The impact of discourse markers instruction on improving writing of intermediate EFL learners

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Abstract Writing is one of the four skills in language learning and it should be paid more attention. Many devices, such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, and discourse marker, contribute to a discourse's cohesion and coherence. In this regard, creating contexts which is value coherence in pragmatic level, and cohesion in semantic level is important. Knowledge about the discourse Markers (DMs), amongst other things, be used to improve writing skill. DMs are expression such as "now, well, so, which signal a sequential relationship between the current basic message and previous discourse. The present paper focuses on the instruction of the DMs and its effect on learners ' writing ability. To do this, two groups as control and experimental were chosen from two classes of Pezhvak English Language institute in Bojnourd, Iran. Both groups were asked to write an article about one topic. Then treatment sessions were conducted for experimental group while during that period, control group held back to receive such a treatment. Analyzing the misuse and inappropriateness of DMs occurring to their writing, pre-test, and investigating the relevant and suitable application of DMs appearing in their writing, post-test, and concludes with the suggestion that teaching text markers to learners should be paid more attention. And also the result reveals the effectiveness of teaching text markers to students in enhancing their awareness and sensitivity of discourse and consequently raising their writing levels.

Keywords: Discourse markers, Cohesion, Coherence, writing

1. 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. In sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, the DMs can be seen as a signpost which constrains the interpretation process and the concomitant background selection (Jucker, 2002). Discourse markers as the binding elements of a text in creating a meaningful discourse have been viewed from different dimensions in language studies. 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. Brown and Yule (1983) defined discourse as "the analysis of language in use". They believed that such an outlook could not restrict the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions they serve in human affairs. Hatch (1992:1) defined discourse analysis as the study of language communication, spoken and written. To understand discourse and its scope, It is necessary to identify different elements which contribute to the creation of discourse. One of the elements referred to in different literatures is text markers or discourse markers. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976) cohesion in English deals with those elements which create cohesion in a text and shape contexts in extended pieces of written or spoken language. They refer to cohesive devices in a very broad sense and divided them into reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctive. Schiffrin (1992) refer to different type of DMs which are to some extent similar to Halliday and Hassan conjunctives. In both Schiffrin (1992) and Halliday and Hassan (1976) the

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different types of conjunctives referred to, and divided into four general and major parts as "additive, adversative, causal, temporal. These connective elements represent the generalized types of connection which are recognized as holding between sentences. As Halliday and Hassan (1976) believed these connections are not logical but textual. When we are planning to write a well-organized text, cohesion and coherence must be taken into consideration. The organization of sentence of a text or a written discourse is not like putting up bricks one upon one, there are some relationship between those sentences. Using discourse markers in writing lead to proper communication and organization. Halliday and Hassan have defined 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"(1976:291). Halliday and Hassan identify five main cohesive devices in English discourse: reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion and conjunction. Conjunction, or connective element, which is what Halliday called DMs, involved the use of formal markers (i.e. discourse markers) to relate sentences, clauses and paragraphs to each other. The difference of the conjunction with reference, substitution, or ellipsis is that it does not instruct the reader to find missing information by looking for it in the text. Instead, conjunction signals the way the writer wants the reader to relate what is about to be said to what has been said before. According to Feng (2010), some DMs are summarized as follows: Additive: and, or also, in addition, furthermore, besides, similarly, likewise, by contrast, for instance; 1. Adversative: but, yet, however, instead, on the other hand, nevertheless at any rate, as a matter of fact; 2. Causal: so, consequently, it follows, for, because, under the circumstances, for this reason; 3. Continuatives: now, of course, well, anyway, surely, after all; etc. The conjunctive elements (DMs) presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse" (Halliday, 1976). DMs not only give cohesion to a text, they also cohere two sentences together. In fact it is not easy to list definitively all the items that perform the conjunctive role in English. Single-word conjunctions merge into phrasal and clausal ones, and there is often little difference between the linking of two clauses by a single-word conjunction, a phrasal one, or a lexical item somewhere else in the clause, a fact Winter (1977) has pointed out. Finally, DMs are distinguished from other types of commentary markers, from vocatives, interjections, and from expressions such as oh, y'know, I mean, and because, often treated as a part of this group (Fraser, 2002). 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) proposed that DMs are conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that connect two sentences, but the current sentence or utterance with its immediate context. DMs have been investigated in classroom oral discourse (Hays,1992), informal settings (Lee, 1999; Muller, 2004; Trillo, 2002), reading (Abdullah Zadeh, 2006; Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007), Lectures (Dailey-O'Cain, 2000; Perez & Macia, 2002), academic genres (Abdi, 2002; Blagojevic, 2003; Bunton, 1999; Longo, 1994; Mauranen, 1993; Ventola & Mauranen, 1993), and student writings (Connor, 1984; Field & Yip, 1992; Intraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Johns, 1984; Johnson, 1992; Karasi, 1994; Norment, 1994; Steffensen & Cheng, 1996). These studies have targeted their use patterns of frequency. Judging from the work reviewed thus far, DMs play an important role in a text's cohesion and coherence. The writer of this paper can assume that discourse markers have some relationship with a discourse's cohesion, texture and coherence. Then the writer can put forward a hypothesis: in order to make their English writing more cohesive and more coherent, besides reference, substitution and ellipsis, students are also very likely to use discourse markers in their essays. If this is true, teacher should be clear about how their students use discourse markers and how they use discourse markers correctly and appropriately. Knowing that, teachers can take positive and effective steps when they teach English writing. Therefore, There is a significant relationship between teaching discourse markers and enhancement.

1.1. Research Question

Does discourse markers instruction have any significant effect on improving writing of intermediate EFL learners?

1.2. Research hypothesis

To answer the above question the following hypothesis made

Null hypothesis: discourse markers instruction does not have any significant effect on improving writing of intermediate EFL learners.

Sub - hypothesis: discourse markers instruction has a significant effect on improving writing of intermediate EFL learners.

Therefore, seeing the need to better understand this powerful construct, we designed a study to investigate the productive role of DMs in writing. In explaining discourse markers to learners, instructors can explain that such words are helpful or necessary whenever they are writing.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The participants of the present investigation consisted of 60 Iranian learners of English in Pezhvak English language institute in Bojnourd, Iran. Their age ranged from 14 to 22 years and all participants studied at intermediate level. To be unbiased, they were chosen randomly, most of them were students at high school level and a few were university students. The cohort in this study was small, because it was a classroom based study.

2.2. Design of the study

The design in the present study was the quasi-experimental design in which two groups are involved with one group receiving treatment. After the treatment, the test scores of two groups are compared to see the effectiveness of the treatment in the experiment group.

2.3. Materials

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.

2.4. Procedures

The subjects were asked to write an assay about the following topic ' what is the happiness?' Preventing from research bias, the writing was assigned as a classroom task, and the subjects did not know the purpose of this experiment. Thus we could ensure the subjects would use DMs as usual. During and after writing they received no feedback. 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 experiment was conducted within one session class time. They received no instruction. After collected, a small corpus of 60 articles has been established. Then the 60 articles were examined whether discourse markers had been used in them and how many discourse markers had been used. The evaluation of the obtained "mean" and their standard deviation revealed the fact that these two groups of the subjects were to a great extent homogenous. The experimental group

were then exposed to the explicit instruction of discourse markers in 10 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 make sentences using them. Participants were also regularly given sentences with eliminated discourse markers and were asked to fill the markers. They also have received a treatment about discourse markers which were found in natural and authentic texts, and told them the different functions each play in creating a meaningful text. Every session they were examined with a definite high usage type of discourse markers. The researcher has chosen the ones which are frequently used in the reading texts, such as: As well as, besides, moreover, and similarly (additive); although, however, on the other hand, though, and yet (adversative); because, for, since, thus, therefore, (causal); as soon as, finally, first, then, and until (temporal), actually, after all, as though, in case, in fact, and such as (other types), then the description of the roles that they play in the context. Note an example from this instruction:

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.

3. RESULTS

The result of tests of both groups implied that the more knowledge about discourse markers, the more cohesion text they can produce. Definitely, experimental group's learners created cohesion text in more efficient way than learners who do not know the role of discourse markers. Table 1 presents mean values and standard deviations by using DMs for each group in pre-test that shows their homogeneities. While Table 2 shows the findings of post-test of both groups, their difference performance after treatment sessions, the means (15.90 and 17.06) of two sets of scores indicate the high relationship between the instruction of DMs and subjects' ability in production of both cohesion and coherence texts. Therefore, the writer of the paper has evidence to support the claim that the instruction of DMs would be helpful for improvement in writing ability. As a result, the research hypothesis that instruction of DMs can enhance the learners' writing ability was supported by the results of the statistical analyses.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The obtained conclusions of this study confirm the claim of this research that explicit instruction affects the writing ability of intermediate EFL learners and improves it. it is concluded that instruction of discourse markers can be one of basic process in developing of writing ability, and learners profit from it and use it in an efficient way. A good writing is not only grammatical, but also cohesive and coherent (Feng 2010). Discourse markers have main role in cohesion of text, and should hold a central place in writing teaching. Nobody can't say discourse markers are decisive for English writing, but anybody can't deny they have great effect on the cohesion and coherence of writing. "Discourse markers tell us not only about the linguistic properties (e.g. semantic and pragmatic meanings, source, functions) of a set of frequently used expressions, and the organization of social interactions and situations in which they are used, but also about the cognitive, expressive, social, and textual competence of those who use them. Because the functions of markers are so broad, any and all analyses of markers-even those focusing on only a relatively narrow aspect of their meaning or a small portion of

their uses-can teach us something about their role in discourse (Schiffrin, 1987: 67)." One of the aims of learner training is to help learners become independent in the learning process and become more confident with writing task of language learning. Therefore, learners who can become more educated can better composing of cohesion text. The findings of this paper is supported by other papers which is related to this topic with former research by Traugott (1995), who has accounted the effect of DMs' relationship with self-perceived success of learners in writing in a foreign language, and "Discourse Markers in English Writing "by Li Feng who concludes that discourse markers function as one of the cohesive devices between words and sentences. He also believes that during English teaching, especially during English writing teaching, discourse markers should paid attention.

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Table 1. Means and Standard Deviation of Pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	30	15.38	1.73047
Control	30	15.30	1.61138

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviation of Post-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	30	17.06	1.19434
Control	30	15.90	1.26899