

Do Discourse Markers Effect the Writing Efficiency? Evidence from Undergraduate Business Students

SYED MUHAMMAD MUJTABA
IQRA UNIVERSITY

Abstract:

Inculcating writing skill in students is a difficult, if not impossible, process for teachers. There are number factors which are responsible in making writing effective. One such factor is 'Discourse Markers'. The uses of discourse markers make a piece of writing effective it adds cohesion and coherence in writing. The current study was conducted with the aim to find out whether the uses of discourse makers make writing effective or not. Not only this, the study also wanted to unveil which discourse marker has the most significant effect in enhancing the quality of the writing. For this purpose 110 undergraduate university students were made to write a descriptive essay of 200 words on the given topic by the researcher. The essays were collected and marked according to the set criteria by Aston. The results of the regression equation revealed that students who scored the highest marks have used the most numbers of DM, which proves the claim of the researcher as well that there exist a significant positive relationship between the use of DM and the quality of the writing. Moreover, the results of the study also revealed that 'Inferential Discourse Markers' "are the one which have had the highest significant value as compare to others DM's, proving that inferential discourse markers are most successful in enhancing the quality of the writing.

Key terms: Discourse Markers, Descriptive Essay, Contrastive Markers

1.1 Introduction:

This study sheds light on the application of discourse markers in a descriptive composition of Pakistani University students. The doctrine for this selection of text type is connected to the fact that descriptive writing is one of the most frequently written texts by Pakistani English language learners. However, from our experience as teachers, we observe that Pakistani students of English perceive it very problematic to write a frame and coherent text in English. There are a few reasons for this failure including: insufficient vocabulary, inadequate rhetorical organization and poor or deficient use of discourse markers. The last key component i.e. discourse marker is the prime focus of this study.

Writing skill is one of the utmost important medium for communication. Jalilifar (2008) argues that English being deemed as a worldwide language and the extensive use of English in different academic goals which bound them to write appropriately. Integrating the writing skill has always been found to be a significantly difficult thing both for teachers and students because writing

does not merely rely on a single step rather it is an amalgamation of distinctive stages (Haselow, 2011). To foster the art of writing EFL learners are bound to be aware of the different stages of the writing if they are to write effectively. In this relevance, teachers are also confined to aim the steps of writing in such a manner so that students before getting the final product should be in position to revise edit their piece of writing before actually finalizing their product in this way they are exposed to different traits of writing (Assadi, 2013). In this regard, Dergisi (2010) claimed that mere knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is not sufficient to produce a quality piece of writing. In this connection, (Schifrin, 1987) claims that, it is of paramount importance to have the knowledge of discourse markers if to write effectively and commendably.

Moreover, Swan (2005) insists that discourse markers are units of language adopted to unveil the connection with the units that speaker has spoken and what he has already spoken. He further claimed that it's a pre requisite for the quality of writing to have DMs in it. Apart from this the uses of DMs also make the process of listening and reading convenient. Not only this, knowledge and practical application of DMS can significantly haul the overall quality of the discourse produced by English language learners. The use of DMs is an integral part of communicative competence in a way that they foster learners to utter quick and considerable discourse (Rahimi, 2011)

In the past, number of research studies pertaining to students writing quality and discourse markers have been conducted by different researchers.(Fatemeh&Kamali,2015; Kalajahi&Nadzimah,2015; Jalilifar,2008; Rahimi,2011). Some of the researchers revealed the positive effect of discourse markers on the students writing performance (Fatemeh & Kamali, 2015;Modish, 2012). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, a similar research has not been conducted in the Pakistani context. In this relevance, the present study attempts to reveal the relationship of DMs and the quality of the writing of the Pakistani University students by using regression and multi regression model.

1.2 Research Question

The purpose of this research is to find out the answers to the following questions:

- Does the use of discourse markers have any positive effect on the quality of the writing?
- Which discourse markers have a dominant effect on the quality of the writing?

1.3 Research hypothesis

Null hypothesis: The use of discourse markers does not have any significant effect on the quality of the writing

Sub hypothesis: The use of discourse markers has a significant effect on the quality of the writing

2.1 Literature Review:

The review of literature is divided into two sections: Theoretical Background and Past Studies.

2.1.1 Theoretical Background:

This study perceives discourse markers from a discourse lens reason being their application is deemed to be components of discourse like: sentences and paragraphs. Matras (1998) assumes discourse markers are perfect when they give information at the discourse stage. Now, in order to understand study the application of discourse makers on text it is pertinent to study the text linguistics.

Some of the linguistics recommends to work with in the territory of the sentences when examining the language mechanism. They believe that whatever lies outside the territory should be the department of the rhetoricians or evaluator. According to Longacre (1992) numerous numbers of schools of Linguistics have lessen their work and responsibility to the sentence structure and avoiding small components in text which are of proven importance to end user of language. In this relevance Batal (1985) reveals that the same thing is also witnessed in Arab old grammar.

Significance of grammar related to the discourse has widely been stressed by the new era linguistics. Halliday (2004) argues that understanding of the grammar does not merely depend by focusing on its form. In this relevance, Grimes (1975) claims that specific components are pre requisite for the basic comprehension of the grammar for which the study of the discourse has become important.

2.1.2 Empirical Past Studies:

In the following section, studies related to discourse markers and writing are analysed to have a better understanding of the relationship between these two components.

Rahimi (2011) investigated the frequency and the type of discourse markers applied in the argumentative and expository writings of Iranian EFL learners and to compare the frequency and type of DMs used in the two essays. For this purpose, 56 Iranian English major students were selected and asked to write two essays. Subsequently, the data was analysed applying ANOVA, paired t-test and multiple regressions. Results indicated that 15 different DMs were used by Iranian students; further, it was revealed that no of occurrences of DMs in expository essay is higher than in argumentative essay. The study concluded that application of discourse marker is not a benchmark of the writing quality in argumentative and expository essay.

Jalilifar (2008) applying Fraser's (1999) taxonomy of DMs, probed DMs in writing text of 90 junior and senior Iranian EFL students. Results indicated that elaborative markers were the most dominantly found, then inferential, contrastive, causative and topic relating markers; further, it

was revealed using Chi-Square that there was a significant difference in the use of DMs between the groups. A direct and positive relationship was also found between the quality of the compositions and the number of DMs used.

Faghih and Mousaee (2015) investigated the use of discourse markers implemented by Iranian non-native English speaking Police Officers and native English speaking police officers in their natural and authentic electronic message (e-mail) interactions via INTERPOL channel in 2013. For this purpose, a corpus of sixty corresponded messages through INTERPOL channel was chosen and all discourse markers in sixty messages were counted and bifurcated in line with Fraser's taxonomy. Subsequently, the results were analyzed by SPSS software (version 21.0) applying *regression equation*. The findings of the study endorsed that there are no significant variations in categories of Fraser's Taxonomy of discourse markers between the Iranian non-native and native English speaking police officers other than inferential discourse markers which are used more frequently by non-natives than natives. The study concluded that contrastive, elaborative, and temporal discourse markers are used parallel in compared texts, whereas inferential discourse markers usage is statistically different.

Martinez (2004) probed the application of discourse markers found in explanatory essay of Spanish undergraduates. The study unveiled that students resorted to different types of discourse markers with some of them are used more dominantly than others. Students were found using elaborative markers more dominantly than contrastive markers. Moreover, the result of the study explained that there exist a direct relationship between marks and the number of DMs applied by the students.

Fatemeh& Kamali (2015) investigated the effect of discourse markers on the learners writing. For this purpose, two groups were selected as control and experimental. Both the groups were asked to write an article about one topic. The results of the study investigated that experimental group's writing was more organized and it was well written as compare to the control group. Hence study proved that teaching of discourse markers positively affected the learners writing.

Modhish (2012) probed the application of discourse markers which are applied by Yemeni learners in their writing. For this purpose, 50 students were asked to write an essay which was later scrutinised on the basis of Fraser's (1999) taxonomy. The verdicts of the study revealed some worth mentioning facts. The elaborative marker was the most used marker by the students then inferential and last but not the least contrastive. The result of the study projected that a constructive relation existed amid the markers and the lettering notches.

Kalajahi and Nadzimah (2015) inspected the application of discourse connectors and cohesion in writing of Malaysian school students. For this purpose, thirty samples from each educational level were selected. The results of the study indicated that there was a very weak negative insignificant correlation between writing quality and the frequency of the use of the DCs in the writing of Malaysian ESL students.

Kamali and Noori (2015) investigated whether the use of discourse markers effect the writing quality of the students or not. For this purpose, a quasi-experimental study was conducted in which two groups were involved. The group which were taught explicit instruction about the use of discourse markers and the other one which was not taught about the use of discourse markers. The researcher selected 60 students studying in a language institute in Iran and was asked to write an essay. The results of the study revealed that the more knowledge of discourse markers the better the writing text is produced. The study concluded that the discourse markers have significant effect on improving the writing quality of the EFL learners.

Alghamdi (2014) investigated the use of DMs in argumentative and personal narrative papers written by NS and NNS. The study aimed to answer what types of DMs are used by NS and NNS. Further the study attempted to answer does the incorrect use of DMS affect the writing quality of the students. For this purpose, the researcher selected 30 undergraduate students: 15 NS and 15 NNS and they were asked to write an essay. The results of the study revealed that there was no significant difference in the use of DMs. The study further highlighted that incorrect use of DMs were key indicators of the quality of ESL writing.

Wahby (2014) investigated to gauge Saudi prep-year pre- intermediate students' writing proficiency in connection with their knowledge of cohesive devices. For this purpose an experiment was conducted to test student's writing proficiency. Students were asked to write an essay and solved ten questions related to cohesive devices. The findings of the study revealed that there is a strong positive relationship between having background about cohesive ties and the quality of English writing. Students who have knowledge of cohesive ties score more as compared to those who didn't have knowledge of cohesive devices.

Daif and Albsher (2013) probed the application of discourse markers by Arab EFL students. For this purpose, the study was held and fifty learners of the novice year program at the university were asked to write a paragraph and these paragraphs were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The conclusion of the study unveiled that additive connectors most dominantly then causative markers. They result of the study further depicted that there happens to have a constructive connection of discourse markers and the test notches.

Zhang (2000) analysed the usage of cohesive elements in the expository essay of Chinese undergraduates. For this purpose, he gathered one hundred and seven written essays from two Chinese universities. The adopted framework was of Halliday and Hasan (1976) taxonomy of cohesive devices. Two statistical tests were run (ANOVA and Pearson correlation). The results of the study revealed that students have applied different kinds of cohesive devices. In student's writing lexical devices were most dominantly used then conjunctions and other devices. The results of the study further unveiled that there wasn't any instance of statistically significant connections of the number of cohesive devices used and the quality of the writing.

3.1 Methodology:

In order to depict the relationship between discourse markers and writing, the researcher has applied the regression equation to unveil the relationship between the two components.

$$WM = \alpha + \beta_1 DM + e$$

$$WM = \alpha + \beta_1 CDMs + \beta_2 EDMs + \beta_3 IDMs + \beta_4 RDMs + \beta_5 CCDMs + \beta_6 EMD + e$$

Where α is constant, e is error term, WM is writing marks, CDMs are contrastive discourse markers, EDMs are elaborative discourse markers, IDMs are inferential discourse markers, RDMs are reasons discourse markers, CDMs are conclusive discourse markers and EDMs are exemplifiers discourse markers. In this study, the researcher has applied the regression model to find the effect of discourse markers on the marks students gain in writing. The first equation would depict the overall impact of discourse markers on the marks obtained in writing. On the other hand, the second equation would reveal the individual effect of discourse markers on the writing. In other words, equation 2 explains which discourse marker has significant effect on the quality of the writing.

For the purpose of the study, 110 undergraduate students are selected. The sample size is selected based on the criteria given by Andy Cofield. Cofield (2009) recommends that a minimum sample size criterion would be $50+8k$ where k is the number of independent predictors. In this sample, there will be both male and female students. All the students are studying English in their first semester as a mandatory subject. The selected students have been asked to write a descriptive essay of 200 words on the topic "The city where I live in." All the students have written the essay under the researcher supervision. They were given 45 minutes to complete the task. The researcher has opted descriptive essay as it is comparatively an easy job for the students to write as it is their regular practice to write about places and events (Jalilifar, 2008)

3.2 Procedure:

The present study is guided through the Fraser's taxonomy of DMs. This taxonomy according to Rahimi(2011) is chiefly applicable for the bifurcation of transcribed treatise and assumes to be the most complete bifurcation in treatise discourse. The written essays will be markers according to Aswell's(2000) content scoring after that classification of the DMs will be done according to Fraser taxonomy of DMs

3.3 Categorization of DMs based on Fraser's Taxonomy:

1. **Contrastive DMs:** however, although, but, yet, in contrast, on the other hand.
2. **Elaborative DMs:** in addition, also, and, besides, furthermore.
3. **Inferential DMs:** accordingly, as a result, because of, therefore, thus.

4. Reason DMs: after all, because, for this/that reason, since.

After careful investigation of Fraser's taxonomy, Martinez (2004) pointed that dual subsequent sets of DMs were missed in Fraser's cataloguing and could be placed beneath the sub category, elaborative markers (69). These are:

5. **Conclusive DMs:** In conclusion, in short, to sum up, in sum.

6. **Exemplifiers:** for example, such as, for instance, e.g.

4.1 Data Analysis & Results:

Under this section, the two regression equations have been applied to analyze the effect of discourse markers on the quality of writing. Table 1 indicates the effect of discourse makers on the quality of the writing. On the other hand, table 2 depicts the individual effect of discourse markers on the quality of the writing.

4.2 Regression Analysis

Table 1 depicts the overall impact of the use of discourse markers on the quality and marks of the writing.

Table 1

Variable	Coefficient	t-stats	Prob.	V.I.F
(Constant)	9.875	26.791	.000	-
Discourse Markers	.123	5.545	.000	1.000
Adj. R²	0.219			
F-stats (Prob.)	81.925 (0.000)			

According to the above table 1, it is evident that there exist a positive relationship between the use of discourse markers and the writing marks. The Sig value is less than 0.1; therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that the use of discourse markers has no effect on the quality of the writing. VIF shows multi co linearity which does not exist in this as VIF is less than 10

Table 2

Variables	Coefficient	t-stats	Prob.	V.I.F
(Constant)	10.062	27.630	.000	-
Contrastive DMs	-.237	-1.788	.077	1.184
Elaborative DMs	.121	5.259	.000	1.059
Inferential DMs	.414	1.744	.084	2.752
Reasons DMs	-.010	-.037	.971	1.593
Conclusive DMs	-.357	-.968	.335	3.001
Exemplifier DMs	.405	2.381	.019	1.698
Adj. R²	.294			
F-stats (Prob.)	8.374 (0.000)			

Table 2 depicts the effect of different DMs on the quality of the writing. From the table, we can conclude that, Contrastive discourse markers, Elaborative discourse markers, inferential discourse markers and exemplifier discourse markers are the significant discourse markers in enhancing the quality of the. According to the above table, Inferential discourse markers have the highest significant value, which represents that inferential discourse marker is the most dominant discourse marker among the other six DMs. On the other hand, multicollinearity doesn't exist as all the VIF's are less than 10 which is a good sign and it shows the efficiency of β

5.1 Discussion and Conclusion:

The results retrieved from this study confirm the notion that use of DMs are of the key indicators of writing. The excessive use of DMs makes the writing unified. A good written piece of essay

doesn't merely rely on grammar but on cohesive and coherent elements as well which are important (Feng, 2010). Cohesion could be obtained by the use of DMs hence it should be taught to the learners. The results of the study indicated that students who have used excessive numbers of DMs in their writing enable them to achieve higher marks than those who have applied less numbers of DMs. Moreover, the study also shed light on the most dominant number of DMs used by the students. In the above study the elaborative DMs are widely used by students. They were altogether 1282 elaborative discourse markers used by the students followed by contrastive DMs which are 152 and last but not the least exemplifiers DMs which were 83 in numbers altogether. One thing that is worth mentioning here is the limited or no use of DMs by the students. The essays of the students indicated that students have sparingly used conclusive DMs, Reason's DMs and Exemplifier DMs. The limited use of these DMs predicts that either students are not familiar with these types of DMs or they are reluctant in applying them. Lack of using these DMs would eventually lead to less marks of or the quality of the writing would be compromised. It is, therefore, recommended that students 'be taught all the DMs, and they should be encouraged to apply them more or less equally. A proficient writer never depends on one or two kinds of DMs rather he applies different kinds of DMs in a balanced manner to achieve cohesion and coherence. On the basis of this study it is recommended that studies of such nature should be conducted further on a larger sample size so that results could be generalize.

References:

- Alghamdi, E. A. (2014). Discourse Markers in ESL Personal Narrative and Argumentative Papers: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4.
- Ashwell, T. (2000). Patterns of teacher response to student writing in a multiple-draft composition classroom: Is content feedback followed by form feedback the best method? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 9, 227-257.
- Assadi Aidinlou, N., & Shahrokhi mehr, H. (2012). The effect of discourse markers instruction on EFL learners' writing. *World Journal of Education*, 2(2), 10-16.
- Carter, R., McCarthy, M., 2006. Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daif-Allah, A. S., & Albeshir, K. (2013). The Use of Discourse Markers in Paragraph Writings: The Case of Preparatory Year Program Students in Qassim University. *English Language Teaching*, 6(9), 217.
- Dergisi, U. S. A. (2010). Discourse markers in English writing. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 3, 299-305.

- Feng, L. (2010). Discourse Markers in English Writing. *Journal of International Social Research*, 3/11, Spring 2010
- Halliday, M. & Hasan, R. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman. 1976
- Haselow, A. (2011). Discourse marker and modal particle: The functions of utterance-final then in spoken English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 3603-3623.
- Jalilifar, A. (2008). Discourse markers in composition writings: The case of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language. *English Language Teaching*, 1(2), 114.
- Kamali, F., & Noori, H. (2015). The impact of discourse markers instruction on improving writing of intermediate EFL learners. *Cumhuriyet Science Journal*, 36(3), 944-949.
- Longacre, Robert E. "Language in Context." (1992)
- Martínez, A. C. L. (2004). Discourse markers in the expository writing of Spanish university students. *Ibérica: Revista de la Asociación Europea de Lenguas para Fines Específicos (AELFE)*, (8), 63-80.
- Matras, Yaron. "Utterance modifiers and Universals of grammatical borrowing." (1998) :281-332
- Modhish, A. S. (2012). Use of Discourse Markers in the Composition Writings of Arab EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 5(5), 56-61.
- Rahimi, M. (2011). Discourse markers in argumentative and expository writing of Iranian EFL learners. *World Journal of English Language*, 1(2), 68.
- Schiffrin, D., 1987. *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swan, M. (2005). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wahby, M. (2014). The Effect of Implementing cohesive ties by Saudi prep-Year Pre intermediate students on their written texts. *European Scientific Journal*, 10(4)
- Zhang, Z. (2000). "Cohesive features in the expository writing of undergraduates in two Chinese universities". *RELC Journal* 31, 1: 61-95.