The Effect of Explicit Instruction of Discourse Markers on EFL Learners' Writing Ability

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Abstract

This paper intends to investigate the effect of explicit instruction of discourse markers on the writing performance of learners at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The participants of this study were 40 EFL learners studying English at Melal institute in Karaj aged from 12 to 17 years old. In order to obtain data, first they were administered a pre-test to evaluate their initial knowledge in writing ability especially with focus on the use of discourse markers. All the participants in the two groups went through an explicit instruction of discourse markers in 15 sequential sessions, about 30 minutes each session. Finally, a post-test was administered to them to measure their writing ability with the focus on the use of discourse markers and text coherence. The results of the analyses indicated that learners’ exposure to explicit instruction of discourse markers significantly improves their ability in writing. Also it indicated that the improvement of learners at intermediate level was greater in comparison with learners at pre-intermediate level. These findings show that teachers, English institutes, and practitioners should pay more attention to discourse markers as a serious part in making EFL curricula. Also the findings of this research indicate that the explicit instruction of discourse markers will lead to improvement of the writing ability of the learners.

Keywords: discourse markers, writing proficiency, EFL learners, explicit instruction, coherence, curricula

I. INTRODUCTION

The word discourse is widely used in linguistics and different scholars and researchers have described it in different ways. This word has a high frequency in linguistics and generally it is applied to an extent more than one sentence. Discourse means consistency in language; so, just a chain of words and sentences do not create a discourse.
Discourse markers are an important characteristic of discourse. In the last decades, discourse markers have been studied so much and many approaches have been developed for this language conception. Discourse markers are lexical terms and have been entitled differently such as discourse markers, discourse connectives, discourse operators and sentence connectors. Researchers maintain the same opinion that discourse markers do link the segments in discourse, but they are not in a definite agreement on their functions in discourse. Each researcher defines it and its function according to his own view about it.

Discourse markers (DMs) are rather syntax-independent, do not affect the meaning of the sentence, and can be considered as empty meaning words or phrases. The particles "oh", "well", "now", "then", "you know", and "I mean", and the connectives "so", "because", "and", "but", and "or" are examples of discourse markers.

Using discourse markers in writing lead to proper communication and organization. Discourse markers can be good signals of cohesion and coherence in written texts. Cohesion and coherence are two language devices in written texts. To communicate appropriately in written texts, it is essential for students to learn about cohesive and coherent devices.

A well-organized text is created through the application of cohesion and coherence. It is not just like putting the parts together and making a whole out of it; there should be relationship between the sentences. Halliday and Hassan have specified a text as “not just a string of sentences. It is not simply a long grammatical unit, something of the same kind as a sentence, but differing from it in size – a sort of super sentence, a semantic unit” (1976, p. 291). Halliday and Hassan classified five major cohesive devices in English discourse: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion and conjunction.

Schiffrin is among the first scholars who paid attention to DMs. She is one of the most influential scholars who has studied the discourse markers in detail and has firmly established the term “discourse markers” in linguistic research in her influential work on discourse markers. Schiffrin operationally defines them as “sequentially Dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (1987, p. 31).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Discourse markers (DMs) are a set of linguistic elements operating within cognitive, expressive, social, and textual areas (Schiffrin, 2001). In theory, DMs are verbal and sometimes non-verbal devices that bring consistency to a text and unity of a discourse (Schiffrin, 1987). Regarding writing, DMs contribute to the fluency and consistency to writing and play a facilitating role in communication; therefore, lack of or inappropriate use of DMs in an L2 prevents from successful communication and even might lead to the lack of comprehension. Actually, L2 writers should consider the fact that the readers follow the ideas expressed in their writing more easily if they connect the upcoming sentence with the prior one. Thus, DMs are important language elements that contribute to proper communication and if L2 learners will to communicate appropriately they should acquire it. It can be inferred that those nonnative speakers who benefit from the DMs of the L2 will be more successful in interaction in comparison with those who are not.
Discourse markers (DMs), having been named in different ways by different group of researchers such as of cue phrases (Knott & Dale, 1994), discourse connectives (Blakemore, 1987, 1992), discourse operators (Redeker, 1990, 1991), pragmatic connectives (Van Dijk, 1979; Stubbs, 1983), pragmatic markers (Fraser, 1988, 1990; Schiffrin, 1987), sentence connectives (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), have been the subject of research in linguistics for the past decade, with a plenty of articles being publishing each year.

Levinson (1983), in his book entitled *Pragmatics*, regarded DMs as an independent set to be studied although he did not entitle it. Within the past few years, there have been studies on DMs, which were centered on what they are, what they mean, and what functions they accomplish. One of the most detailed attempts to study elements which mark “sequentially-dependent units of discourse” is done by Schiffrin (1987) who entitled them “discourse markers”. Schiffrin proposes that DMs do not simply fit into a linguistic category. Actually she goes so far as to imply that paralinguistic characteristics and nonverbal gestures are DMs as well.

Redeker (1991) asserts the concept of core meaning for DMs. There she calls DMs “discourse operators” proposing that “the core meaning should specify the marker's intrinsic contribution to the semantic representation that will constrain the contextual interpretation of the utterance” (Redeker, ibid, p. 1164). She classifies a discourse operator as a word or phrase that is uttered with the main function of taking to the listener's attention a special kind of relation of the upcoming utterance with the instant discourse context. An utterance in this description is a deliberately and structurally limited, usually a unit of clausal (Redeker, ibid).

Blakemore (1987; 1992) believes DMs as a sort of conventional implicature, and focus on the point that how "discourse connectives" as she calls them, inflict limits on implicatures. Blakemore (1987; 1992) offers that DMs do not have a figurative meaning like lexical expressions but have a practical meaning, including directions about how to operate the theoretical representation of the utterance. Despite different views taken by different group of researchers, DMs serve as a connection between the upcoming and the current discourse.

In the group of words we may be faced with: discourse markers operators, discourse connectives, lexical markers, pragmatic connectives, cues, discourse phrases, and a group of other terms invented and used by different researchers. The definitions are also similarly as various as the terms used by them. Fraser (1999) asserts that DMs are conjunctions, adverbs and prepositional phrases that link two sentences or clauses together. Redeker (1990; 1991) offers that DMs not only link adjacent sentences, but also connect the current sentence or statement with its near context. Schiffrin (1987; 2001) assumes that DMs can have both local and global functions. She also considers items such as *oh, y’know, I mean* as DMs. For Blakemore (1987; 1992; 2002), working within the scheme of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), DMs need limits on the implicatures the listener can take out from the discourse; therefore, discourse is open to more than one type of implicature without DMs. Louwerse and Mitchell (2003) regard DMs as cohesive devices that express coherence relations acting as transition media in a sentence, between sentences, at the both local and global levels of discourse. Halliday and Hasan (1976) also regard DMs as cohesive devices.
Schiffrin’s early working definition of DMs as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (Schiffrin, 1987) has received most attention today. Later, she proposed a more detailed definition of the markers as “proposing the contextual coordinates within which an utterance is produced and designed to be interpreted” (Schiffrin, 1987). Based on the Schiffrin’s study of DMs, Redeker labels discourse markers “discourse operators” and declare her own definition: “…a word or phrase – for instance, a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection – that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to the listeners’ attention, a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context” (Redeker, 1991).

Fraser (1999) declares that discourse markers are conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that link two sentences or clauses together. Fraser’s classification contains three main subclasses namely, (a) contrastive markers that indicate the meaning of the second sentence contrasts with the interpretation of the first sentence, (b) elaborative markers that signal a quasi-parallel connection between the sentences, and (c) inferential markers signal that the following sentence is a result derived from the former sentence.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1- Does discourse-markers explicit instruction improve students’ proficiency of writing ability?

2- Is there any difference between the performance of pre-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners in learning and utilizing discourse markers?

A. Participants

The total number of participants was 40 students in this study. They were studying English at lower intermediate and intermediate level categorized by the institute. They were in two separate classes with a population of 20 in each class during the study. The participants were all male and their first language was Persian. They had no contact with native speakers of English. They were between 12-17 years old. In order to be sure that they were in the appropriate (pre-intermediate and intermediate) level, they were exposed to Version A (Lesley et al., 2005). The participants had been chosen from Melal English institute in Karaj city.

B. Materials

At first, in order to be sure that the learners were in appropriate (pre-intermediate and intermediate) level, they were exposed to Version A (Lesley et al., 2005). Version A consisted of three sections: listening section with 20 items, reading section with 20 items and language use with 30 items. The questions in the listening, reading and language use sections
consisted of four-option multiple-choice items intended to check participants are homogeneous in their own levels.

Then two writing tests (a pre-test and a post-test) were used in the present study: A pre-test to assess their initial knowledge and use of discourse markers, and a post-test to measure participants’ writing performance after the explicit instruction of discourse markers.

The subjects’ writings were assessed by focusing on general assessment criteria as the clarity of the purpose, the clarity of the main ideas, the close relations between ideas, the correctness of the segmentation of paragraphs, and the clear connections between ideas, and etc.

C. Procedure

The participants of this study were from two levels of pre-intermediate and intermediate categorized by the institute. But to get assured about their true level, they were administered a proficiency test. To measure their initial knowledge, a pretest on writing performance was administered to all participants. In this test, the two groups were given two topics, one to the pre-intermediate group and one to the intermediate group. Each participant was required to write three paragraphs no less than five lines about the related topic in order to determine the extent of his initial knowledge and spontaneous utilization of discourse markers.

The two groups were then exposed to the explicit instruction of discourse markers in 15 sequential sessions about 30 minutes at the beginning of each session. They were initially provided and familiarized with a list of definitions and examples of discourse markers and DMs in English were compared with those in the students’ first language. Then they were frequently, and under the teacher’s direction, given opportunity during the instruction time to give synonyms for different types of discourse markers and make sentences using them. Participants were also regularly given sentences with eliminated discourse markers and were asked to fill the markers. Every session they were examined with a definite high usage type of discourse markers. They were given texts with different types of discourse markers and were required to first identify them and then write the function of each marker on a piece of paper. They were also required to use each type of discourse in various types of sentences (simple, complex, declarative, imperative, question, etc.). All these activities formed the ‘explicit instruction’ in this study.

Finally, the writing post-test (i.e. writing a 150 word essay) was administered to check the participants’ knowledge in terms of discourse markers after having been exposed to explicit instruction. The participants’ scores on the pre-test and post-test were then compared to see the amount of progress of participants within the group, and also the scores of the two groups were compared with each other to see the function of each group.
D. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data and results, independent sample T-test and paired sample T-test were used. Independent sample T-test compares the means between two unrelated groups on the same continuous, dependent variables, while paired sample T-test compares the means within a group like the comparison of pre-test and post-test performance of one group.

Also two assumptions were used to interpret the results. One assumption is when the variances are not equal. In this case, unequal variances assumption to analysis of the results is used. Another assumption is when the variances are equal. In this case, equal variances assumption is used.

1. Investigation of the first research question

*Does discourse-markers explicit instruction improve students’ proficiency of writing ability?*

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of participants’ pre-test mean scores at intermediate and pre-intermediate level (Points out of 100%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Statistics</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest scores</td>
<td>Int.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60.3000</td>
<td>2.97091</td>
<td>.66432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Int.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45.3000</td>
<td>1.89459</td>
<td>.42364</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it was expected and the interpretation of results indicated, initial knowledge of students at intermediate level in writing ability was more than that of pre-intermediate participants.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1.* The comparison of pre-test mean scores (standard deviation) of participants at intermediate and pre-intermediate level
Table 2: Post-test mean scores of participants at two intermediate and pre-intermediate levels (scores are out of 100%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. The comparison of post-test mean scores (standard deviation) of participants at intermediate and pre-intermediate level

Paired sample statistics was used to indicate the mean scores of participants at the intermediate level. As it is shown, the pre-test mean score was 60.30 and the post-test mean score was 86.87. And for learners at the pre-intermediate level the pre-test mean score was 45.30 and the post-test mean score was 62.32.

2. Investigation of the second research question

Is there any difference between the performance of pre-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners in learning and utilizing discourse markers?
Table 3: The pre-test and post-test mean scores of participants at intermediate level (scores are out of 100%).

Paired Samples Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>In. Pre Test</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>In. Pre Test</td>
<td>60.3000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.97091</td>
<td>.66432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In. Post Test</td>
<td>86.8750</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.43155</td>
<td>.32010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores is 26.58 at the intermediate level which indicates a significant improvement in their writing ability after explicit instruction.

![Graph showing comparison of Int. Pre-Test Mean and Int. Post-Test Mean](image)

**Figure 3.** Comparison of pre-test and post-test means (standard deviation) of participants at intermediate level

Table 4: The mean scores of pre-test and post-test of participants at pre-intermediate level

Paired Samples Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Pre-int. Pre-Test</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre-int. Pre-Test</td>
<td>45.3000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.89459</td>
<td>.42364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-int. Post Test</td>
<td>62.3250</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.49803</td>
<td>.33497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores is 17.03 at pre-intermediate level.
The difference between the pre-test and the post-test means at intermediate level is 26.58 and difference between the pre-test and the post-test means at pre-intermediate level is 17.03. In other word, it means that explicit instruction was more effective for intermediate participants and they showed more improvement in comparison to the pre-intermediate participants.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With regard to the obtained results and analysis of data in this research it can be concluded that both the pre-intermediate and intermediate learners improved significantly after explicit instruction of discourse markers. But the intermediate learners had greater improvement. In fact, explicit instruction was more effective for this level.

The obtained conclusions of this study confirm the claim of this research that explicit instruction affects the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners and improves it. Also as it was indicated, the participants at intermediate level significantly did better in relation to the first group (pre-intermediate) on their post-test. So, it can be inferred that some explicit instruction of discourse markers is necessary for both groups to improve their writing ability especially for intermediate level because they improve more. Also some curricula should be designed and applied for the pre-intermediate level learners to achieve improvement like intermediate level learners as they need it more.
Maybe this assumption from the results of this research comes into the mind that the higher the level, the higher the improvement. As this research did not consider the upper levels like advanced levels, it cannot prove or reject this hypothesis.

A final word is that, firstly, this research requires teachers, practitioners and researchers in language teaching to pay more attention to discourse as an important feature of writing ability and at last language proficiency. Secondly, it provides a suggestion for material designers to regard discourse markers in course designs to aware learners to this language element. This research also makes clear the fact that learners at different levels of language proficiency behave differently in writing composition, i.e. in this study intermediate learners improved better in comparison with pre-intermediate level learners. Therefore, learners at different levels should not go through similar curricula.

REFERENCES


