Discourse Markers Acquisition in the Iranian Students Writings at Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Discourse markers (DMs) are the linguistic elements that represent different relations and show the coherence between units of talk. Most of the research in the area of DMs has focused on conversations rather than essays. As it is axiomatic, all students in Iran from the primary school to high-school and universities are speaking and writing in their standard language, i.e. Farsi. In fact Farsi is the first language (L1) of almost all the students in Iran. In order to understand Iranian students' ability in using DMs in their essays in L1, a sample of 80 bilingual and monolingual students were selected. Frasers' (1999) classification used to identify DMs in the students' writings. The learners were supposed to write essays of about 300 words on different topics. The subjects of compositions were the same for all of the learners. Findings showed that students employed DMs with different degrees of occurrence. Elaborative markers were the most frequently used, followed by inferential, contrastive, causative, and topic relating markers. Also, the use of some DMs varied with proficiency level and some others remained constant across proficiency level.

Keywords: discourse markers; essay; bilinguals; monolinguals

1. Introduction

While communicating, speakers utilize grammatical, paralinguistic, and nonverbal factors signaling relationships among parts of speech which are termed discourse markers (DMs) (Schiffrin, 1987). Verbal DMs are factors making sound speech systems and building social communication between the members at various stages. Based on Fraser (1996), DMs are pragmatic markers commenting on the following statement. In other words, they lead an utterance and show how the speaker conveys its primary note to link to the prior discourse. They are likely to happen chiefly in improvised oral speech (Ostman, 1982).

The topic of DMs has received significant attention in the last few decades. Most studies on DMs has emphasized the dynamics of everyday communication and investigated how adults utilize DMs in everyday conversation (Fraser, 1996; Louwrese & Mitchell, 2003; Schiffrine, 1987; Wierzbicka, 2002). Moreover, a variety of texts was investigated. They involve oral samples likes conversational samples (Koike, 1998; Labov, 1972; Norrick, 2001), re-told stories (Norrick, 1998), and mind remembers novels or obtained accounts (Chafe, 1980; Stromqvist & Verhoeven, 2004).

Writing is an important tool, probably the most efficient second language (L2) learning tool available for learning a language (Wolff, 2000, as cited in O'Brian, 2004). As Richards and Renandy (2002) state, one of the most difficult skills for L2 learners to master is the writing skill, with its difficulty being in generating and organizing ideas as well as translating those ideas into a readable text. In writing, native speakers use different markers to create cohesion. DMs are one of these connectors. Since the prior sixteen years, there has been an increasing matter in the technical situation of

DMs, concentrating on what they are, what they intend, and what purposes they play in documents. Based on Fraser (1999), DMs are connections, adverbs, and prepositional expressions joining two clauses or sentences to each other. Redeker (1991) said that DMs link adjoining decisions as well as the current statement with its urgent context.

Discourse analysis covers many sub-branches such as oral, written, and oral face-to-face discourse. Compositions or essays are types of discourse with their own structural conventions and interactional relevance. The area of writing and its connection with DMs is a neglected and understudied area in the field of discourse analysis. The concept of DMs has been mostly studied in the oral conversations like narratives. A few studies have demonstrated that DMs have contrasting functions in narratives in comparison with conversations. For instance, Norrick (2001) argued that DMs play individual, organizational purposes in oral stories. These happen because of the different structural and persistent practices of oral narratives which are pretty separated from the turn-by-turn change in spoken communication.

Koike (1996), within the interpretation of personal action narrations of eight Spanish lecturers, reported that when expressions function as DMs in oral stories, they can take on special functions and meanings. Moreover, Koike claimed that the multi-functional ability of the adverbial marker helps the listener in processing information, which, in turn, contributes to the overall success of the oral narrative. Looking at the DMs from the viewpoint of essay or composition writing, various studies have been conducted (Connor, 1984; Field & Yip, 1992; Karasi, 1994; Norment, 1994; Johnson, 1992; Steffensen and Intraprawat, 1995; Cheng and Steffensen, 1996). As an instance, Connor (1984) analyzed six articles written by English native and ESL pupils following Halliday and Hasan's (1976) structure. Field and Yip (1992) examined 67 pupils from Hong Kong with 29 Australian scholars regarding writing a contentious article. Johnson (1992) investigated 20 informative articles in Malay, twenty articles in English by the identical team of Malay pupils, and twenty articles in English by native talkers. Karasi (1994) investigated 135 expository articles by Singaporean secondary scholars. Norment (1994) scrutinized thirty Chinese scholars communicating in Chinese and English on both descriptive and historical issues following Halliday and Hasan's (1976) structure. Intraprawat and Steffensen (1995) examined the DMs in powerful articles by ESL university scholars. Eventually, Steffensen and Cheng (1996) examined texts of scholars who worked on the propositional content of their articles and were prepared to utilize a process plan, and scholars who concentrated on the pragmatic functions of DMs by enjoying direct teaching of DMs.

The overall outcomes of these investigations have exposed that during conjuncts were used, the lexical attachment was employed to some extent by native lecturers (Johns, 1984). Furthermore, it has been discovered that non-native pupils of English applied more connections related to Australian seniors, and they usually put all coincidences at the onset of the statement (Field & Yip, 1992). Besides, it has been exposed that there is a contrast among text types regarding the application of cohesive materials (Norment, 1994). Also, the variations among articles that got good grades and articles that got lower grades have been determined to be linked to the number of words, T-units, and density of DMs (Intraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). Ultimately, it has been shown that pupils are getting direct guidance on DMs handled them more efficiently, converted to more sensitive to their readers' requirements, and, so, made global adjustments that developed their documents (Steffensen & Cheng, 1996).

Jalilifar (2008), following to Fraser's (1999) DMs taxonomy, tried DMs in identifying stories of ninety junior and senior Iranian EFL pupils. Conclusions confirmed that elaborative markers were the most commonly used, followed by probable, contrastive, causative, and material relating markers. A direct and positive correlation was further observed within the quality of the articles and the number of DMs employed. Using an eight-million-word corpus of fiction, news, and academic talked and written English, Bell (2010) examined the contrastive DMs of 'nevertheless,' 'yet,' and 'still.' The sequences reported that these markers involved a clone of scope with 'nevertheless' having the most restricted range and while 'yet' having the most range. Variability of scope, according to Bell (2010), refers to "the extent to which a marker instructs the hearer/analyst to search the previous discourse or even go beyond the discourse to search their encyclopedic knowledge for a potential effect".

To provide insight into the use different types of DMs, based on the subcategory of Fraser's (1999) taxonomy, in the writings of Persian-speaking students at different proficiency levels, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1) What is the frequency of DMs in the writings of Iranian students?
2) Is there any obvious contrast in the frequency of DMs and students' proficiency level?

2. Technical Structure of the Research

This research made based on Fraser's (1999) DMs taxonomy classifications. The purpose of choosing this taxonomy, as exposed to comparable taxonomies, was that this structure is principally utilized for the analysis of written discussion and assumed to be the most extensive analysis of written speech. Based on Fraser (1999), DMs are practical forms and

lexical phrases that drawn originally from the syntactic types of connections, adverbials, and prepositional expressions. Fraser's (1999) taxonomy comprises six principal subcategories. These subclasses are displayed beneath:

Conclusive, Reason, Elaborative Contrastive, Inferential, and Exemplifiers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Partners

The first sample includes 80 Iranian native students speaking Farsi as standard language. They were at different proficiency level, i.e. 35 were primary school students and 45 were secondary school students. The students were randomly selected from two female primary and secondary schools who were within age range of 9 to 13. They took part in this study with the aim of an essay writing course from two primary and secondary schools in Ahvaz, Iran. The participants had all passed pre-requisite grammar courses in paragraph writing in their own native language. Since different proficiency levels were the aim of this study, there was no need to homogenize the learners.

3.2 Materials and device

The elements employed in this research involves essays written by the partners of the research. Completely, the scholars wrote an essay on the following topic:

Write about one of your memorable memories in your life?
The participants were supposed to write in their L1, that is, Farsi.

3.3 Procedure

As it is common in Iran, all the students are taught writing in their native language from grade 1 of the primary school. The writing course started with writing simple sentences from the first grade and continued with writing paragraphs in the next grades including secondary and high-school levels. In fact, almost all students within the age range of 8 to 18 learn to write paragraphs from simple descriptive writings in lower grades to argumentative writings in higher grades. Having randomly selected learners from different classrooms in terms of proficiency level, the researchers presented the topic of writing to all the participants in their own schools. The reason was that the researcher could control for the testing environment facet as one of the facets that can affect learners' performance (Backman, 2007). If the place of testing or assessment be familiar to the students, then they feel comfortable and this can prevent them from expressing anxiety and stress. Another point worth mentioning is the variable of gender. The researcher decided to choose single-sex students, i.e. all-female students, in order to control the variable of gender.

Following, each partner was expected to write articles of within 200- 300 words regarding the selected issue. Next, the recorded articles were gathered, examined, and investigated according to the decided pattern. This manner took about 45 minutes.

The essays were reviewed by one of the researchers in this investigation concerning two features. Head, the DMs employed in the articles were recorded for next examination. Moreover, the articles were arranged on their quality. To assure the authenticity of the review, 25 percent of the articles were marked by another researcher in the existing research as well as an expert high-school instructor. Next, the inter-rater loyalty was estimated by Cronbach's Alpha code. The obtained loyalty ratio was 0.76, which is an adequate loyalty range.

3.4 Data analysis

The frequency of the overall DMs applied in each proficiency stage determined to answer the initial issue regarding the repetition of the DMs use. Then, the repetitions were transformed to rates to have a precise figure of the individual DMs use in each ability stage. Next, the DMs categorized with respect to the class of the cohesive means they related to them. This time the average rates of the DMs use relating to various classes determined. It enabled the researchers to statistically analyze the performance of various kinds of DMs across various skill stages. Eventually, to examine the application of these classes across the 2 proficiency levels, the Chi-square analysis was used.

4. Results

4.1 Overall use of individual DMs in essays

As discussed earlier, the number of unique DMs employed in the 2 article classes recorded and converted to repetitions. Table 1 introduces the frequency and percentage of DMs in the compositions written in L1 by Iranian learners.

Table 1. Repetitions and the rates of the individual DMs application on the entire essays.

DMs	Reason	Elaborative	Contrastive	Inferential	Exemplifiers
Frequency	178	823	96	423	138
Percentage	10%	47%	5%	24%	8%

Around 1754 events of various kinds of DM models were discovered in the whole essays without considering the proficiency level. Overall, from the total 6 different forms of DMs, the repetitions and rates of elaborative DMs was more than other kinds of DMs (47%). Moreover, it can be observed that the overall frequency of the application of conclusive and contrastive markers are equal in frequency (6%), which are the lowest types of DMS. Regarding the rank order of the use of individual DMs, inferential and exemplifiers followed elaborative DMs.

4.2 Use of various kinds of DMs across proficiency level

Scrutinizing of different types of DMs and their distribution in the writings of students at different proficiency levels, the researcher collected the following data.

Table 2. Repetitions and the rates of the individual DMs application in terms of levels.

DMs	Conclusive		Reason		Elaborative		Contrastive		Inferential		Exemplifiers	
Levels	L	H	L	H	L	H	L	H	L	H	L	H
Frequency	27	69	69	109	504	319	41	55	198	225	36	102
Percent	2%	4%	4%	6%	29%	18%	2%	3%	11%	13%	2%	6%

As represented in the table, elaborative discourse marker is higher in frequency among low level students' writing in comparison with higher level ones. The two DMs used with the lowest frequency among low level students were conclusive (27) and exemplifiers (36), respectively.

This research also attempted to investigate whether there are differences in using DMs between two groups of learners across proficiency levels. In so doing, Chi-square test was used. Table 3 shows students' use of DMs in two groups.

Table 3. Primary and Secondary Students Use of Discourse Markers

	Discourse Markers
Primary level students	875 (49.89%)
Secondary level students	879 (50.11%)
Total	1754

The total amount of DMs was 1754 in students' writing. Out of 1754 DMs, a total of 875 (49.89%) were used by primary level students, and 879 (50.11%) were used by secondary level students (see Table 3). A comparison between primary and secondary level students showed that there was a few contrast among the two classes. In order to see whether the difference is significant, a chi-square test was used (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of Chi square

	Discourse Markers
Chi-Square	.009[a]
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.924

As revealed in the table above, there is no significant difference between the two groups regarding the use of DMs, χ^2 = 0.009, df=1, p =0.924. Since the significant level is more than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted. It can be concluded that the primary and secondary level students use DMs to the same extent. This difference is illustrated in figure 1.
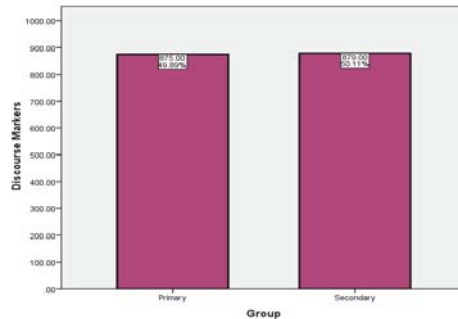

Figure 1. Use of discourse markers by groups

5. Conclusion

The present study tried to investigate the rate and frequency of different types of DMs in the compositions written by Iranian primary and secondary school students. Moreover, this research wanted to survey existence of any differences between students' use of DMs in their writings composed in L1 across proficiency level. To this end, DMs used in the writings of Iranian student across proficiency level analyzed.

The conclusions of the research presented that elaborative DMs were the most repetitive employed DMs in both categories' texts. The percentage and ratio of these markers application (47%) turned out to be much larger than those of the other ones. These findings are in agreement with those of other investigations revealing that elaborative DMs are the most commonly employed DMs (Jalilifar, 2008; Johnson,1992). It might mean that the use of elaborative DMs is more intimately linked to high proficiency level rather than low one. A close look at the students' essays represented that the most frequently employed elaborative DMs in both groups' texts were 'also' and 'and' in comparison with 'or' and 'moreover'.

The reason for the extensive coverage of elaborative markers may also be due to the fact that both groups intended to explain or elaborate their own ideas in general. The findings may also implicitly show that when Iranian pupils want to write about a topic, they try to include a large amount of ideas preferably than developing on and presenting specific ideas. It deduced to applying more elaborative DMs than the other kinds.

The findings are further in accordance with the analysis by Zhang (2000), Chang (2000), and Martinez (2004). They surveyed the application of DMs in different types of writings including expository and argumentative texts. For example, Chang (2000) investigated of cohesion represented more applied of additive markers like 'besides', 'in addition' and 'also'. The difference between the present study and that of Chang can be the language. That is, while the present study tried to investigate DMs in Iranian texts written in students' L1, Chang studied the use of cohesive marks by English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Essentially Murray (1990) disputed, it is further expedient that EFL pupils' widespread application of elaborative labels is because they are disclosed to such markers in their original language and in English articles or books that they studied.

One related study that has been done in the context of Iran on participants' L1 is Mehrabi Sari's (2014) study. This research has been done in oral discourse rather than written one. Also, one difference between the present study and the so-called study is the variables. That is, this study's main variable is proficiency level; however, Mehrabi Sari's (2014) main variable is age. Mehrabi Sari examined age and its moderating effects on the use of various DMs among pre-school children. The participants of Mehrabi Sari's study were fifteen male and female Iranian monolingual children. The researcher divided them into three age groups. The results showed that the functions of DMs within the oral narrative context did not follow theoretical meaning and usual discourse functions in other contexts. The functions of these markers were just helping the continuance of the narrative procedure. The results showed that the frequency of some DMs changes with age and some others remain without change. In addition, the genre has a direct effect on the type of DM produced. Overall, children behave in a different manner when they are asked to retell a story, as opposed to the time

when they are asked to produce a story.

Furthermore, in terms of EFL context, the present study is in harmony with a number of English research studies such as Greenfield and Dent (1982) as well as Peterson and McCabe (1988). The results of these studies showed that children and even adult are fond of linking their narrative clauses by means of 'and' or elaborative DMs.

Although different studies approved that their results are in line with the results of the present study, further research is needed in the field of native and non-native English writers at different language proficiency levels writing different types of texts to support and confirm the results of this research.

There are some pedagogical implications in this study. The conclusions of this research revealed that the Iranian scholars utilize a broad range of DMs and that they are attracted to applying a specific kind of appropriate elaborative markers like 'and' significantly more than others. It can be claimed that the overuse of 'and' can be a symbol of delicacy on the part of these students in their writings. It means that instructors of these students at both proficiency levels can work more on including the application of DMs to develop utilizing those components in the writings. On the other hand, instructors must increase their pupils' knowledge of textual standards of work and refine them to the application of particular methods and their repetition of application in special kinds of writings.

In addition, the absence of the connection among pupils' proficiency level and their use of DMs can indicate that DMs has not been utilized properly and purposefully by undergraduate EFL students. Therefore, instructors can practice not only on encouraging learners to use different types of cohesive devices such as DMs but also on classifying those markers based on the student' knowledge of the language. They would require increasing the pupils' knowledge of the proper application of individual kinds of DMs and how they can be applied in forming a unified writing.

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