Shiraz University
International Division

M.A. Thesis in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language(TEFL)

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN USING DISCOURSE MARKERS AND THE QUALITY OF EXPOSITORY AND ARGUMENTATIVE ACADEMIC WRITING OF IRANIAN ENGLISH MAJORS

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September 2010

In the Name Of God

IN THE NAME OF GOD

Declaration Letter

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THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (M.A.)

IN
ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY

INTERNATIOAL DIVISION

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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DEDICATED TO:

My Family

For Their Love and Support

Acknowledgments

I thank the Almighty God who helped me to accomplish my goal.

I express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Mona Hosseini Sarvari, for her esteemed supervision, incessant support, inspiration and constructive criticism throughout my project work.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Iranpoor and Dr. Jarrahpour, who accepted to read the thesis and for their constructive suggestions and comments regarding of this dissertation.

Finally, I would also express my deep sense of gratitude to my parents and family members for their encouragement and support throughout, which always inspired me.

Abstract

On the Relationship between using Discourse Markers and the Quality Of Expository and Argumentative Academic Writing of Iranian English Majors

By
Mahsa Khojastehband

The aim of the present study was to investigate the frequency and the type of discourse markers used in the argumentative and expository writings of Iranian EFL learners and the differences between these text features in the two essay genres. The study also aimed at examining the influence of the use of discourse markers on the participants' writing quality. To this end the discourse markers used in two essays (an argumentative and an expository) written by the participants of the study were analyzed. The results indicated a hierarchy of use of discourse markers in both essay types with elaborative markers (mainly "and") the most frequently connectors used in both essay types. Next came contrastive and inferential markers; reason, exemplifier, and conclusive markers, respectively, were the least frequently used connectors. The results, moreover, indicated that, on the whole, the mean of discourse marker use was significantly higher in argumentative essays than in expository essays. As for the individual categories, contrastive and conclusive markers were used more frequently in argumentative than in expository essays. The results, nonetheless, showed that the use of discourse markers cannot be a significant predictor of the writing quality in argumentative and expository compositions of Iranian undergraduate EFL students.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.0. Introduction

The present chapter incorporates five parts. The first is preliminaries. The second part introduces the theoretical framework of the study. In the third part the objectives of the present study are presented. The fourth part describes the context and setting of the study, and in the last part, the significance of the study is discussed.

1.1. Preliminaries

Nowadays, with the advent and rapid expansion of the use of the internet bringing various concerns of the globe together in one large community, comprehensible written English of any kind is becoming vital to any modern person's array of social skills. Since English is recognized as one of the most widely-used languages in the world, intelligible written English is not only a critical business skill, but a generally-used social skill as well. According to Nunan (1991), writing is not only the process the writer uses to put words to paper but also the resulting product of that process. This process and product are also conditioned by the purpose and place of writing (its audience and genre). Writing in a second language is further complicated by issues of proficiency in the target language, first language literacy, and differences in culture and rhetorical approach to the text

(Demiric & Kleiner, 1997). Instruction in writing can effectively improve student proficiency in a number of key areas. With the status of English as an international language and the expansion in the use of English, an increasing number of second language learners are engaged in academic pursuits that require them to write compositions. As such, they would need to get familiar with a variety of different text types and academic research genres to communicate effectively. Moreover, they would need to create paragraphs and texts using certain discourse connectors which make a text coherent. Consequently, this study tries to investigate the use of these discourse markers by undergraduate Iranian EFL learners in expository and argumentative text types. Accordingly, in this chapter a brief overview of the issues related to discourse markers will be presented followed by the significance of the study, the objectives of the study, and the specific research questions related to this study.

1.2. Discourse Markers

One interesting area of investigation in second language writing is to see how discourse markers (DMs, hereafter) are tackled by non-native writers of English in compositions. Theoretically, DMs are a class of verbal and non-verbal devices which provide contextual coordination for ongoing talk (Schiffrin, 1987). They help writers provide writing which is effective and satisfactory.

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 DMs are conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that connect two sentences or clauses together. Redeker (1991) suggests that DMs link not only contiguous sentences, but the current sentence or utterance with its immediate context.

1.3. Discourse markers as procedural devices

Discourse markers are believed to function as procedural devices that help readers learn how to process the resulting contextual effects. Each contextual effect is relevant to a preceding proposition because the readers construct appropriate inferences from the possible assumptions generated.

Based on such a cognitive perspective, the procedural nature of these markers enables the readers to achieve a level of optimal relevance. Thus, linguistic devices such as discourse markers, in addition to signaling thematic relations (Halliday and Hassan, 1976), serve a cognitive function to constrain the potential contextual effects that emerge by limiting and identifying relevant assumptions, and therefore aiding the readers to get to an appropriate interpretation of the communication at hand.

Discourse markers can serve to constrain the degree of relevancy of propositions and thus may be viewed as procedural signals that enable optimum rewards of interpretation at minimum processing costs (Abdollahzadeh, 2009; Sanders and Noordman, 2000; Sperber and Wilson; 1995). This perspective gives connectives a more central role in function which goes beyond Halliday and Hassan's perspective, which is a linguistic perspective. Thus, connectives can be "conceived as procedural instructions for constructing a semantic representation" (Caron, 1997, p. 70). That is, the meaning schemas of linguistic markers help identify the relevant features of context which must be taken into account.

 A great deal of research on discourse markers has been carried out during the past two decades (e.g. Aijmer, 2002; Fraser, 1990; Schiffrin
, 1987; Schourop, 1985). Although other terms such as ''discourse particles,'' ''connectives,'' ''pragmatic expressions'' or ''pragmatic markers'' are preferred by some researchers, the term ''discourse markers'' (DMs) is more commonly employed by researchers who work on English discourse.

1.4. Approaches to discourse markers

In order to understand the function of DMs in language it is necessary to refer to two approaches to DMs: the relevance-theoretic account and the coherence-based approach (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

1.4.1. Coherence theory

Within coherence theory it is assumed that texts are coherent; there is a definable set of coherence relations and the recovery of such coherence relations is essential for comprehension. The function of DMs or "cue phrases", as they are called, is to make such coherence relations explicit (Camiciottoli, 2003; Chung, 2000; Geva, 1992; Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007). According to the cognitive representation of coherence, constructing a coherent representation of a text requires that coherence relations be established between text segments or rather between the cognitive representations that readers have of text segments. For instance, in support of the coherence theory, Sanders and Noordman (2000) focused on the type of coherence relations between segments (e.g., problem-solution vs. list), and the implicit and explicit marking of the relations by means of signaling phrases in expository texts. Both factors were found to have affected faster text processing.

1.4.2. Relevance theory

The relevantist perspective states that speakers interpret information searching for relevance. According to Hyland (2005), connectives contribute essentially to the interpretation process. From this theoretical perspective, connectives are considered signals the speaker/writer uses to guide cooperatively his hearer's/reader's interpretative process. Usually a speaker/writer has a specific interpretation of his utterance in mind and expects the hearer/reader arrive at that interpretation. To arrive at the intended interpretation of an utterance, the hearer/reader must process the

utterance in the right, i.e. the intended context. The selection of context is governed by considerations of optimal relevance. The speaker/writer may have reasons to believe that the hearer/reader will choose the appropriate contextual assumptions and draw the appropriate conclusions without any extra help from him, or he may decide to direct the hearer/reader towards the intended interpretation by making a certain set of assumptions immediately accessible. DMs are one of the linguistic devices the speaker/writer may use to that effect.

Ädel (2006) contends that the essential function of elements like *likewise*, *therefore*, *because*, etc. is to guide the hearer's/reader's interpretation process through the specification of certain properties of the context and the contextual effects. More specifically, these elements constrain the relevant context for the interpretation of an utterance, reinforcing some inferences or eliminating other possible ones and thus help process the information. Having looked at the two accounts above one can notice that there is a striking similarity in the way the relevance theoretic and the coherence based approaches analyze the role of DMs in utterance interpretation. On both accounts, DMs have a constraining function.

For coherence theorists, DMs constrain the relational propositions which express the coherence relations the hearer needs to recover in order to interpret a discourse. For relevance theorists DMs constrain the interpretation process by guiding the hearer towards the intended context and contextual effects. On both the relevance-theoretic account and the coherence-based approach, DMs play a facilitating role. Since DMs facilitate communication, it is logical to suppose that the lack of DMs in an L2, or their inappropriate use could, to a certain degree, hinder successful communication or lead to misunderstanding. L2 students must learn to signal the relations of their utterances to those which precede and follow. Therefore, in terms of communicative competence, L2 learners must

acquire the appropriate use of DMs of the L2. It is plausible to suppose that those nonnative speakers who are competent in the use of the DMs of the L2 will be more successful in interaction (both oral and written) than those who are not.

This study attempts to identify the use of discourse markers in academic argumentative and expository compositions of Iranian university students. It intends to analyze the effect of using DMs on the quality of writing, and to identify some of the features that characterize students' compositions with regard to the choice and use of DMs. The research is based on the premise that the knowledge derived from this investigation will provide insights into the nature of the academic compositions of EFL university students. The investigation of the role of discourse markers in foreign language writing ability continues to be revealing for the better understanding of the nature of foreign language writing.

1.5. Significance of the study

To the best of the researchers' experience, the use of DMs is usually very tentatively attended to in writing classes in the EFL context of Iran. The results of the present study would help shed more light on the importance of DMs and the significant role they play in promoting the quality of writing.

Further, an investigation of the range of the text types which undergraduates are able to write most efficiently can be revealing. In a study on genre and text types, Moore and Morton (1998) examined the written genre and text type requirements of undergraduate and post-graduate students in two Australian universities. They found that the most common written genre was the academic essay. In terms of text types, although EAP students are required to be familiar with different written genres, they also need a high level awareness of the range of text types that