

The Use of Discourse Markers in Written Discourse by Students of English at the University of Jordan

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Abstract

This study adopts a functional approach to investigate the use of DMs in expository essays written by Jordanian EFL learners with different levels of English language proficiency. It relies on Fraser's (2009) taxonomy to represent the targeted DMs. The comparative analysis indicates that the advanced and intermediate EFL learners employed comparable rates of discourse markers in their essays. However, the latter were found to use more restricted sets of discourse markers than the former. The intermediate learners were also observed to use these devices to perform a narrower range of functions in a more restricted set of positions. Moreover, the discourse markers that are employed by the intermediate learners are found to be drawn from more redundant syntactic categories than the ones that are used by their advanced counterparts. It was concluded that the use of discourse markers is affected by the proficiency levels of EFL learners.

Keywords: discourse markers, EFL learners, English language proficiency, written discourse.

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that discourse markers have been analyzed widely since the 1970s, there is still an ongoing controversy between researchers, adopting different or even similar theoretical frameworks, about the nature of these mysterious expressions. Accordingly, the researchers who study these expressions do not agree on the characteristics, classifications, functions, core meanings, definitions or even labels under which they are to be analyzed. For example, Fraser (1999) refers to these expressions as **discourse makers**; Blakemore (1987) labels them as **discourse connectives**; Halliday and Hasan (1976) identify them as **sentence connectives** whereas Redeker (1990) refers to them as **discourse operators**.

Furthermore, various definitions have been proposed to account for the nature and functions of these linguistic items. Redeker (1991, p.1168), for instance, defines a discourse operator as an expression which is equipped "with the primary function of bringing to the listener's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediately preceding discourse context." Another definition is proposed by Schiffrin (1987, p.31) who defines these markers as "sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk." Maschler (1994, p.325) defines discourse markers (henceforth DMs) as "a subcategory of metalingual expressions: those used to mark boundaries of continuous discourse." Moreover, a number of researchers such as Schiffrin (1987) argue that some DMs have a core meaning while others (e.g. interjections) lack any meaning without explicitly defining the nature of this meaning. Contrary to Blakemore (1987) who claims that DMs have only procedural meaning, Fraser (2009, p.16) argues that DMs potentially have "both conceptual and procedural meaning, though not in equal proportions."

In spite of the researchers' disagreement about many aspects of DMs, they typically agree on three main characteristics that define the nature of these devices. Connectivity is approved to be one of the necessary conditions of discourse markers by many researchers. For example, Schiffrin (1987) claims that DMs contribute to the local coherence of a discourse by signaling connections between two adjacent textual units, while Fraser (2009) argues that DMs can contribute to local and global coherence. Discourse markers are also believed to contribute nothing to the truth conditionality of the linguistic segments that they connect and this can lead to another characteristic of these markers which is their optionality (e.g. Brinton, 1996; Fung, 2003; Muller, 2005).

The heterogeneity of the syntactic classes from which they are drawn, detachability of clause syntactic structure and initiality are also commonly recognized characteristics of DMs (Schourup, 1999).

2. Aims of the study

The present study analyzes the use of DMs in expository essays written by Jordanian students with different levels of English language proficiency. It attempts to discuss the effect of English language proficiency on the use of DMs. Another objective of this study is to assess the students' awareness of the stylistic peculiarities of DMs. The study will attempt to answer the following question: How does the level of proficiency of students at the University of Jordan affect their use of DMs in written discourse?

3. Literature Review

Fraser (1996) uses constructed examples for analyzing DMs within a grammatical-pragmatic framework. A discourse marker is defined by Fraser (1996, p.186) as “an expression which signals the relationship of the basic message to the foregoing discourse.” He holds the position that DMs constitute a functional rather than a syntactic class. Accordingly, coordinate and subordinate conjunctions (*and, or, but, since...*), adverbs (*consequently, furthermore...*) and prepositional phrases (*above all, on the other hand...*) are the major sources of DMs. In contrast to Schiffrin (1987) who claims that DMs contributes to the local coherence of discourse, Fraser believes that these markers can contribute to the local or global coherence.

Fraser (2009) identifies three functional classes of DMs. The first class is contrastive discourse markers (CDMs) which signal that the message conveyed by the discourse segments they introduce contrasts directly or indirectly with the prior segments. ‘*Nevertheless*’ in (I didn't study hard. *Nevertheless*, I passed the exam) is an example of this functional class of discourse markers. Elaborative discourse markers (EDMs) constitute the second subclass of discourse markers. EDMs indicate that the information contained in the discourse segments that host them is an elaboration on the information represented by prior segments. ‘*Above all*’ in (You must study hard. *Above all*, you mustn't fail school exams) illustrates the use of EDMs. The third subclass of discourse markers is that where the discourse segment they introduce “provides a basis for inferring” the prior segment (Fraser, 2009, p.9). ‘*Thus*’ in (It is raining today. *Thus*, we aren't going shopping) is an instance of the discourse markers identified by Fraser as inferential discourse markers (IDMs).

Martinez (2004) employs Fraser's taxonomy to carry out a study that investigates the use of DMs in written discourse by non-native speakers of English. Thus, 78 Spanish university students are asked to write expository compositions on a topic that the researcher supposed to be familiar to them by virtue of studying it at school and university. The researcher concludes that Spanish students use a variety of DMs with different degrees of frequency. She points out that the discourse markers which are exhibiting the highest degree of frequency in the students' writings are the elaborative markers. The second most frequently employed type of DMs is contrastive markers, followed by causative markers and inferential markers. Martinez relates the high frequency of elaborative DMs, such as (*and, moreover and furthermore*), to the fact that expository compositions often require elaboration which might be signaled by the use of such markers. She adds that the students who exhibit the most frequent uses of DMs are the ones who score the best results in their writing task.

The study also reveals that there is a positive relationship between the qualities of the students' compositions and the variety of the DMs used by them. The highly-rated compositions generally “tended to present a larger variety” of elaborative, inferential and contrastive markers (Martinez, 2004, p.76). For example, the contrastive markers that are used in the highly-rated compositions include “(*but, however, although, whereas, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, in contrast (with/to this/that), whereas, instead (of (doing) this/that), despite (doing) this /that, in spite of (doing) this/that*)” (Martinez, 2004, p.76). The poorly- rated compositions, on the other hand, tended to present a redundant use of the contrastive markers ‘*but*’ and ‘*however*’.

Another study that uses Fraser's (1999) taxonomy to investigate the employment of DMs in compositions is conducted by Jalilifar (2008). The researcher contributes her choice of Fraser's taxonomy to the fact that “it conforms to written discourse and it seems to be the most comprehensive classification in written discourse” (Jalilifar, 2008, p.115). Jalilifar asked 90 Iranian university students to write descriptive compositions once a week for 8 weeks. She came to the conclusion that the elaborative markers are most frequently used class of DMs. Jalilifar additionally emphasizes that there is a significant relationship between the frequency of DMs and the quality of the compositions.

Following Fraser's (1999) taxonomy of DMs, Rahimi (2011) carries out a study to examine the use of DMs by Iranian EFL learners. The researcher analyzes the DMs used in expository and argumentative essays written by 56 English-major Iranian students. The findings show that the most frequently employed type of DMs in the students' essays is elaborative markers. Rahimi (2011, p.73) ascribes the high quantity of elaborative markers to the fact that "both expository and argumentative writing in general require explanation of ideas." Moreover, the elaborative marker 'and' is found to be the most frequent DM in both essay types. The second most frequent DM is 'or', followed by 'so', 'but', 'also', 'for example' and 'because' (Rahimi, 2011, p.72). The results further indicate that the Iranian students are found to "resort to more textual and discoursal devices in argumentative texts than in expository texts" (Rahimi, 2011, p.74). As for the relationship between the use of DMs and the quality of the expository and argumentative compositions, the results reveal that "the use of DMs cannot be a significant predictor of the writing quality" (Rahimi, 2011, p.74).

Šimčikaitė (2012) analyzes the use of spoken DMs in academic writing. This study is based on the belief that DMs are "sensitive to discourse type" (Šimčikaitė, 2012, p.27). Thus, using informal DMs in an academic essay might "contribute to the overly oral tone of the whole essay" (Šimčikaitė, 2012, p.27). The researcher relies on Carter and McCarthy's classification of DMs. Carter and McCarthy (2006) distinguish a class of DMs which are used frequently in informal oral discourse such as (*by the way, anyway and you see*). They argue that these markers are sometimes used to "imitate a spoken style" in written discourse (Šimčikaitė, 2012, p.28). The data for this study are collected from a corpus of academic essays written by Lithuanian learners of English and compared to a corpus of native English essays.

The results indicate that the Lithuanian learners use spoken DMs more frequently than their native counterparts. Šimčikaitė suggests that the most likely explanation is that the Lithuanian learners are not familiar with the "stylistic peculiarities" of DMs (Šimčikaitė, 2012, p.27). This could be attributed to the learners' course books which "lack stylistic suggestions of discourse markers" (Šimčikaitė, 2012, p.32).

Unaldi (2013) examines the use of the DMs 'I think' and 'in my opinion' which are distinctive features of speech contexts in argumentative essays written by Turkish EFL learners. A comparable corpus of essays written by native speakers of English is employed as the base line for this analysis. The results indicate that the intermediate EFL learners overuse these spoken markers as opposed to their native counterparts. Unaldi argues that overusing these markers is an indication of "a transfer of spoken register into written by EFL learners which means that they try to write like they speak" (Unaldi: 583).

Asassfeh, et al., (2013) analyze quantitatively and qualitatively the use of logical connectors (another label for DMs) in essays written by 146 students who are studying English at one of the Jordanian universities. The researchers investigate the frequency and variety of the use of logical connectors (LCs). They found that the Jordanian EFL learners tend to "incorporate a higher number of LCs compared to what the context requires" (Asassfeh, et al., 2013, p.19). In other words, the subjects show a tendency for overusing or overloading their essays with LCs. Furthermore, the subjects are observed to use repeatedly and redundantly a restricted set of LCs. The LC 'and', for instance, represents 80% of the additive LCs that are employed by the students, whereas 'because' and 'so' stand for 93% of the occurrences of causative connectors (Asassfeh, et al., 2013, p.23-24).

4. Methodology

4.1. Subjects

The subjects of the study are divided into two groups. The first group is advanced EFL learners and they are represented by forty graduate students in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. Specifically, the subjects are enrolled in the master's degree programs of English linguistics, English literature and translation. The administration of these students requires that they score high in one of the graduate admission tests which assess the English language-proficiency of students whose native language is not English. Consequently, all the subjects who are classified as advanced EFL learners have obtained a TOFEL® ITP score of 550 or more out of 660 or a National English Test score of 75 or more out of 100. The two tests aim at evaluating students' proficiency level in reading, listening and writing skills.

The other group of subjects is intermediate EFL learners and they are represented by eighty-seven students who failed the university entrance exam. The university entrance exam consists of questions that assess students' proficiency level in the skills of reading, speaking and listening. These students are enrolled in English 99 courses at the University of Jordan.

The total number of students who are enrolled in the master's degree program in the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014 is one hundred and fourteen. Forty subjects are randomly selected from the one hundred and fourteen graduate students. The sample of the advanced EFL learners presents around 35% of the population from which it is drawn. On the other hand, the eighty-seven intermediate EFL learners represent around 5% of the one thousand seven hundred and thirty students who are enrolled in the English 99 course. Selecting different sample sizes might be justified by the fact that the population size of the graduate students is too small in comparison with the population of the English 99 students. Thus, it is difficult to select the same sample sizes or even percentages of representations of each population.

4.2. Data collection

Writing essays is the instrument for data collection in the present study. The subjects are asked to write expository essays in which they discuss and suggest solutions for three problems they face at the University of Jordan. Following Asassfeh, et al., (2013, p.21), three topics are presented to two English professors to ensure "the appropriateness of the prompt for the participants and the study purpose." The selection of this topic is based on the assumption that it is familiar to the subjects. The subjects are asked to write the essays during regular classroom sessions with the attendance of their instructors.

4.3 Model of analysis

This study relies on Fraser's (2009) taxonomy to represent the targeted DMs. This choice is based on the assumption that Fraser's taxonomy "conforms to written discourse and it seems to be the most comprehensive classification in written discourse" (Jalilifar, 2008, p.115). Fraser (2009) distinguishes three functional classes of discourse markers.

A- Contrastive discourse markers (CDMs)

(but, alternatively, although, contrariwise, contrary to expectations, conversely, despite (this/that), even so, however, in spite of (this/that), in comparison (with this / that), in contrast (to this/that), instead (of this / that), nevertheless, nonetheless, (this/that point), notwithstanding, on the other hand, on the contrary, rather (than this/that), regardless (of this/that), still, though, whereas, yet ...) (Fraser, 2009, p.8)

B- Elaborative discourse markers (EDMs)

(and, above all, after all, also, alternatively, analogously, besides, by the same token, correspondingly, equally, for example, for instance, further (more), 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) (Fraser, 2009, p.9)

C- Inferential discourse markers (IDMs)

(so, all things considered, as a conclusion, as a consequence (of this/that), as a result (of this/that), because (of this/that), 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) (Fraser, 2009, p.9)

Fraser (2005) considered the temporal class of pragmatic markers as a subclass of DMs and then in Fraser (2009) excluded this class and justified this exclusion by the claim 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. Hence, Fraser's (2005) temporal class of DMs is included in this study.

D-Temporal discourse markers (TDMs)

(then, after, as soon as, before, eventually, finally, first, immediately afterwards, meantime, meanwhile, originally, second, subsequently, when) (Fraser, 2005, p.197)

Moreover, Fung's (2003) category of interpersonal DMs represents the class of Spoken DMs in the present study. The spoken class of DMs is useful in marking shared knowledge between the participants and marking the attitude of the participants towards the propositional content of discourse segments. This class of DMs is typically used in spoken rather than in written discourse.

F- Spoken discourse markers (SDMs)

(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, OK, okay, right, alright, yeah, yes, I see, great, oh great, sure) (Fung, 2003, p.84)

4.4. Data analysis

The subjects' use of DMs is judged based on six criteria. The first is the frequency of the use of DMs. Accordingly, the number of words used in each essay is counted manually to find out the ratio of DM use. The second criterion is the functions that DMs serve in expository essays. Each DM is assigned to one of the five functional categories that are investigated in the study. It should be indicated that there are instances of DMs which are not classified as members of the proposed functional categories. These markers are found to perform functions similar to the members of the proposed categories and thus they are analyzed in this part of the study. The third criterion is the variety of the use of DMs. DM occurrences of each functional category are analyzed to find out if the intermediate and advanced students use restricted or varied sets of DMs in written discourse. The fourth is the syntactic categories from which DMs are drawn.

Following Fraser (2005), each DM is to be identified as a member of five syntactic categories: coordinate conjunctions; subordinate conjunctions; prepositions; prepositional phrases; adverbials. However, two syntactic categories are not identified as sources of DMs by Fraser (2005), i.e. clauses and interjections, are considered as sources of DMs in the present study. The reason behind Fraser's exclusion of the DMs that are drawn from the latter categories is that they do not convey a semantic relationship between the discourse segments they connect. These markers constitute the spoken category of DMs which serves a phatic role in the discourse "to facilitate closeness between participants" (Fung, 2003, p.77). As a result, instances of the employment of this category in academic essays are considered pragmatically inappropriate. Assessing the subjects' awareness of the stylistic peculiarities of DMs which is represented by frequent instances of spoken DMs in academic essays is the fifth criterion for evaluating the subjects' use of these markers.

The last criterion is the position that DMs occupies in sentences and in discourse segments. A set of words are to meet two conditions to be considered a sentence. The first is to include a subject and a predicate. The second condition is to end with a full stop, question mark, or exclamation mark. Discourse markers might occur in sentence initial, medial or final position.

5. Result and discussion

5.1 Frequency of occurrence

A total of 853 DMs were used by the intermediate and advanced EFL learners. The intermediate learners employed 419 DMs in their expository writing and the advanced learners employed 434. One DM was observed to be roughly used by both groups of learners every 13 words (The frequency rate is calculated by dividing the total number of words on the number of DMs used by each group of learners). The frequency of DM occurrences is presented in Table 1.

As apparent from Table 1, there was no marked difference in the frequency between the advanced and the intermediate learners of English. The number of DMs used by the advanced learners accounted for 50.9% of the identified instances. As for the intermediate learners, the percentage of frequency accounted for 49.1%.

5.2. Functions

The second criterion used in judging the participants' use of DMs is the functions that these pragmatic expressions serve in expository essays. The frequencies of the functional classes of the DMs that are employed by the advanced and intermediate EFL learners are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table.2, elaborative markers were the most frequently employed (47.1%), followed by inferential markers (17.8%), temporal markers (12.9%), contrastive markers (11.1%) and spoken markers (11.0%). The extensive use of elaborative markers by the advanced and intermediate EFL learners might be contributed to the fact that expository writing typically requires elaboration of ideas which might be signaled by the use of the elaborative category of DMs (Martinez, 2004; Jalilifar, 2008; Asassfeh, et al., 2013). However, it should be pointed out that the intermediate learners (53.9%) used elaborative markers more frequently than the advanced ones (40.6%). Jalilifar (2008, p.116), who reported a similar result, observes that there is "a negative relationship between increase of composition writing ability and the use of elaborative DMs."

In other words, as students became more proficient in their ability to write in English, “the rate of DMs other than elaborative markers increased, but elaborative markers decreased” (Jalilifar, 2008, p.116). This assumption might be verified by the fact that the temporal, inferential and contrastive markers were used more frequently by the advanced EFL learners.

Spoken markers had a slightly higher percentage of use in essays written by the intermediate (12.4%) rather than advanced learners (9.7%). This finding is supported by Šimčikaitė (2012) and might be justified by the assumption that lower English-language proficiency students are less familiar with the stylistic peculiarities of DMs. Contrastive markers were the least employed functional class of DMs in the intermediate learners’ essays. A similar result is reported by Asassfeh, et al., (2013), hence, it could be argued that the contrastive class of DMs is the most difficult to learn by intermediate EFL learners.

5.3. Variety of use

In order to investigate whether the subjects used varied or restricted sets of DMs, instances of the targeted DMs are categorized under the five functional classes that are analyzed in the present study. This section presents a qualitative analysis of the variety of use of the DMs that are grouped under elaborative, temporal, inferential, contrastive and spoken classes of DMs.

5.3.1. The variety of elaborative markers

As mentioned previously, elaborative markers were the most frequently employed class of DMs by the advanced and intermediate EFL learners. The occurrences of DMs that are categorized under this class are presented in Table 3.

The results indicate that the intermediate and advanced EFL learners overused the DM ‘and’. The over-reliance on ‘and’ is indicated by Asassfeh, et al., (2013) who found that this marker constituted a ratio of 80% of the elaborative DMs which are employed in the essays that he analyzed. In the present study, the intermediate learners showed a greater tendency to overuse the DM ‘and’ in comparison to the advanced ones. Accordingly, this marker constituted a ratio of 89.8% of the entire set of the elaborative markers that were used in the intermediate learners’ essays as opposed to 62.5% employed in essays written by the advanced learners. . Example (1) illustrates the redundant use of ‘and’ by the intermediate learners.

(1) The first problem is the students don’t have a long time when we want registration. And the faculties very far take a long time to come to the class, and we don’t have a place to put the books between the classes and we don’t have box to put my things. (Intermediate)

In addition to ‘and’, the only DM that was used more frequently by the intermediate learners was ‘or’. The DMs (*also, as well as, for example, moreover, furthermore, in addition to, besides* and *in other words*) were used more frequently by the advanced learners. Moreover, there were no instances of the DMs (*furthermore, in other words, besides, and as well as*) in the intermediate learners’ expository writing. Examples (2-3) include instances of the use of elaborative markers in the advanced learners’ essays.

(2) Second, many students suffer from the large distance between classes, *in other words*, students spend a lot of time wondering around from one place to another to take their different classes. (Advanced)

(3) *Moreover*, some professors are hard to deal with especially when it comes to their treatment on the personal level. They put a great pressure in the students and make them feel that they shouldn’t be here. (Advanced)

In sum, the intermediate learners used relatively a more restricted set of elaborative DMs in their essays and relied heavily on the DM ‘and’ to compensate for their unfamiliarity with the other elaborative markers. Likewise, Martinez (2004, p.76) came to the conclusion that in the compositions that she analyzed, a varied set of elaborative markers were effectively used in the development of ideas by more proficient writers, whereas less proficient writers tended to repeat a restricted set of elaborative markers which resulted in a lower quality of writing.

5.3.2. The variety of temporal markers

Temporal DMs serve the function of signaling structural relations between the segments that host them and prior discourse segments. They are, hence, extremely useful in organizing the structure of spoken and written discourse. The frequency of the temporal DMs in the learners’ expository writing is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 indicates that a variety of temporal DMs was used by the intermediate and the advanced learners. With the exclusion of some instances of using informal temporal markers (e.g. *now*), intermediate and advanced EFL learners managed to use temporal DMs properly. Asassfeh, et al., (2013, p.24) attribute EFL learners' ability to use temporal markers properly to the fact that EFL learners are explicitly instructed to use this type of markers in essays that "adopt an organizational pattern of logical division of ideas."

However, it is observed that each group of learners employed a varied set of temporal markers which is different from the set employed by the other group. The advanced learners, for example, used frequently the temporal markers '*first*' and '*first of all*' to introduce initial points whereas the intermediate learners relied on '*firstly*' to signal initiality. In addition to the DM '*finally*', the advanced learners employed '*eventually*' to introduce concluding signals whereas '*in the end*' was used by the intermediate learners. Examples (4-5) illustrate the use of temporal markers in the advanced and intermediate data, respectively.

(4) *First of all*, students suffer usually from the process of registration because they cannot find the courses they want. *Secondly*, students are always complaining from the high prices of hours. *Finally*, a lot of students face a problem to find a quiet place where they can relax themselves after classes. (Advanced)

(5) *Firstly*, I faced as a major problem smoking. The students are smoking everywhere. It is making medical problem for the smokers and the other students. *Secondly*, our university facing crowded. The numbers of the students are very huge. And we need more facilities. *Finally*, we faced hard subjects to study. (Intermediate)

5.3.3. The variety of inferential markers

Despite the fact that the inferential markers had a slightly lower frequency in the intermediate EFL learners' data, a deeper analysis indicates that the intermediate learners used a restricted set of this category in comparison with the advanced learners. The analysis of the occurrences of the inferential markers in the learners' essays is presented in Table 5.

The analysis reveals that the intermediate and the advanced learners relied heavily on the DMs '*so (that)*' and '*because (of)*' to signal a relationship of inference between discourse segments. This result is in line with the research conducted by Vickov and Djujunić (2011, p.270) who observed that these markers are the most frequently employed inferential markers by EFL learners. In spite of the overreliance on '*so (that)*' and '*because (of)*', the advanced learners employed relatively a varied set of inferential markers in contrast to the intermediate learners who neglected the use of other markers that are grouped under the inferential category of DMs.

The inferential markers (*as a conclusion, consequently, in conclusion, in this case, since, then, therefore and thus*) occurred in the advanced learners' essays, whereas the taxonomy of inferential markers used by the intermediate learners only included '*so (that)*' and '*because (of)*'. Similarly, the results of the study conducted by Asassfeh, et al., (2013) reveal that the DMs '*because*' and '*so*' represent 93% of the inferential markers employed in the intermediate students' essays. Examples (6-7-8) represent the use of inferential markers by the advanced learners.

(6) One of the most common problems facing students is the university poor management and lack of proper communication between departments and between different sections. *Consequently*, students fall victims of such shortcomings. (Advanced)

(7) The number of professors does not suffice to cover students' needs, *therefore* students may have to content themselves with unqualified professors. (Advanced)

(8) *As a conclusion*, students find that problems are deep and it would take time to change them. (Advanced)

5.3.4. The variety of contrastive markers

The least frequently employed category of DMs in the intermediate learners' written data was the contrastive markers. This category of DMs signals a relationship of contrast between adjacent discourse segments. Table 6 presents the occurrences of the contrastive markers in expository essays written by the advanced and intermediate learners.

The results reveal that the DM '*but*' accounted for a ratio of 92% of the entire set of contrastive markers used by the intermediate EFL learners. The extreme reliance on the DM '*but*' is reported by Martinez (2004), Vickov and Djujunić (2011) and Asassfeh, et al., (2013). The contrastive markers (*but, on the other hand and while*) constituted the entire set of contrastive DMs in the intermediate learners' data. Example (9) illustrates the use of contrastive markers by the intermediate learners.

(9) I am studying in the University of Jordan, I love the university, *but* I'm having some problems... in the end I would like to say that every student has a problem, *but* it's nice to have cooperation between students and teachers. (Intermediate)

The advanced EFL learners, on the other hand, employed a varied set of contrastive DMs in their essays. The contrastive DMs (*but, however* and *instead of*) were the mostly frequently used in the advanced learners' data. Other instances of contrastive markers in the advanced learners' essays include (*although, despite (of), even though, nonetheless, rather, still, though* and *while*).

(10) *Even though* the University of Jordan is considered as the best university in Jordan, its students face many problems. (Advanced)

(11) The University of Jordan has been historically well-respected by its academic achievement. *Nonetheless*, there are many problems abstracting the path of success. (Advanced)

5.3.5. The variety of spoken markers

Spoken DMs generally serve the functions of facilitating closeness between participants and marking shared knowledge and attitudes. Employing spoken markers in academic essays is, therefore, considered pragmatically inappropriate. Despite the fact that spoken DMs were employed in the advanced and intermediate EFL learners' data, this category of DMs had a slightly higher ratio of use in the intermediate learners' essays. Table 7 presents the number of occurrences of spoken markers in academic essays written by the advanced and intermediate learners.

The analysis reveals that the DMs (*I think* and *in my opinion*) accounted for a ratio of 80.7% of the entire set of the spoken markers used by the intermediate EFL learners. A similar result is reported by Unaldi (2013) who identifies the DMs (*I think* and *in my opinion*) as distinctive features of speech contexts. Accordingly, the researcher conducted a study to investigate the use of these markers in academic essays and found that intermediate EFL learners overused these markers in comparison to native speakers of English. Examples (12-13) include instances of the use of these markers in the intermediate learners' writings.

(12) *I think* my university has a lot of problems such as the services, security and the doctors. *I think* this problem can solve by make deal with company of service. (Intermediate)

(13) *In my opinion* the problem the University of Jordan is racism in the body and some doctors have very hard exams. (Intermediate)

In comparison to the intermediate EFL learners, the advanced learners used a varied set of spoken DMs in their essays. This might be attributed to the fact that the advanced EFL learners are exposed to a more varied set of spoken markers and thus they employed a variety of spoken markers in their essays. The intermediate learners, on the other hand, relied heavily on the DMs (*I think* and *in my opinion*) to compensate for their unfamiliarity with a varied set of spoken markers

The DM '*I think*' was the most frequently employed 'spoken' DM in the advanced learners' data and it accounted for a ratio of 28.6% of the occurrences of spoken markers. Examples of spoken markers that were used only by the advanced learners include (*actually, from my aspect, from my point of view, indeed, like* and *of course*). Examples (14-15) illustrate the use of spoken markers by the advanced EFL learners.

(14) *From my point of view*, I suggest that the academic and administrative staff take course from time to time for enhancing their behavior. (Advanced)

(15) University life includes some unavoidable problems that students might face. *Actually*, it is part of the human life that people encounter some problems. (Advanced)

It should be pointed out, however, that the majority of the spoken markers that were employed in the essays served the function of marking the attitude of the participants towards the propositional contents of the sentences that host them. As mentioned previously, the participants in the study were asked to write expository essays in which they express their opinions on problems they face at their university. Writing essays that express personal opinions might require the use of DMs that signal the participants' opinions and might account for the occurrences of the spoken markers that perform this function.

5.4. Syntactic categories

The DMs that are analyzed in the present study are drawn from seven syntactic categories, namely, coordinate conjunctions, subordinate conjunctions, prepositions, prepositional phrases, adverbials, clauses and interjections.

Table 8 presents the frequency of the syntactic categories of the DMs that are employed in the subjects' expository essays. As shown in Table 8, the syntactic category of coordinate conjunctions (42.3%) was the most frequent source of DMs in the present study, followed by adverbials (23.0%), subordinate conjunctions (16.3%), prepositional phrases (12.4%), clauses (4.1%) then prepositions (0.9%) and interjections (0.9%). Discourse markers which are drawn from the coordinate conjunctions (*but*, *and*, *or*) had a higher percentage of use in the intermediate learners' data. The intermediate learners' extreme over-reliance on the elaborative marker '*and*' and the contrastive marker '*but*' might account for the fact that coordinate conjunctions constituted a ratio of (54.7%) of the entire set of the syntactic categories that were employed by these learners. Djigunović and Vikov (2011, p.273) attribute the over-reliance on these markers to the fact that they "are very simple in their orthographic and phonological structure, and are semantically unambiguous, which makes them easy to both acquire and use."

The advanced learners (16.1%) and the intermediate learners (16.5%) had comparable percentages of DMs which are drawn from subordinate conjunctions. A deeper analysis indicates that the intermediate learners relied heavily on (*so* and *because*) to represent this syntactic category of DMs. The advanced learners, on the other hand, employed a more varied set of the DMs that are drawn from subordinate conjunctions (e.g. *although*, *even though*, *while*, *since*).

The DMs that belong to the adverbial category were used more frequently by the advanced learners. Temporal markers (e.g. *first*, *eventually* and *finally*) are drawn from this category and they had a higher percentage of use in the advanced learners' essays. In addition to the temporal markers, the advanced learners employed other markers that belong to the adverbial category more frequently than the intermediate learners (e.g. *consequently*, *still*, *therefore*, *moreover*, *nonetheless* and *however*).

Moreover, the syntactic categories of prepositions and prepositional phrases had a higher ratio of use by the advanced EFL learners. The advanced learners used more frequently a varied set of DMs that belong to these categories (e.g. *for example*, *despite*, *instead of*, *in addition to*, *in other words* and *in conclusion*). Finally, interjections and clauses are the sources of the majority of spoken markers (e.g. *Oh* and *I think*). In accordance with the fact that spoken markers were used more frequently by the intermediate learners, the syntactic categories that are the sources of these markers had a higher percentage of use in the intermediate learners' data.

5.5. Sentence position

Discourse markers may appear sentence initially, medially or finally. Nonetheless, there were no instances of DMs that occur in sentence-final position in the EFL learners' data. The positions that DMs occupied in essays written by the intermediate and advanced EFL learners are presented in Table 9.

The frequent employment of DMs in sentence-medial position by the intermediate and the advanced learners contradicts Schourup (1999), Fraser (1999), Fung (2003) and Muller (2005) who argue that DMs tend typically to occur in sentence-initial position. The tendency of DMs to appear initially is attributed to the fact that DMs serve the function of guiding readers towards eliciting the intended connections between discourse segments early before the possibility of misinterpreting these connections (Schourup 1999: 233).

The analysis also reveals that the intermediate learners (71.1%) employed DMs in sentence-medial position more frequently than the advanced learners (59.9%). This might stem from the fact that the intermediate learners overused the DMs that are drawn from coordinate conjunctions. The DMs that belong to this syntactic category (*and*, *but*, *or*) tend to appear sentence-medially. The advanced learners, on the other hand, employed the syntactic categories of adverbials and prepositional phrases as sources of DMs more frequently than the intermediate learners. The DMs that are drawn from these categories tend to occupy sentence-initial position. Table 10 presents the association between the positions that DMs occupy in sentences and the syntactic categories from which these pragmatic expressions are drawn.

Moreover, the tendency of the intermediate learners to employ DMs in sentence-medial position more frequently than the advanced learners might also stem from the fact that the former had a higher percentage of elaborative markers than the latter. In contrast to the Elaborative markers that tend to appear more frequently in sentence-medial position, temporal markers had a higher ratio of use in sentence-initial position. The temporal markers were employed more frequently by the advanced learners who had a higher ratio of using DMs in initial position than the intermediate learners. Table 11 presents the association between the sentence positions and the functional categories of DMs.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the DMs that are employed in expository essays might point to the fact that the use of these devices is affected by EFL learners' proficiency levels. Lower proficiency EFL learners tend to use more restricted and redundant sets of DMs. Lower levels of proficiency might result in restricting the functions that are served by DMs, limiting the syntactic categories from which these markers are drawn and affecting the variety of the positions that they occupy.

7. References

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Table 1: The frequency of DM occurrences in expository writing

Level	Percent
Advanced	50.9%
Intermediate	49.1%

Table 2: The frequency of the functional classes of DMs

	Advanced	Intermediate	Total
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Elaborative	40.60	53.90	47.1
Inferential	18.90	16.70	17.8
Temporal	14.70	11.00	12.9
Contrastive	16.10	6.00	11.1
Spoken	9.70	12.40	11.0

Table 3: The frequency of the elaborative markers

	Advanced	Intermediate
	Percent	Percent
Also	9.10	4.90
And	62.50	89.80
as well as	2.30	0.00
Besides	1.10	0.00
for example	11.40	1.30
Furthermore	2.30	0.00
in addition	1.10	0.90
in addition to	2.30	0.90
in other words	1.10	0.00
Moreover	6.80	0.90
Or	0.00	1.30

Table 4: The frequency of the temporal markers

	Advanced	Intermediate
	Percent	Percent
Eventually	3.10	0.00
Finally	21.90	15.20
First	15.60	2.20
first of all	6.20	0.00
Firstly	3.10	13.00
in the end	0.00	8.70
Now	3.10	0.00
Second	12.50	8.70
Secondly	15.60	28.30
Then	3.10	8.70
Third	3.10	2.20
Thirdly	6.20	13.00
When	6.20	0.00

Table.5: The frequency of the inferential markers

	Advanced	Intermediate
	Percent	Percent
as a conclusion	2.40	0.00
Because	29.30	61.40
because of	7.30	2.90
Consequently	4.90	0.00
in conclusion	2.40	0.00
in this case	2.40	0.00
Since	7.30	0.00
So	17.10	34.30
so that	14.60	1.40
Then	2.40	0.00
Therefore	7.30	0.00
Thus	2.40	0.00

Table 6: The frequency of the contrastive markers

	Advanced	Intermediate
	Percent	Percent
Although	2.90	0.00
But	31.40	92.00
Despite	5.70	0.00
despite of	2.90	0.00
even though	2.90	0.00
However	20.00	0.00
instead of	17.10	0.00
Nonetheless	2.90	0.00
on the other hand	0.00	4.00
Rather	2.90	0.00
Still	2.90	0.00
Though	2.90	0.00
While	5.70	4.00

Table 7: The frequency of the spoken markers

	Advanced	Intermediate
	Percent	Percent
Actually	14.30	0.00
from my aspect	4.80	0.00
from my point of view	14.30	0.00
I think	28.60	36.50
in my opinion	9.50	44.20
in my point of view	0.00	1.90
Indeed	4.80	0.00
it is my view	0.00	3.80
Just	0.00	1.90
let's start	4.80	0.00
Like	9.50	0.00
of course	4.80	0.00
Oh	0.00	3.80
Well	4.80	7.70

Table 8: The frequency of the syntactic categories of DMs

	Advanced	Intermediate	Total
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Coordinate conjunctions	30.40	54.70	42.3
Subordinate conjunctions	16.10	16.50	16.3
Adverbials	32.30	13.40	23.0
Interjections	0.50	1.40	0.9
Clauses	3.20	5.00	4.1
Prepositions	1.80	0.00	0.9
Prepositional phrases	15.70	9.10	12.4

Table 9: The frequency of the sentence positions of DMs

	Advanced	Intermediate
	Percent	Percent
Initial	40.10	28.90
Medial	59.90	71.10

Table 10: The association between the sentence positions and the syntactic categories of DMs

	Sentence-initially	Sentence-medially
	Percent	Percent
Coordinate conjunction	7.10	60.90
Subordinate conjunction	9.50	19.90
Adverbial	52.90	7.20
Interjections	2.70	0.00
Clause	7.10	2.50
Preposition	1.40	0.70
Prepositional phrase	19.30	8.80

Table 11: The association between the sentence positions and the functional categories of DMs

	Sentence-initially	Sentence-medially
	Percent	Percent
Elaborative	25.10	58.80
Inferential	11.50	21.10
Temporal	33.20	2.20
Contrastive	11.90	10.80
Spoken	18.30	7.20