

Integrating Discourse Markers into EFL Instruction: A Preliminary Exploration

Su Chengchieh

School of Foreign Studies, Zhaoqing University, Guangdong, China

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Abstract: Discourse markers are essential elements in both spoken and written English, playing a crucial role in organizing discourse, expressing attitudes, and signaling text structure. Despite their importance in achieving fluency and communication efficiency, the use of discourse markers is often overlooked in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This paper explores the functions and significance of discourse markers in EFL teaching, reviewing existing literature on their use and the challenges learners face in acquiring them. It highlights the insufficiency of current teaching methods and textbooks in addressing discourse markers and offers pedagogical recommendations for integrating them effectively into the EFL curriculum. This paper advocates for a pragmatic approach in teaching discourse markers, supported by appropriate textbook selection and AI-assisted tools to enhance students' understanding and application of discourse markers.

Keywords: Discourse Markers, English Writing, Pedagogical Suggestion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers are words or phrases used in spoken and written language to connect discourse, express attitudes, and signal the structure of a text. They play the role of organizers and interlocutors within a discourse, contributing to coherence and facilitating interaction between speakers. Schiffrin (1987) suggests that the primary function of discourse markers is to "strengthen discourse coherence." Blakemore (1988) views discourse markers as a series of words or phrases that limit the interpretation of discourse through the inferential connections they express. Brinton (1996), while noting the lack of consensus on the terminology and classification of discourse markers, compiles an inventory of thirty-three markers and proposes a broad set of characteristics typical of these words. Jucker and Ziv (1998) summarize four functions of discourse markers: 1) from a textual perspective, they are text-structuring devices, including topic transition signals and turn-taking cues; 2) from a modal perspective, they are modality or attitudinal indicators; 3) from an interactive perspective, they signal speaker-hearer relationships; and 4) from a cognitive perspective, they guide how discourse should be processed, including prompt words and connectors. Fraser (1999) defines discourse markers as a class of lexical expressions primarily from conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that signal a relationship between the interpretations of the segments they introduce and the prior segment. Muller (2005) lists the functions of discourse markers, which include initiating discourse, marking discourse boundaries, serving as fillers or delaying tactics, helping speakers maintain the floor, forming interactions or resonance between speakers and hearers, marking anaphoric and cataphoric references, and marking given or background information. Thornbury and Slade (2006) argue that discourse markers and other interactional signals are crucial to the collaborative organization that takes place in conversation.

Based on the research above, the salient features of discourse markers include: 1) not belonging to any specific part of speech; 2) having a certain phonetic quality; 3) commonly appearing at the beginning of a discourse unit; 4) being syntactically independent; 5) being grammatically optional; 6) lacking a fixed meaning; 7) being colloquial. The diverse functions of discourse markers include: (1) initiating discourse; (2) marking discourse boundaries; (3) anticipating responses or reflections; (4) serving as fillers or delaying tactics in discourse; (5) helping speakers maintain their turn; (6) fostering positive interaction between speakers and listeners; (7) marking anaphoric and cataphoric references; (8) marking foreground or background information.

In the context of globalization, where English serves as a primary language for international communication, fluency and accuracy are crucial for non-native speakers. Discourse markers, as an essential component of oral communication, significantly impact the naturalness and effectiveness of communication. However, teachers and learners often neglect the use of discourse markers in English learning, which limits their communicative abilities. The teaching of discourse markers is vital for developing students' linguistic communicative skills. It not only helps students better understand and produce discourse but also enhances their language sensitivity and fluency, thereby improving their practical language application abilities. Building on previous research, this article reviews the study of discourse markers in teaching, analyzes potential issues learners may encounter in learning or using discourse markers, and discusses how to effectively integrate the teaching of discourse markers in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction to enhance students' pragmatic abilities and communication efficiency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on discourse markers in the field of teaching has expanded to include several critical areas: the redefinition of teaching philosophies and the roles educators play, an examination of language use among non-native English teachers and students, and the exploration of how discourse markers affect comprehension. Additionally, this research delves into the frequency and functions of discourse markers in communication, the way non-native English teachers employ these markers in their teaching practices, and the correlation between discourse marker usage and language proficiency among EFL students. Furthermore, the influence of gender and proficiency levels on the use of discourse markers is also a significant area of study within this field.

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) proposed a discourse and context-based perspective on language teaching and learning, redefining the roles of teachers, learners, and teaching materials. Llorca (2005) compiled research conducted in various English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, highlighting the language used by non-native English-speaking teachers and students. Chaudron and Richards (1986) investigated the comprehension of university lectures by non-native speakers of English living and studying in the United States, focusing on the role of discourse markers. Hellerman and Vergun (2007) examined the frequency of use and some functions of three specific discourse markers (*well*, *you know*, and *like*) in classroom interactions and home interviews.

Chapetón Castro (2009) delved into the role of discourse markers in EFL classroom interactions led by non-native English-speaking teachers. Through qualitative analysis of classroom discourse, it was found that discourse markers are frequently used and serve multiple functions, including enhancing discourse coherence and facilitating interpersonal communication. The study concluded that non-native teachers' use of discourse markers could improve lesson structure and classroom interaction, indicating a need for greater awareness and integration of discourse markers in EFL teaching practices. Al-Shammari and Al Qenai (2023) examined the use and functions of discourse markers among EFL students at Kuwait University, with a particular focus on the distinction between high and low proficiency learners. The study revealed that interpersonal discourse markers were the most common, while referential discourse markers were the least used. It was also found that high proficiency learners used discourse markers more effectively, indicating a link between discourse marker usage and speaking proficiency. The study advocates for the inclusion of discourse marker instruction in EFL curricula to enhance students' conversational skills. Ebrahimi and Xodabande (2023) conducted a corpus study to investigate the functions and frequencies of discourse markers in the speech of Iranian EFL teachers and learners, considering variables such as gender and proficiency. Their analysis showed no significant gender differences in the use of discourse markers. However, they found that advanced learners used more interpersonal discourse markers than intermediate learners, with male learners using fewer interpersonal discourse markers at intermediate levels but more at advanced levels.

The studies discussed above have provided valuable insights, but overall, research on discourse markers in educational contexts remains underexplored, and there is room for improvement in the teaching recommendations and strategies proposed for discourse markers. Crucially, scholars have noted that educational materials often lack comprehensive coverage of these markers (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Consequently, EFL students typically use a narrow range of discourse markers and do so with insufficient frequency across various speaking situations (Asik & Cephe, 2013; Götz, 2013).

III. INSUFFICIENCY IN DISCOURSE MARKER INSTRUCTION

Along the lines of Asik and Cephe (2013), Al-Shammari and Al Qenai (2023), Ebrahimi and Xodabande (2023), Namaziandost et al. (2019) and Götz (2013), the instruction of discourse markers is often overlooked, leading to students' inadequate use in practical communication in EFL instruction. The coverage of discourse markers in textbooks is insufficient, and the teaching input regarding these markers is lacking in both systematic and diversity. There is also negative transfer from the students' native languages, which can adversely affect learning outcomes.

The primary reason for students' difficulties in acquiring discourse markers is the lack of input. Classroom teaching methods and content contribute to the unsuccessful acquisition of these markers. Traditional teaching methods, often based on the grammar-translation approach, neglect the natural expression in English. Due to unclear representation and definition of discourse markers, influenced by traditional exam-oriented education, both teachers and students do not place enough emphasis on them. Teachers may simply introduce their functions and relationships, without delving into the full range of functions and usages from a linguistic perspective, at most listing various discourse markers for student recognition. Vivality, due to the syntactic independence of discourse markers, omitting them does not significantly affect the meaning of a sentence, and therefore, they may be mistakenly perceived as non-essential in form. However, they play an important role in communication and interpersonal interaction, and their omission may make discourse appear unnatural, awkward, incoherent, impolite, or authoritative. Additionally, there is a lack of output opportunities. In foreign language learning, there is a scarcity of opportunities to use the genuine language and a lack of native speakers as interlocutors. Pursuing accuracy in foreign language use, both teachers and students often overlook discourse markers. In writing, influenced by exam-oriented education, students tend to apply writing templates, and thus neglecting discourse markers.

Moreover, most textbooks seldom specifically address discourse markers in depth. Traditional English teaching focuses on grammar rules and vocabulary acquisition, aiming to enhance students' language skills at the sentence level while often neglecting coherence at the discourse level. Many textbook designs target the passing of standardized tests, which tend to concentrate on grammar, vocabulary, and single-sentence comprehension, with little emphasis on the practical use of discourse markers. Discourse markers serve multiple functions, such as organizing discourse, shifting topics, and expressing attitudes. Their use is often influenced by context, style, and cultural background, adding to the complexity of teaching and textbook writing. Since the use of discourse markers typically does not directly affect grammatical correctness or sentence meaning, they are easily overlooked in instruction.

In addition, a substantial body of research indicates that negative transfer from the mother tongue is a significant contributor to fossilization in EFL learners. In foreign language teaching, thinking and processing in one's native language often result in negative transfer. Even with explicit instruction and frequent reminders, students may consciously use discourse markers to organize their discourse and maintain coherence, but their usage often appears mechanical. Learners may also misuse these markers. For instance, the discourse marker *you know* is typically used with specific intonation to express confirmation, emphasis, or to soften the tone. However, non-native speakers may struggle to grasp its nuanced functions, which can affect the naturalness of their speech. Since *you know* is sometimes employed to seek confirmation, non-native speakers might mistakenly interpret it as a question, whereas it is more commonly used as a discourse marker to structure language and guide the listener. For example, consider the following dialogue:

Speaker: Why are you late?

Listener: You know, because I missed the bus.

Here, *you know* functions as a filler that softens the tone rather than serving as a question. Misinterpreting such usage can hinder effective communication and lead to unnatural speech patterns.

IV. PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section is divided into three key parts. First, we will discuss effective teaching methods for discourse markers, focusing on their pragmatic functions. Second, we will explore the role of appropriate textbook selection, emphasizing the need for materials that provide adequate exposure to discourse markers. Finally, we will highlight the potential for AI-assisted learning, showing how technology can enhance students' understanding and use of discourse markers in real-life contexts.

A. Effective Teaching of Discourse Markers

Teachers can approach the teaching of discourse markers from a pragmatic perspective, explaining to students that discourse markers have at least three key functions and types, in light of Schiffrin (1987), Redeker (1991), Fraser (1999), and Blackmore (2002):

(1) Cohesion Function: Discourse markers help organize discourse, maintain coherence, and link different chunks of speech together in a meaningful way. Common examples include *well, you know, anyway, I mean, you see, as I said*, etc.

(2) Interactional Function: Discourse markers serve to draw the listener's attention, signal turn-taking in conversation, assist in feedback, maintain the flow of discourse, and regulate the relationship between the interlocutors. Markers such as *well, ok, you know, perhaps, I mean* fulfill this role.

(3) Metalinguistic Function: Discourse markers indicate the speaker's attitude or emotions toward the content of the discourse. They can sometimes function to hedge or soften the message, maintain politeness, and protect the speaker's face. Examples include *well, I think, sort of, kind of, perhaps, probably*, etc.

After introducing these three functions of discourse markers, teachers can guide students to effectively learn and internalize them. For example, a discourse marker can be used to introduce a new question, thereby attracting students' attention and encouraging critical thinking. When transitioning to new teaching content, teachers can use discourse markers to demonstrate their cohesion function. During feedback and commentary stages, teachers can also employ discourse markers for clarification and evaluation. By enhancing students' awareness of the interactional function of discourse markers in foreign language classroom activities, teachers can consciously guide students to recognize and appropriately apply these markers. Furthermore, for students who omit discourse markers, teachers can actively use classroom language to direct attention to their function. Through self-correction and mutual correction between teachers and students, learners can acquire the ability to use discourse markers effectively. Teachers can also use the interactional function of discourse markers to alert students that certain inappropriate language may lead to negative consequences, serving as a warning or advice. For example:

A: So, the meeting is at 3 p.m., right?

B: Well, actually, it's at 2 p.m.

Regarding classroom input, teachers can incorporate discourse markers into oral, listening, reading and writing activities. Through explanations and practice, students can learn authentic English expressions. Additionally, teachers can aim to help students use discourse markers effectively to infer meaning, predict discourse development, and interpret the speaker's attitude. For example:

A: Do you think she is the right person for the job?

B: In fact, she is the most experienced candidate we have.

Here, *in fact* emphasizes the speaker's intention. Adding the discourse marker *in fact* not only emphasizes the communicative information but also highlights the speaker's personal attitude. Since discourse markers play a significant role in focusing information, predicting discourse, and expressing attitudes, understanding and learning their pragmatic functions has substantial communicative value.

Crucially, teachers can effectively incorporate the teaching of discourse markers into daily instruction by creating rich contexts and providing authentic materials. This approach allows students to experience and understand the functions and uses of discourse markers in real-life language use. Teachers can design targeted activities, such as role plays and situational dialogues, based on students' specific needs to enhance their ability to use discourse markers. Additionally, authentic language materials like movies, TV shows, podcasts, and TED talks can be utilized to demonstrate the natural use of discourse markers. It is beneficial to encourage students to incorporate them into their spoken expression, whether in speeches, presentations, or everyday conversations. In writing tasks, students should also be encouraged to use discourse markers to improve the coherence and logical flow of their writing. However, teachers should note that some discourse markers, such as *you know*, are not appropriate for formal writing and should be addressed during instruction. Teachers can further emphasize the cultural and contextual sensitivity of discourse markers in the classroom, highlighting these linguistic

features to help students understand which discourse markers are appropriate for formal and informal settings. To enhance students' learning efficiency, teachers can first model the effective use of discourse markers in natural contexts, then scaffold students' learning by providing guided practice. For instance, in a listening exercise, teachers can pause and highlight the use of markers like *well* or *in fact*, explaining their role before asking students to practice similar usage in their speaking or writing. Given the role of cultural context in discourse marker usage, teachers can introduce examples from different English-speaking cultures. By contrasting the use of markers in formal and informal settings, students can better understand their pragmatic and stylistic nuances. Evaluation of students' mastery of discourse markers can be carried out through oral tests and classroom performance, ensuring both the objectivity and effectiveness of the teaching outcomes.

B. Appropriate Textbooks

The textbooks chosen by teachers should not only include a sufficient number of logical and communicative discourse markers but also feature expressions of discourse markers that are typical in nature. Typical discourse markers refer to the ones that are syntactically independent, pragmatically appropriate in specific contexts, and commonly used in spoken language. Teachers can select simple, vivid, natural, and authentic communicative discourse markers, while increasing the proportion of meaningless fillers, speech act markers, and topic-related discourse markers. In terms of textbook annotations, the pragmatic aspects of discourse markers should also be explained and emphasized. For example, multiple example sentences can be provided in annotations to explain the various meanings and uses of a particular discourse marker. Additionally, it is recommended to develop graded content for teaching discourse markers. At the beginner level, simple and commonly used markers like *ok*, *maybe* can be introduced, while at the advanced level, more functionally diverse markers like *you know*, *well* can be taught. Textbooks can further provide examples of discourse marker usage across different cultures to help students understand and flexibly apply them.

C. AI-Assisted Learning

AI can provide personalized learning resources and exercises based on students' learning history and performance, helping them focus on their weaknesses. By using Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology, AI can analyze students' use of discourse markers in spoken or written language, providing feedback and suggestions to help them improve. Additionally, AI can create simulated dialogue environments where students can practice using discourse markers, allowing them to engage in virtual conversations that mimic real-life situations and enhance their practical application skills. AI, combined with speech recognition technology, can analyze students' pronunciation and language flow, offering immediate and detailed feedback and suggestions for improvement, helping students identify and correct errors, and ensuring the correct use of discourse markers. Teachers can also integrate AI-assisted teaching into the classroom, providing students with realistic and timely practice opportunities.

V. CONCLUSION

Discourse markers are integral to improving communication effectiveness and fluency in EFL learners, yet they are often neglected in traditional teaching methods. To address this gap, it is vital to incorporate the teaching of discourse markers in a more systematic and contextually rich manner. Teachers should focus on the pragmatic functions of discourse markers, providing ample input through authentic materials and activities that reflect real-life language use. Textbooks should include a broader range of discourse markers, emphasizing their cultural and pragmatic aspects. Furthermore, AI-assisted learning tools hold great potential in providing personalized feedback and fostering the practical use of discourse markers. AI provides dynamic, personalized, and context-sensitive learning opportunities in learning discourse markers. By enhancing students' awareness and application of discourse markers, teachers can significantly improve learners' communicative competence and fluency in English.

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