markers** signal that the following sentence is a conclusion derived from the preceding sentence.

Besides, Fraser differentiate additional subclasses of discourse markers that specify that the following sentence provides a reason for the content presented in the previous sentence. (e.g., after all, because, for this /that reason, since). While Fraser's first class of DMs involves the relationship between aspects of the explicit message of the second segment and either an implicit or explicit message of the first segment, his second class of DMs are distinguished by focus on topic, and so he calls them topic relating markers.

From literature it could be understood that DMs have been examined extensively in different contexts such as Iran and other parts of the world using mainly quantitative method, for instance, Rahimi (2011), Jalilifar (2008), Lahuerta Martínez (2004), Sáez (2003), Demirci and Kleiner (1997).

Fraser's (1999) taxonomy of Discourse Markers was used for the analysis of discourse markers in students' writing. The main findings were that students employed a variety of discourse markers with some types used more frequently than others. Elaborative markers were the most frequently used, followed by contrastive markers. There was a statistically significant relationship between the scores of the compositions and the number of discourse markers used in the same compositions. Thus, the larger the number of discourse markers used, the higher score of the composition achieved. It was also found that there was a statistically significant difference between the highly-rated and the poorly-rated compositions in the frequency of use of contrastive, elaborative and topic relating discourse markers. Those essays with a larger number of elaborative, contrastive and topic relating discourse markers obtained a higher score. Elaborative markers were the most closely related to the compositions' quality.

Unlike previous studies, Fung (2011) explored the attitudes of Hong Kong teachers towards the pedagogic values of DMs. Both the quantitative and qualitative results indicated a very positive perception of the pragmatic and pedagogic values of DMs by the subjects, where students at the intermediate-advanced level are challenged to acquire DMs for both receptive and productive purposes. The findings also revealed the underrepresentation of DMs in existing teaching materials and in subjects' teaching.

However, numerous studies have been carried out on the topic of connectors in learners' written discourse. Granger and Tyson (1996) looked into the use of connectors in essays written by the French, Altenberg and Tapper (1998) – Swedish, Tankó (2004) – Hungarian, Narita, Sato and Sugiura (2004) – Japanese, Fei (2006), Tang and Ng (1995), Yaochen (2006), Milton (2001) – Chinese, Yoon (2006) – Korean, Chen (2006) – Taiwanese, Leńko-Szymańska (2007) – Polish and other students, etc. While Chen (2006), Tankó (2004), Yoon (2006) and Milton (2001) reported on a general overuse of connectors by non-native speakers of English, Altenberg and Tapper (1998) found a general tendency for underuse. Granger and Tyson (1996), on the other hand, noticed neither general overuse nor underuse of connectors in students' essays. Despite the observed differences in the general use, over- or underuse and misuse of individual connectors was observed by all the authors.

It is evident that language learners at different proficiency level are experiencing problems with the use of DMs. In one hand, it is generally believed that the larger number of DMs used the higher quality in writing will be achieved. However, some researchers deny the fact that use of wide range of DMs does not lead to cohesion in writing. On the other hand, some learners apply some of the DMs frequently while some do not due to various reasons such as overuse, misuse, and underuse. Although several researchers have studied discourse markers from the descriptive and contrastive perspectives (mainly quantitatively) to determine the role of DMs and language skills, yet research needs to address these devices qualitatively. In contrast to previous studies, DMs have not been researched qualitatively so far, i.e. they merely focused on the frequency and its relation to the quality of the writing; nevertheless, so far learners have not asked how they are viewing DMs. In fact, those learners who are using them might be experiencing some problems that unable them to use variety of DMs or keep the balance in their writing not overuse some specific DMs. Also, from teacher's experiences in teaching profession, it is observed that Iranian students find it very difficult to construct an organized and coherent text in English, using DMs, (Lahuerta Martínez, 2004). In an attempt to fill this research gap, the present study focuses on Iranian post graduate students' perceptions and aims to explore the actual scenario in the local educational context. It is significant in revealing how DMs are perceived by students and to what extent they are represented in their writing which points to a gap in pedagogy.

The present study seeks to fill the research gap on the attitudinal side by exploring the attitudes of Iranian post graduate students towards the use of DMs in their writing through addressing the following questions:

1. How do Iranian Post graduate- students view the employment of discourse markers in writing?
2. How far the difference between what is expressed in the interview and what is written in the writing sample?

## **2. Methodology**

For the purpose of this research study a purposive sampling is used. Ahmad, Shaghayegh, shabnam, Leila, and Farahnaz, who are informants, are post-graduate students at university Putra Malaysia and doing their MA/MS/PhD in the field of Electrical Power Engineering, Management, Food science, accounting, and Agriculture. They are chosen chiefly because the researcher has an easy access to them. Further, they took international English tests (IELTS/TOEFL) and obtained the English language requirement to be able to study in an English medium instruction university overseas, therefore, they know how to write and what makes their writing understandable. Furthermore, they are required to write articles as well as dissertation and do their assignments in English throughout their study. It is a fact that whether they like it or not they need a large number of DMs in their writing.

The present study aims to understand students' thoughts, perceptions, knowledge, and experiences related to and arising from DMs. A qualitative study helps to elaborate notions in a more detailed manner. In order to explore the learner problems, a set of interview questions designed and supplemented by learner's sample of argumentative writing (Do you think it is easier to learner English in an English-speaking country than Iran? What are your reasons for your answer? ) as this sort of writing could be one of the writing that needs DMs to be used consecutively. The reason for this choice of text type is related to the fact that argumentative writing is one of those most frequently used by students as EFL learners in their academic work in university. The main reason why writing is used is matching of students' response in interview. That is to say, if their views are confirming what they were asked to write before conducting interview.

This study is based on a semi-structured in-depth interview of five informants. Interviews are audio-recorded then transcribed and data are coded manually for the purpose of drawing conception and classifications of the response accordingly. The reason behind the in-depth interview is to receive rich and adequate information from informants. Besides that, interviews permit informants to express their feelings, opinions, views, experiences, and thoughts. At the same time, it allows the researchers to follow up rapidly and make clear informants responses where there seems to be a vague. Hence, it provides a thorough understanding of the ongoing scenario and provides a range of information with a various quality compare to conventional approaches (Leng & Baki, 2008).

In order to gain validity, prior to conducting interview, interview questions examined meticulously by two PhD candidates in the teaching English field and their comments on the each question were taken into account respectively. Then, objective of the study were clarified to the informants and later transcription of the interviews sent to the informants. They confirmed what was transcribed as comments of their own to the interview questions. The reliability of the findings was also strengthened by some common similarity of response to the literature on the pertinent domain.

## **3. Findings and Disunions**

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in relation to the purpose of the study. In order to analyze data, comparative method applied to this study. Dick (2005) highlighted that constant comparison is the heart of the process in qualitative research. Comparison was done between ideas of informants, categories, and concepts as they emerged. As for research question one, analysis of the responses are as follows;

### **i. Role of DMs in writing and awareness of the informants**

First and foremost, all respondents state that DMs are highly important and they are playing crucial role in writing. Ahmad maintains that

*They make sentences connected to each other and even DMs make text more fluent.*

Likewise, Shagayegh states that

*Through DMs we can develop our writing more consistently. They are useful tools to convey meaning easily.*

Shabnam highlights that

*DMs can help us to create a meaningful writing and similarly they aid reader to follow and understand our points of views better.*

Leila and Farahnaz keep that

*By using DMs in writing we can develop our ideas fully and make connections among them. Moreover, inserting variety of them in a piece of writing adds more color to the text and makes it coherent.*

It is crystal clear that every one of the informants is aware of DMs role in writing. They all put forward that they have approximately sufficient knowledge of DMs except the fourth respondent. Four of them reported more than fifty percent they are conscious about applying DMs. This claim reveals the fact that they still need to be master on DMs. As they all are Master and PhD candidate, this percentage cannot be considered desirable because they are required to do many write-ups in English during their studies. Hence, in order to have cohesion, DMs need to be used constantly as they confirm that they are extremely important and are playing important role in constructing text.

On what is mentioned above with respect to the role of DMs, a number of researchers affirm what role they keep in building a text. For instance, Schiffirin (1987), Fraser (1990), Redeker (1990), Zwichy (1985), and Giora (1997) believe that discourse markers play a major role in the interpretation of the text by signaling coherence relations.

#### **ii. The importance and frequency use of DMs**

The entire respondents acknowledge that applying DMs in writing is absolutely necessary. To begin with the Ahmad, he claims

*Without use of DMs, definitely reader can be confused and he/she can fail to comprehend the text.*

Shaghayegh remarks

*Communication is easier and writing is understandable when certain DMs are utilized.*

Similarly Shabnam has the same idea of the second one. The Leila and Farahnaz mention that depletion of DMs can result in logical construction of text and via them connection between sentences and paragraphs can be made. They also believe that DMs should be taken into consideration in academic writing”.

In contrast to what presented above, all of them clearly state that they do not know what type of DMs they need to use. In fact, they rarely could realize how often they make use of them in writing. They all agree that DMs are considerable and using them is significant; however, they do not realize how frequently and where they use them. This can be due to lack of clear instruction. It is clear that all DMs are illustrated in books in a list form and it is advised they can be used interchangeably (Zamel, 1984 & Crewe, 1990). Another reason could be teachers which do not focus adequately in the classroom and are not aware of explicit teaching. Hence, it could be the consequence of implicit instruction and confining to the textbooks lists.

#### **iii. Easy and appropriate employment of DMs**

Ahmad and Leila explain it is not easy to deploy discourse markers due to lack of practice. But the others continue that it is more convenient to employ them in writing than speaking mainly because it requires more care and thinking on what is needed in the specific context. Regarding the appropriateness, all disclose

*they cannot use DMs properly and continue that this difficulty may stem from shortage of DMs knowledge.*

It is mentioned previously that inappropriate and not being able to use DMs easily are basically from teachers and text books. Even though, in some cases dictionaries fail to present clear distinction among variety of DMs. Therefore, learners have right to claim that they have not learnt how to use them properly. Consequently, the responsibility probably could be on material developer to some extent to do thorough work on the proper application of DMs.

#### **iv. Received pedagogy, efficient way of learning, and demanding practice of DMs**

As all informants took international exams (IELTS/TOEFL), they explain that they could acquire some knowledge on DMs from IELTS or TOEFL preparation books. They all believe there are a number of ways to learn them and continue that the best way is using them in writing or better to diagnose them when doing reading so that they can become our active words. Others also tend to believe that doing extensive reading and teacher are great sources to learn them.

To this end, all hold the view that they desperately need more practice on the employment of DMs. Majority of them resist on being master on the appropriate usage of DMs. They accept that applying a number of DMs can improve their writing to some extent. Neither in EFL nor ESL context DMs has been paid a scant attention. As for learners claim, they solely could be trained course books especially exam preparation books while other sources particularly writing books have the responsibility to illustrate them in-detail and teach learners proper usage of them. Nevertheless, it seems even writing course books fail to address this controversial issue from time to time. Learner suggest that an efficient way of learning of DMs would be course books. Thus, material developers need to take into consideration learners' needs in relation to DMs considerably.

#### v. Interlanguage issue

It should be noted that DMs exist almost in every language. The situation is the same in Farsi language. All respondents state that DMs are available in their mother tongue language to a great extent. Moreover, they all confirm they can use variety of them easily in their first language. If this is the case why they cannot transfer to English in which if it is possible to do as it may be considered as positive transfer. So, there would be a point to clear why learners cannot do positive transfer to exploit DMs in second or foreign language whereas negative transfer is occurring always unintentionally.

#### vi. Required location, punctuation, and usage ( underuse, overuse, misuse) of DMs

The entire respondents affirm they have almost no clear idea where DMs should be deployed. In line with this problem, they even do not know what kind of punctuation should be used along with them.

Generally speaking, initial, middle, and final position of DMs are remained vague to informants. That is to say, they could not understand which position is appropriate and where precisely DMs need to be employed. The problem, as is presented before, may return to the source that they have acquired them. To find a solution to this problem, a mere way can be a clear illustration of DMs in comprehensible list along with their usages, and of course, with required explanations and examples. However, a fundamental distinction should be made on the probable similar DMs and avoid recommending them to put them into practice interchangeably.

Five informants express that they underuse DMs to a great extent due to;

- a. lack of practice,
- b. forget to use them,
- c. having no idea where to use DMs, and
- d. not mastering on the frequent ones.

Their views show that they need to pay a great attention to DMs and take it as a serious problem because they cannot make use of them suitably. Even they misuse them in some cases. Nonetheless, they might over use some type of DMs frequently compared to the others but what is worth seriously to mention is a variety of them in writing need to be used in lieu of some basic and routing ones. Some quantitative research studies proved that Iranian learners to over use some specific DMs such as *and*, *or*, *thus*, *also*, *besides*, and *in addition*. It is interesting to state that misusing some DMs are often happening among the overused ones. But there are some DMs are being used infrequently, for example, *however*, *not only but also*, *nevertheless*, *although*, *despite* (Jalilifar, 2008 & Rahhimi, 2011).

#### vii. DMs in relation to other language skills

Not only DMs are considered substantial in writing, they also have a considerable role in other skills. The respondents remark that they are highly influential in other skills (listening, reading, and speaking). It is an obvious fact that DMs

- a. show direction to audience,
- b. help to understand meaning easily,
- c. give the audience a good understanding of a context, and
- d. indicate how well audience can follow the speaker or writer,

It is evident that to what extent DMs are indispensable part of language. This is how learners view DMs use. In fact, if they can be used frequently and properly comprehension and understanding will be crystal clear to the listener or reader. Overall, Iranian post-graduate students are fully aware of using DMs; nevertheless, they do not obtain sufficient knowledge to put them into practice.

To this end, it results in underusing or misusing some DMs respectively whereas a number of learners routine DMs stay on top as an overused one. Regarding the second research question, all informants expressed that they are totally aware of DMs, when it comes to their writing samples it is apparent that they cannot use variety of them frequently. In fact, they fail to use various types of DMs in the argumentative genre; however, this genre required more complex and a great number of them.

The entire number of words of the first informant's writing is 158 words but only five DMs are on the whole (firstly, secondly, thirdly, due to, overall). As a matter of fact, those DMs that is chiefly use in process-based genre rather than argumentative one, particularly first three ones. Argumentation can be made through this sort of DMs. Actually, it seems that the writer is not aware of this fact and cannot make use of several of them and therefore, this seems a potential problem for Ahmad who is not able to utilize them though he pretends that he is aware of DMs to some extent. His writing shows deploying infrequent number of DMs and not knowing the proper use of them.

Of the 387 words is written by Shaghayegh, merely 11 DMs could be observed. (For instance, so, because, last but not least, to sum up, otherwise, although, but, even, on the other hand). As is seen, several DMs are used in this genre compared to the first informants. The more words are written the more DMs are inserted. In fact, the second informant believes they develop her writing and consequently they will become active words of her. Ostensibly, examples and a good argumentation could be illustrated clearly via use of DMs accordingly. Despite to typical use of DMs, misuse of them is apparent occasionally. For example, "Although *may be is too expensive, but it is worth*". Syntactically, after comma, using but is not appropriate. Generally, this informant is aware of DMs but still underuse some of them, for instance,

*So there is not enough chance to learn English from other countries especially native ones.  
[However]Being exposed in English lead us to speak more and more because in this case we  
have to speak in English.*

It is clear that 'However' is missing while it could be applied to show contrast.

Shabnam deploys the following DMs (although, furthermore, moreover, firstly, but secondly, thirdly, to sum up). In parallel (even though, such as, actually, despite of, first, also) are DMs utilized by the fourth informant. Eight DMs of the whole of 215 words and six DMs out of 175 words are used by the Shabnam and Leila respondents respectively. In contrast, the Farahnaz could deploy (such as, first, however, on the other hand, in addition, consequently) as a DM. Seven DMs out of 280 words are put into practical use by the Farahnaz in which underuse of DMs is evident. Surprisingly, this informant is concerned about the use DMs in the academic writing. It is apparent that this informant could use more complex DMs compared to others. The reason could be the confidence in using them as this informant expressed that she is assured where DMs can be employed.

Broadly speaking, writing samples of the informants illustrate and confirm what they expressed throughout the interviews. Indeed, there is no clear distinction between the comments that they made in the interview questions and the sample writings that they wrote.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Although this study is of a small scale study due to the limitations of time and number of informants and their writing samples, it provides a glimpse into how DMs are viewed by Iranian post-graduate students. The study explored that all informants are fully aware of applying DMs in their writing but they do not have sufficient knowledge to use and choose them appropriately. It is argued that this problem may originate from the received pedagogy either resource books or teachers. Thus, findings of this study suggest further research studies on the pedagogical aspect of DMs. Moreover, result show that there are a great number of DMs in L1's of informants (Farsi) but they cannot exploit them in L2. This recommends that although there can be a positive transfer from L1 to L2, why it is not happening in this case. Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is no mismatch between what is expressed during interview and what they wrote as a sample. That is to say, their responses are validated by their documents that are provided. It is hoped that by adopting different research design, an efficient ways of teaching and learning of DMs emerge.

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