

The Frequency of Macro/Micro Discourse Markers in Iranian EFL Learners' Compositions

Ghasemali Azadi (PhD candidate)

English Department, Isfahan (Korasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

Azizeh Chalak (PhD)

English Department, Isfahan (Korasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate the use of micro and macro discourse markers in the compositions of Iranian EFL students. Compositions were collected from a sample of 150 pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced English students at Pooyesh language school. Belles-Fortuno (2006) taxonomy of discourse markers was used for the analysis of discourse markers in students' writing. The main findings were that students employed a variety of discourse markers with some types used more frequently than others. Micro markers were the most frequently and macro markers the least frequently used markers among pre-intermediate students. Intermediate students made use of both micro and macro markers with almost the same frequency. However, the advanced students employed macro discourse markers with a high frequency and micro discourse markers with a low frequency in the compositions. There are significant differences between the use of discourse markers and the composition quality.

Keywords: *Micro discourse marker, Macro discourse marker, Discourse analysis, Frequency*

1. Introduction

A discourse marker (DM), both in spoken and written discourse, is a relatively syntax-free word or phrase that seemingly expands the text and talk generated by both the speaker and writer. The distinction between verbal and textual DMs is based on the different functions of them. The spoken DMs function as “mnemotechnic devices”, whereas the written DMs have primarily “aesthetic” functions (Zienkowski, Ostman and Verschueren, 2011, p. 113). In spoken discourse, speakers have access to a richer context as they have prosody and phonology as well as nonverbal communication or interaction with external physical objects, whereas in written discourse, texts are autonomous with no inclination of dependency on paralinguistic cues (Belles-Fortuno, 2006, p. 112).

There are four levels in writing: the first one includes handwriting, spelling and punctuation; the second one constitutes sentences, grammar, and word choice; the third one consists of the paragraphs; and the last one embraces the overall organization of the text. Through the last three levels, there exist DMs, both in macro and micro level. DMs in both levels function as signals for tidying the relationship between ideas or information in a discourse.

According to Gerard (2000), macro DMs categorised in topic-markers, topic-shifters, summarizers, amplifiers, relaters, evaluators, qualifiers can be seen in phrases to indicate the overall organization of texts through highlighting major, sequence, and importance of the target information. They are the signals or meta-statements about the major propositions to follow the flow of the discourse in a comprehensive mode. However, micro DMs classified in additional, temporal, causal, contrastive, and consecutive markers can be seen as almost single word to signify link between sentences within the text or which function as linking words for soft flow throughout the text. On the one hand, macro DMs signal a global move and micro DMs show a local move in the text. Accordingly, macro DMs signals significant transitions in the text whereas the micro markers are used as inter-sentential connectors.

Sharndama and Yakuba (2014) describe DMs as the 'glue' that binds together a piece of spoken and written discourse. Therefore, without sufficient DMs in a piece of speaking and writing, a talk and a text would not seem logically constructed and the connections between the different sentences and paragraphs would be illogically outlined. Moreover, DMs guide the listener and the reader to predict the direction of the flow of discourse. Without sufficient DMs in a piece of writing, a text would not seem rationally constructed and the connections between the different sentences and paragraphs would seem fragmented. In other words, solidarity in writing without appropriate and adequate DMs would not be flawlessly stretched.

Moreover, cohesion and coherence premises are two major solidarity principles in writing needed to be presented through the practical use of micro and macro DMs. Coherence involves in features such as the use of deictic, anaphoric and cataphoric elements, logical tense structure, and presuppositions. However, cohesion refers to the ways in which sentences are linked or connected by various linguistic and semantic ties. Cohesion, therefore, is limited to the linguistic markers that help the speaker/writer to build such coherent representations. According to Yehia (2015), "Cohesion emphasizes discourse-as-product, and coherence emphasizes discourse-as-process." Both premises should be strictly pursued by both the EFL teachers and learners whether the students are at pre-intermediate, intermediate, or advanced level of English language classrooms.

In order to meet the requirements of a piece of high quality writing and academic composition with appropriate cohesion and coherence, teachers call for teaching the format, outline, and mechanisms of writing including DMs in a step-by-step and clockwise loop and students need to implement them well in their paragraphs, compositions and essays. Accurate implementation and adequate frequency of DMs have been an issue to be addressed and attended in EFL context. Thus, the type and frequency of DMs should be by and large monitored and explained for possible amendment and development.

2. Literature Review

Literature in relevance to DMs is classified in three groups. The first group studies the use and usage of DMs among native and non-native speakers or writers and compare and contrast the numbers and kinds of DMs to be applied. The second group conducts the research on examining the use of DMs within different genres of writing, such as argumentative vs. expository. The third group researchers investigate the relationship between the use of DMs and the overall English writing quality or writers' language proficiency levels.

Zhang (2000) conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the use of DMs in one hundred and seven expository compositions of Chinese undergraduates. The results statistically showed that the students employed a variety of cohesive devices in their writings with some categories of ties used more frequently than others. However, there was no statistically significant relationship between the frequency of cohesive ties used and the quality of writing. Hinkel (2001) compared the use of a set of cohesive ties in academic compositions written by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) students. The result analysis showed that NNS students significantly use more sentence transitions in comparison with their native speaker counterparts. The study stated that NNS students depend heavily on sentence transitions to tie their sentences together in order to make their texts cohesive.

Castro (2004) analyzed the use of grammatical and lexical cohesive devices in low, mid and high rated essays written by thirty homogenous Pilipino EFL students. Based on the results, there were no significant differences in the total number and type of cohesive devices employed by students at the three levels of language competence. Narita, Sato and Sugiura (2004) looked for the use of twenty five logical connectors in the writings of Japanese students with a high level of English proficiency as well as in the writings of native English speakers in two sub-corpora of the International Corpus of Learners English. Using a quantitative research design and a strict extracting approach for the sentence connectors, the researcher indicated that Japanese EFL students overused logical connectors, especially at the beginning of sentences. The results were attributed to the students' lack of familiarity with the usage of formal contrastive connectors. The findings also revealed that students likely use other semantic equivalents that are already familiar to in the place of some connectors they were not familiar to provide contrastive and comparative information.

Liu and Braine (2005), applying Halliday and Hasan's framework and concept of cohesion, analyzed the use of cohesive devices employed in the argumentative writing of Chinese undergraduate students. The findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between the quality of students' compositions and a higher use of cohesive devices in general and lexical devices, references, and conjunction devices in particular.

Tapper (2005) conducted a study on the use of three types of connectives (adverbial conjuncts, content disjuncts and lexical discourse markers) in argumentative writings of advanced Swedish learners of English and native-speaking American college students. The researcher counted the frequency of connectives per essay and then compared the number of connectives with the writing quality scores of each essay, which were holistically determined with the implication of the Test of Written English (TWE) scoring guide. The comparison revealed no significant correlation between the number of connectives and students' writing scores. However, there was a moderate correlation in the Swedish students' ESL writings and a very low correlation in the American students' writings. Thus, the researcher concluded that "a high frequency of connectives was not found to be an indicator of good writing quality for either group of student writers" (ibid, p. 137).

Jalilifar (2008) focused on the use of DMs in the descriptive writings of college students representing three groups: junior, senior, and graduate students. The findings of this study showed that there is a hierarchy of use of DMs in students' writings whereby elaborative markers were employed in the students' writings more frequently than any other discourse marker categories. Other DMs were in the next hierarchical standing such as inferential, contrastive, causative, and topic-relating markers.

Tan-De Ramos (2010) examined the use of DMs in the descriptive papers written by the college students. Students employed more logical connectives of addition and contrast than any other type of DMs. Additionally; students used more logical connectives of addition, contrast and sequence in their argumentative writing. These findings suggested that ESL learners tend to utilize a particular set of DMs depending on the type of writing assignment. Rahimi (2011), who analyzed and compared the use of DMs in argumentative and expository writings of EFL Iranian university students and found that students most frequently used elaborative markers, followed by contrastive and inferential markers in their compositions. Martinez (2004) also found that elaborative and contrastive markers were the most frequently used in English expository writings of Spanish university students.

To sum up, the results of the above studies, in general, demonstrated that NNS students use more DMs in their writings than do NS students. A close look at the individual occurrences of each DM showed that NNS learners overuse additive and contrast DMs than any other DMs in other categories. The findings of Tan-De Ramos's study suggested that different genres of compositions (argumentative vs. narrative) require different use of DMs to coherently tie the components of discourse together. Furthermore, the inquiry of the relationship between the use of DMs and the overall writing quality shows tentative findings. Some researchers (Jalilifar, 2008, Liu & Braine, 2005, & Jin, 2001) found a significant relationship between the frequency and type of DMs used and the overall writing quality of L2 texts while others (Tapper, 2005

Castro, 2004, & Zhang, 2000) found no such significant relationship. Some more research and studies need to be conducted to achieve more confidence of the relationship between the quality of the written text and implication of various DMs. DMs that are frequently examined in the studies are listed in terms of their functions in the following figure.

Micro-markers	Macro-markers
<p>Additional Moreover, Furthermore, In addition, On top of that, Another thing, What is more, Besides, In any case, Also</p> <p>Temporal Of that time, And, After this, For the moment, Eventually</p> <p>Causal So, Then, Because, Since, For, Due to, Because of</p> <p>Contrastive But, On the other hand, However, Nevertheless, In spite of, Conversely, In contrast to</p> <p>Consecutive Then, after that, Thus, Hence, Accordingly, Therefore, As a result, Consequently, So, That's why</p>	<p>Starter First, First of all, To begin with, To start with, In the first place, For one thing, For another thing, The surprising thing is, What I want to point is</p> <p>Rephrase I mean, That is to say, In other words, I think, I feel, I reckon, I guess, In my opinion, Apparently, So to speak, More or less, Sort of, Kind of, I suppose, This meant that</p> <p>Organiser Actually, In fact, As a matter of fact, To tell the truth, Well, This is not the end of the story, Now we are at, The next thing is, What happened after that was</p> <p>Topic shifter By the way, Incidentally, You can imagine what happened next, As you may have heard, Another interesting development is</p> <p>Conclusion In conclusion, To sum up, Briefly, In brief, In short, In summary. And that's all we'll talk about today, What we've come to by now is that</p>

Figure 1: List of Discourse Markers in compositions adapted from Dulger (2007).

Whether an EFL student, teacher or writer composes paragraphs or essays, he needs to make the point clear to the readers. To do so, a topic should be picked, outlined, narrowed down, and explained as detailed as possible. Nothing should remain vague and in need of discussion. To meet such requirements, there are various ways to apply like bringing facts, giving examples, offering descriptions etc. So, a well organized, unified, cohesive, coherent composition should be formed. To this end, discourse markers are made into use for various mentioned functions.

The findings of this paper may be implied to increase the awareness of involved principles in writing at different levels among the EFL teachers and students. Curriculum designers would obtain a better picture of the writing classes and their drawbacks for further amendments. EFL teachers gain important insight about the shortcomings relevant to the written assignments of their students and attempt to address them in their instruction. The findings can also help students to know the fields of their errors and mistakes not to follow through in their subsequent writing tasks. Furthermore, the results help interested figures to have a better view of the application of the DMs at different educational levels.

In Iran, students almost in all levels are not trained in how to deal with, write, and evaluate writing or literacy works. Therefore, disinterest in the use and functions of DMs are obvious among the teachers and the students even at the high level of the university (Behafrain and Khaki, 2004).

The study attempts to analyse the content of paragraphs and essays written by EFL students regarding both macro and micro DMs. Writing as a very complex phenomenon in EFL context with its inherent elements- DMs- should be paid close attention. To clarify the problem, the students' writings at different levels meant pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced at Pooyesh language schools in the city of Isfahan- Iran were targeted with the focus on frequency of macro and micro DMs applied at three levels. The main purpose of this study is to observe the frequency of DMs used, the kind of DMs used, and the levels at which the kind of DMs used. Therefore, this study attempt to address the following questions:

- 1) What groups of the DMS are used by the three levels of EFL students?
- 2) What is the frequency of the DMs that are used by three levels of EFL students?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants are EFL students at three levels of English language classes: pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced ones at Pooyesh language school in Isfahan. They are linguistically homogeneous in their own classes since they have already passed the placement tests and attended the suitable classes based on their proficiency levels. They concurrently study the other three skills and the components of knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in their classes.

3.2 Instrument

Data collection conducted by randomly picking up 150 pieces of writing out of 509 written assignments during the summer classes in 2015. From each level, 50 written paragraphs by upper-intermediate students and written essays by intermediate and advanced students were

randomly chosen. The discourse marker category model (DMCM) presented by Belles-Fortuno (2006) was employed to categorise the data based on macro or micro DMs and subcategories of markers. The frequency and types of the DMs used by the learners were investigated. With regard to frequency and types of DMs, all pieces of writings from a six-week term of study written either in the form of paragraphs or essays were scrutinised by the researchers on the basis of (grammar, content, style, and spelling). Chi square test was used and frequency and mean of occurrence of DMs as well as percentages were calculated using SPSS software.

3.3 Procedure

The experiment was conducted within two successive summer terms (10 weeks). Through instruction, each week the participants were given a take-home assignment for which they were allowed to chose a topic to write compositions on individually. The total numbers of compositions delivered to the researchers by pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced students were collected. In order to hold the experiment with reliability, the students were not offered any feedback on their topic and format during and after their writing. Then, to minimize the risk of subjectivity in the compositions analysis and to maximize the reliability of the results, two other expert teachers from Kish language school analyzed five compositions of each group (15 in total) and calculated the number and type of DMs. The two teachers and the researchers discussed the tiny differences and then they reached an agreement collectively. Next, the compositions were carefully scrutinized to determine the extent that DMs were functionally appropriate in the context of use. After that, the researchers categorized and started to analyze the data pursuant to the following DMCM. A freeware concordance software program, AntConc 3.4.3, was employed to extract and count the overall number of words in each of the 150 paragraphs and essays and separately for each discourse marker.

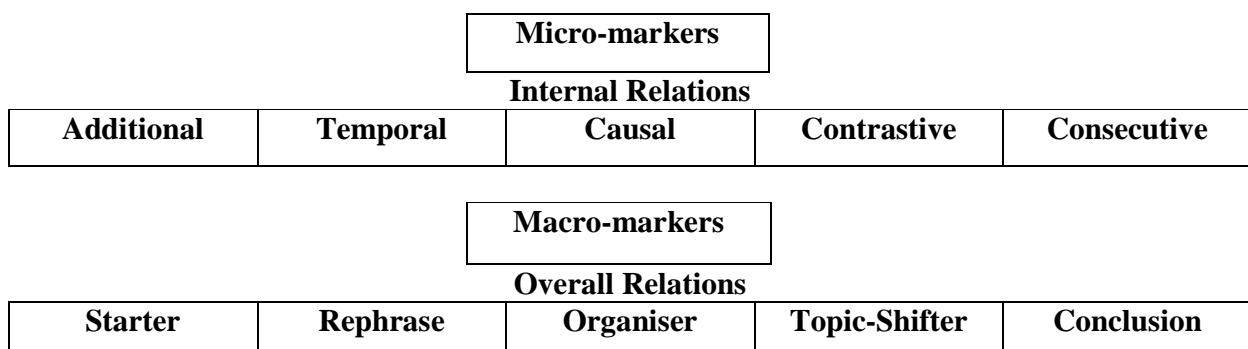


Figure 2: Discourse Markers Category Model by Belles-Fortuno (2006)

Accordingly, the courses targeted in two schooling terms during the summer in 2015 pedagogically considered the following five premises in the writing sections of text books: (1) format or outline, (2) supporting explanation (3) exemplification, (4) comparison and contrast, and (5) process analysis. Then, the DMs were picked up from among such premises.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Since validity deals with quality, rigor and trustworthiness of the experiment, inter-rater procedure is applied to pursue the validity principle and subsequently reliability criterion of the study. Two raters scored the participant's writings based on the degree of their cohesiveness and the correct use of DMs. In order to decrease the subjectivity and increase reliability, the raters were asked to base their judgments on general assessment criteria as the clarity of the purposes, the clarity of the main ideas, the close relations between ideas, the correctness of the segmentation of paragraphs, the clear connections between ideas, etc. The obtained scores were analyzed to identify the changes that had taken place as an outcome of instruction given to the groups as well as differences in achievement among the three groups.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the level of students, number of compositions, and number of words in each level and in total. PI stands for pre-intermediate, IM for intermediate, and AD for advanced students.

Table 1:
Total distribution of DMs in compositions

Student level	No of Compositions	No of words	No of DMs
PI	50	7436	148
IM	50	12113	275
AD	50	15600	321
Mean	50	11716	248
Total	150	28459	744

Table 2 shows the DMs, the percentage of DMs implemented between three levels of students, and the total percentage for each used marker.

Table 2:
Total distribution of DMs in compositions between three levels

DMs	PI	IM	AD	Total

Additional	31%	33%	11%	75%
Temporal	42%	26%	12%	80%
Casual	39%	30%	11%	80%
Contrastive	20%	34% ⁶	47%	101%
Consecutive	11%	33%	46%	90%
Starter	10%	21%	52%	83%
Rephrase	2%	39%	69%	110%
Organiser	13%	21%	59%	83%
Topic-shifter	8%	32%	51%	91%
Conclusion	12%	27%	44%	83%

In practice, the current study focuses on the use of micro or macro DMs in written assignments of EFL students based on their academic level. The data from the pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced English learners are used for the exploration of DMs use in Iranian EFL writings. The frequently used DMs in composition were analyzed and the results revealed that EFL pre-intermediate students prefer to use micro discourse markers such as Additional, Temporal and Casual at the highest frequency for (31%), (42%) and (39%) respectively, and the macro discourse markers such as Rephrase and Topic-shifter at the lowest frequency (2%) and (8%) respectively. The findings showed that pre-intermediate students exploited micro markers distinctively more than macro markers in their compositions (Table 2).

Among the EFL intermediate students, micro discourse markers such as Additional, Contrastive and Consecutive were employed at the highest frequency with the percentage of (33%), (34%) and (33%) respectively and macro discourse markers such as Topic-shifter and Conclusion were used at highest frequency (32%) and (27%). The Starter marker was used at the lowest frequency (21%). The findings showed that intermediate students employed both types of DMs-micro and macro- almost at the same percentages in their compositions (Table 2).

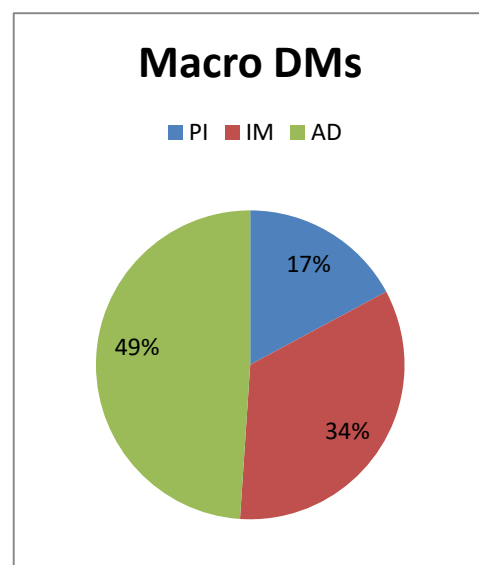
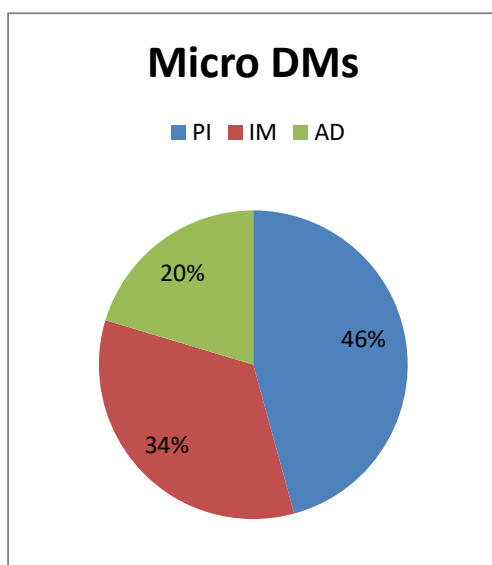
To the EFL advanced students, they employed Contrastive (47%) and Consecutive (46%) among the micro DMs at the highest rate. They, however, used Starter (52%), Rephrase (69%), Organiser (59%), Topic-shifter (51%), and Conclusion (44%) respectively among the macro DMs. The Additional (11%) and Casual (11%) were used as the least frequent DMs. The findings indicated that the advanced students utilised macro discourse markers in a distinctive mode as the dominant markers in their compositions (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the DMs, the percentage of DMs implemented by each level, and the total percentage for each marker.

Table 3:
Total distribution of DMs in compositions within a level

DMs	PI	IM	AD
Additional	16.48%	11.14%	2.73%
Temporal	22.33%	8.78%	2.98%
Casual	20.74%	10.13%	2.78%
Contrastive	10.63%	11.48%	11.69%
Consecutive	5.85%	11.14%	11.44%
Starter	5.33%	7.11%	12.93%
Rephrase	1.09%	13.17%	17.16%
Organiser	6.91%	7.11%	14.67%
Topic-shifter	4.26%	10.82%	12.68%
Conclusion	6.38%	9.12%	10.94%
Total	100%	100%	100%

According to the results of this study, Iranian English students make use of the discourse markers in a different way and at the different frequencies to construct textual coherence of their writings. In this case, pre-intermediate students utilised Temporal markers at highest percentage (22.33%) and Topic-shifter at the lowest percentage (4.26%). Intermediate students made use of Rephrase markers at the highest percentage (13.17%) and Starter and Organiser markers at the lowest percentage (7.11%). Advanced students used Rephrase markers at the highest percentage (17.16%) and Additional ones at the lowest percentage (2.73%).



Pie Charts: Percentages of utilised DMs in EFL students' compositions

As the pie charts show, EFL students at different levels implemented micro and macro DMs in their compositions with variation in frequency. Employing Chi square test and calculating the percentages of the utilised DMs, the results indicated that pre-intermediate students employed micro DMs 46% and macro DMs 17%. Intermediate students used micro DMs 34% and macro DMs 34%. Plus, advanced students benefited from micro DMs 20% and macro DMs 49%.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed the use of discourse markers develops the students' composition and writing quality as they performed far more successfully at the advanced level. This can be due to the fact that the students in the advanced level were able to take advantage of various types of discourse markers more than other levels to develop the topic sentences and support the main idea. In fact, the quality of writings is met by the appropriate use of DMs.

Compositions with more DMs were considered as more cohesive. Advanced students frequently used macro DMs in the right places. However, intermediate students used a kind of balanced between micro and macro to make their compositions more acceptable. This study indicated that intermediate and advanced students seem to have an awareness of the needs of the readers and control the strategies for making their texts more considerate and reader friendly by employing appropriate DMs. While advanced students write more reader-oriented texts and use macro DMs as facilitating devices to make their text more accurate and comprehensible, pre-intermediate and intermediate students need to build up more experience in writing compositions to enable them to employ macro DMs.

Some of the students at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels wrote sentences with excessive use of discourse markers such as “and” and some students wrote compositions without DMs indicating the role of translation from first language as negative transfer that shows students with insufficient L2 skills fail to follow proper and accurate DMs in text structures and paragraph connections (Kubota, 1998). Therefore, the students particularly at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels need to develop their awareness and knacks of writing skill to achieve expected stage.

Teacher and students can construct the knowledge of DMs accurately if students are given the chance to work actively and continuously to implement the language for educational and individual purposes in a practical set-up both in writing and in non-writing formats. The distinction between successful and less successful students corresponds to the good instruction and flexibility of application of DMs when they select and when they utilize them appropriately.

In this regard, the results of this study call for more attention to the significance, attainment and practice of DMs in L2 classes.

According to Jalilifar (2008), teachers and students should focus more on the principals of grammar that incorporates DMs and have them be employed within any written text to flow accurately and in quality. The significance of the grammar drives both teachers and students to a framework in which DMs find the appropriate stance. The relationship between grammar and DMs is like the relationship between train and rail. Coal is morphology, skeleton of train is syntax, chains that join the compartments together are semantics, waiters are vocabulary items, passengers are readers, the person who is leading the train is writer, and the rail is DMs. If all parts of train work well, then the train is able to move on the rail, and if the person who is leading the train knows the interpretation of signs along the rails, then he is able to keep the train on the right track. In this respect, Lichtenberk (1991) stated “Grammar shapes discourse, and discourse, in return, shapes grammars” (p. 78) and DMs represent both grammar and discourse.

Teachers should provide students with accurate, appropriate and adequate English language grammar input including DMs at each level. Then, they have students exercise various kinds of DMs in their writings at any level. The students need to enjoy as many chances as possible to make enough output with all ten types of DMs. In order to have students to employ even Rephrase markers in pre-intermediate level, both instructors and students need to focus on fitting types of markers in terms of the principles of relevance in discourse. Students, beyond grammar, need to be familiar with other implicit textual facets like the internal logic of text, overall organization, outline items and cohesive devices for a piece of quality writing.

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