

The Effect of Discourse Markers on Cohesion and Clarity of Foreign Language Interaction

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Abstract

Discourse markers (DMs) are essential linguistic devices that regulate interaction, maintain cohesion, and ensure clarity in spoken communication. In foreign language context, learners often struggle not only with grammatical accuracy but also with the pragmatic use of DMs to manage turns and convey meaning effectively. This study investigate the use of DMs among third-year Iraqi EFL learners at the University of Basra. Data were collected through classroom recording using a Sony digital voice recorder and analyzed using Deborah Schiffrin's (1987) model of discourse coherence. The findings indicate that a limited set of DMs (yes, okay, good, well, so, you know, I think) were frequently used, mainly for turn-taking and acknowledgment functions. In contrast , others, such as actually, because, in my opinion, appeared less often. The absence of DMs was found to cause abrupt turns, unclear transitions, and reduced coherence, whereas their presence enhance the clarity and flow of interaction. The study concludes that explicit instruction in DMs should be integrated into EFL curricula to foster communicative competence, improve classroom discourse, and prepare learners for academic and professional interaction.

Keywords: (Discourse Markers, Cohesion, Clarity, Turn-taking) .

تأثير أدوات الخطاب على التماسك والوضوح في التفاعل اللغوي الأجنبي

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الملخص

تُعدُّ أدوات الخطاب عناصر لغوية أساسية تُستخدم لتنظيم التفاعل، والحفاظ على تماسك الحديث، وتحقيق الوضوح في التواصل الشفهي. ويواجه متعلمو اللغة الأجنبية صعوبة ليس فقط في تحقيق الدقة النحوية، بل أيضاً في الاستخدام العملي الصحيح لأدوات الخطاب عند إدارة الأدوار الكلامية ونقل المعنى بشكل فعال. تتناول هذه الدراسة استخدام أدوات الخطاب لدى طلبة المرحلة الثالثة من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في جامعة البصرة. جُمعت البيانات من خلال تسجيلات صافية باستعمال مسجل صوت رقمي من نوع Sony، ثم جرى تحليلها وفق نموذج شيفرين (١٩٨٧) للتماسك الخطابية. أظهرت النتائج أن مجموعة محدودة من أدوات الخطاب مثل: (yes, okay, good, well, so, you know, I think) كانت الأكثر استخداماً، وغالباً ما استُخدمت لإعراض إدارة الدور الكلامي وإلقاء وظيفة التوكيد أو الاستجابة. في المقابل، ظهرت أدوات أخرى مثل actually و because و in my opinion بصورة أقل. وقد تبين أن غياب أدوات الخطاب يؤدي إلى انتقالات مفاجئة، وغموض في الترابط، وانخفاض مستوى التماسك، في حين أنّ وجودها يعزّز وضوح التفاعل وسلاسة تدفق الحوار. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة إدماج تعليم أدوات الخطاب بشكل صريح ضمن مناهج تعليم الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، بهدف تعزيز الكفاءة التواصلية، وتحسين الخطاب الصفي، وإعداد الطلبة للتفاعل الأكاديمي والمهني بصورة أفضل. الكلمات المفتاحية: (أدوات الخطاب، التماسك، الوضوح، تناوب الأدوار الكلامية، نموذج شيفرين).

1. Introduction

In the process of learning a foreign language, successful communication requires more than mastery of vocabulary and grammar. Learning must also acquire pragmatic competence, which include the ability to use DMs to organize their speech, signal transitions, and maintain coherence. DMs such as *well*, *so*, *okay*, and *you know* do not add new propositional content to an

utterance but serve as interactional cues that guide the listener and clarify the structure of discourse (Fraser, 1999; Schiffrin, 1987). The use of DMs is particularly crucial in classroom contexts, where turn-taking and clarity of responses determine the effectiveness of learning. In foreign language classrooms, especially in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), the lack of DMs often leads to fragmented discourse, overlapping turns, and misunderstanding. Thus, analyzing how learners employ DMs provides insights into their communicative competence and helps identify pedagogical gaps.

This study examines how DMs influence cohesion and clarity in the speech of Iraqi EFL learners. Using Schiffrin's five-plane model, the researcher analyzes the functions of various DMs and highlights their role in organizing classroom interaction.

2. Problem Statement

Despite years of formal English instruction, many Iraqi university students still struggle to sustain clear and cohesive spoken interactions. One recurring problem is their limited or inappropriate use of DMs during turn-taking and extended responses. While teachers often use DMs to structure discourse, students rely on a narrow set of markers, such as yes or okay, which hampers their ability to maintain clarity and connect ideas.

This problem is significant because the absence of DMs disrupts turn-taking sequences, cause repetition of questions, and reduces the overall effectiveness of classroom communication. The present study address this gap by analyzing how students use or omit DMs, and what impact this has on the clarity and cohesion of their speech.

3. Aims of the Study

The study is guided by these aims:

1. To identify the range and frequency of DMs used by Iraqi EFL learners in classroom discourse.

2. To analyze the functions of these markers across Schiffrin's (1987) five levels of discourse coherence.
3. To evaluate the effect of the absence or misuse of DMs on turn-taking, clarity, and cohesion.

4. Theoretical Background

The role of DMs has long been highlighted as essential to developing pragmatic competence in second and foreign language learning. Unlike vocabulary or grammar, which operate at the oppositional level, DMs mainly operate at the pragmatic level, organizing speech, signaling transitions, and helping facilitate mutual understanding between speakers. According to Schiffrin (1987, p. 31), DMs serve as "contextual coordinates" that structure interaction across various discourse layers, including exchange structure, action structure, ideational structure, participation framework, and information state. Their pragmatic role thus goes beyond semantic content, as they give speakers the tools to negotiate meaning, express stance, and maintain conversational flow. This theoretical foundation has guided much subsequent research into low learners use, or fail to use, these devices in real discourse.

Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory of cohesion established that language is not merely a string of sentences, but rather a network of relations that create texture and coherence. Within this framework, DMs can be viewed as essential cohesive ties, linking utterances and signaling logical, temporal, or contrastive relationships. Their absence often results in disjointed, abrupt contributions that reduce comprehensibility. Fraser (1999) further refined this perspective by classifying DMs according to their semantic-pragmatic function, such markers enables a shift from fragmented speech toward more cohesive and listener- friendly communication, thereby enhancing the overall clarity of discourse.

Empirical studies in second language acquisition (ESL) have documented consistent challenge in learners' productive use of DMs. Aijmer (2002), for example, demonstrated that learners often rely on a narrow set of high-frequency markers, while underusing those that structure logical relations or signal interpersonal stance. Fung and Carter (2007) also reported that non-native speakers of English tend to over-rely on acknowledgment markers such as *yes* and *okay*, but underexploit markers like *well*, *actually*, or *you know*, which serve to negotiate face and alignment. These findings echo the present study's concern that Iraqi EFL learners exhibit a restricted repertoire of DMs, which in turn constrains their ability to achieve cohesion and clarity in classroom interaction.

The pedagogical dimension of DM instruction has been increasingly recognized. Rose and Kasper (2001) argue that pragmatic features such as DMs must be explicitly addressed in language teaching, since they are not automatically acquired through exposure. Anderson (2001, p. 17), examining adolescent discourse, showed that DMs are not mere "fillers" but re integral to identity construction and interpersonal negotiation. In classroom contexts, explicit awareness-raising tasks, role-plays, and corrective feedback can provide learners with opportunities to notice, practice, and internalize the pragmatic function of DMs. Without such pedagogical interventions, learners often plateau in their pragmatic development, leaving their spoken discourse less natural, less cohesive, and less interactive.

The study of DMs must also be situated within broader sociocultural and cross-linguistic perspectives. Muller (2004) found that German learners of English transferred interactional patterns from their first language, leading to distinct DM usage patterns that sometimes deviated from native norms. Similarly, Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg (2011) highlighted the variability of DM use across languages and cultures, suggesting that transfer effects play a significant role in shaping learner behavior. In the Iraqi EFL

context, learners' restricted reliance on a few markers such as *yes* and *okay* may reflect both the influence of Arabic discourse practices and the lack of targeted instruction in pragmatic devices. This underscores the necessity of integrating cross-cultural pragmatic into EFL curricula to ensure learners develop not only grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic versatility.

5. Deborah Schiffrin's Model of Discourse Coherence

According to Schiffrin (1987), discourse coherence is maintained across five planes:

1. Exchange Structure: the turn-taking system in conversation that determines who speaks, when, and how transition between speakers occur. Exchange Structure refers to the fundamental mechanics of turn-taking in conversation, how speakers coordinate who talks, when transitions occur, and how conversational shifts are negotiated. Conversation are inherently interactive, requiring implicit and explicit cues to regulate participation. DMs such as *well*, *okay*, and *now* play a critical role in managing conversational boundaries, signaling when speaker is yielding, continuing, or shifting the discussion. Schiffrin highlight how these markers prevent overlap, ensure smooth transition, and maintain an orderly flow of dialogue. For example, *okay* frequently functions as a turn-yielding device, acknowledging the end of speaker's point while subtly inventing the next speaker to take over. Similarly, *well* often appears when a speaker hesitates or repositions their response, allowing for conversational flexibility. This level of discourse coherence ensues that communication is not chaotic but rather structured through implicit social norms and linguistic devices that regulate the flow of speech. (Schiffrin, 1987)

2. Action Structure: The speech act level, where utterances perform specific actions, such as requesting, questioning, or asserting. While the exchange structure governs turn-taking, the action structure concerns the function of speech, how utterance perform specific communicative actions.

Drawing from Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962: Searle, 1969), Schiffrin illustrates how DMs help define whether an utterance is a question, command, assertion, or response. Markers such as *you know* and *I mean* often serves as conversational softeners or clarifiers, helping speakers navigate potential misinterpretations or social sensitivities. For instance, in a disagreement, a speaker might use *I mean* to modify the directness of their statement, signaling an attempt to rephrase or justify their position. Likewise, *but* functions as a contrastive DM, marking a shift in perspective or counterpoint, shaping the pragmatic force of the statement. Through these markers, Schiffrin shows how speakers not only convey information but also perform social action, negotiating meaning and managing their interpersonal stance. Understanding action structure highlight the pragmatic nature of discourse, here meaning is constructed not just through words, but through the way those words are framed and delivered. (Schiffrin, 1987)

3. Ideational Structure: the contrast and logical relationships between ideas, including cause-effect relations, contrast, and elaboration. Beyond turn-taking and speech acts, coherence in discourse depends on how ideas shape are logically connected. Ideational structure pertains to the organization of content, the way causal, contrastive, and elaborative relationships between ideas shape meaning. DMs such as *so*, *because*, and *then* structure thought by establishing cause-and-effect, sequencing, and elaboration (Schiffrin, 1987). For example, *so* is often used to introduce conclusions, linking previous information to an inferred outcome. Schiffrin demonstrates that these markers serve as cognitive scaffolding, helping listeners process relationships between ideas. Without these structuring devices, conversations would appear disjointed, as speakers would struggle to signal logical connections between different parts of discourse. By focusing on ideational structure, Schiffrin underscores the importance of

cohesion in meaning construction, showing how DMs guide both speaker intention and listener comprehension.

4. Participation Framework: The social roles and alignments between speakers, including how interlocutors engage with each other. Discourse is not just about exchanging information, it is also a social activity involving speakers with different roles, alignments, and relationship. The participation framework refers to the ways in which speakers position themselves and others within the conversation, shaping how discourse unfolds on an interpersonal level. Schiffrin argues that DMs like *you know*, *I mean*, and *well* are crucial in negotiating social relationships and ensuring conversational alignment. For example, *you know* function as a marker of shared knowledge, inviting the listener to affirm or confirm understanding. In contrast, *I mean* allows speakers to clarify their intent or adjust their message in response to their audience. The use of politeness markers, hesitation devices, and alignment signals ensures that discourse remain cooperative, fluid, and socially appropriate. Through this lens, Schiffrin's model emphasizes that coherence is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a relational process, where speakers continuously adjust their language to maintain engagement and social harmony. (Schiffrin, 1987)

5. Information State: The cognitive processing of discourse, including shared knowledge, presuppositions, and discourse progressing. The final level, information state, deal with how speakers manage knowledge within discourse, tracking what is already known, what is new, and how information progresses across conversation. DMs such as *oh* and *now* signal cognitive shifts, marking realization, topic changes, or reorientations. For instance, *oh* often introduces new information or sudden realization, while *now* can signal a transition to a new topic or a shift in discourse focus. Schiffrin explores how these markers help regulate listener expectations, guiding them through the speaker's thought process. By structuring how

information is introduced and processed, these markers play a key role in maintaining coherence, ensuring that conversations remain intelligible and cognitively accessible to all participants. (Schiffrin, 1987)

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Context

The study was conducted at the University of Basra, College of Education for Human Sciences, within the Department of English. The participation were third-year undergraduated students majoring in English. This context was chosen because students at this stage have already received extensive training in grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, yet their spoken fluency and discourse competence remain underdeveloped. The classroom setting provided an authentic site for examining naturally occurring interactions between students and instructors, enabling the analysis of how DMs function in real academic communication.

6.2 Participants

The participants consisted of students from two classroom sections, taught by two instructors. While not all students spoke equally, sufficient utterances were recorded to illustrate the use and absence of DMs in interaction. Ethical considerations were observed, as students' identities were anonymized and data were analyzed for research purposes only.

6.3 Data collection

Classroom interactions were recorded using a Sony digital voice recorder. A total of 6 hour, 46 minutes, and 32 seconds of spoken interaction were collected. The sessions included oral exams, classroom discussions, and problem-solving activities, which provided a variety of contexts for DM use. The data collected strategy aimed to capture both teacher and student utterances revealed the extent to which learners incorporated these pragmatic elements into their speech.

6.4 Sampling procedure

The analysis did not focus on one continuous conversation but rather on strategically selected utterances where DMs appeared or were noticeably absent. This approach allowed for comparison between cohesive exchanges facilitated by DMs and incoherent or abrupt turns caused by their omission. Particular attention was paid to transitional moments, question-answer sequences, and instances of hesitation or repair.

6.5 Analytical Framework

The transcribed utterances were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

- Qualitative analysis involved categorizing each DM according to Schiffrin's (1987) five-plane model: exchange structure, action structure, ideational structure, participation framework, and information state.
- Quantitative analysis included counting the frequency of each DM and calculating relative percentages of their occurrence in the dataset.

6.6 Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability, utterances were cross-checked multiple times during transcription to avoid misclassification of DMs. Instances of ambiguity (e.g., whether *yes* functioned as a backchannel or an agreement marker) were resolved by analyzing the broader conversational context. Validity was supported by grounding the study in an established theoretical model (Schiffrin, 1987) and triangulating findings with observations from related literature (Fraser, 199; Aijmer, 2002).

7. Dara Analysis

The analysis of the corpus revealed that Iraqi EFL learners rely heavily on a limited set of DMs, while teachers use a wider range to regulate classroom interaction. This section presents the frequency of occurrence, classification according to Schiffrin's five-plane, and examples illustrating how the presence or absence of DMs influenced cohesion and clarity.

7.1 Frequently Used DM and Their Functions

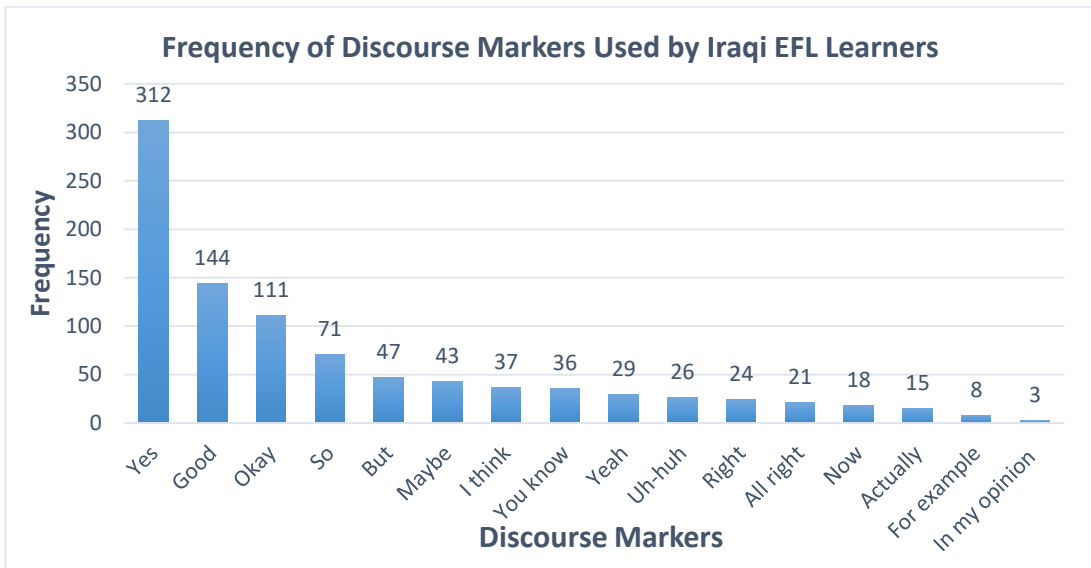
The following table summarizes the DMs identified in the dataset, their frequency of use, and the discourse plane where they most often functioned:

Frequency of Use and Functions of Discourse Markers

(Total= 10,544 words)

Discourse Markers	Plane of Discourse	Frequency	Function
Yes	Exchange Structure	312	Agreement, acknowledgment, turn acceptance
Good	Exchange/ Action	144	Evaluation, feedback, approval
Okay	Exchange Structure	111	Indicates topic closure or transition to a new idea
So	Ideational Structure	71	Indicates logical consequence or summarization
But	Ideational Structure	47	Signals contrast or a corrective move
Maybe	Ideational/ Action	43	Suggestion, hedging
I think	Action/ Participation	37	Expressing stance, subjective evaluation
You know	Participation Framework	36	Invites listener agreement or shared understanding
Yeah	Exchange Structure	29	Information agreement, turn acceptance
Uh-huh	Participation Framework	26	Backchannel support
Right	Exchange Structure	24	Agreement, maintain acknowledgment
All right	Exchange Structure	21	Confirmation, shift marker
Now	Information State	81	Topic shift or reorientation
Actually	Action	15	Clarification, correction
For example	Ideational Structure	8	Elaboration, illustration
In my opinion	Participation Framework	3	Marking stance explicitly

Figure (1)



8. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that DMs play a pivotal role in regulating turn-taking and ensuring cohesion within classroom interaction. A notable example is the use of okay by student when responding to teacher prompts. For instance, when asked, “So you are following the religious for instance, the religious rule?” , the student began with “Okay, I will explain for you.” Here, okay functioned as a prefatory marker, affording the student a brief pause before articulating the response and simultaneously signaling acknowledgment of the turn. Such use not only facilitate a smoother transition into the contribution but also minimized abruptness, thereby enhancing the clarity of exchange. Conversely, the absence of DM often rendered student utterances abrupt and fragmented. In response to the question “Now why does she wants to buy a new car?”, one student simply replied, “Her car often breaks down.” Without an introductory marker such as I think, the utterance appeared truncated and less cohesive. By contrast, a slightly elaborative version “I think her car often breaks down.”, would have provided a smoother entry and greater clarity. These examples underscore

the importance of DMs in scaffolding coherence and reducing the impression of abruptness in learner's speech.

The corpus also illustrates how teachers strategically deploy DMs to guide the progression of classroom discourse. For example, in the teacher's statement, "Now, let's move to the next question.", the marker now signaled a transition in the information state, redirecting learner focus and marking a shift in the lesson. Such usage exemplifies the instructor's role in managing the flow of interaction and modeling effective discourse practices for students. Teachers frequently employed markers such as well, now, and all right to frame tasks, smooth transitions, and maintain alignment within the classroom dialogue. This wider range of DM use contrasted sharply with the narrower repertoire of students, who relied predominantly on yes, okay, and good. Analysis of the corpus further revealed that ideational markers establishing logical relationships, such as so, because, or but were noticeably underused by students. This weakened the coherence of their explanations, as the logical links between ideas were often left implicit. Such findings resonate with earlier research (Muller, 2004; Fung & Carter, 2007), which documents EFL learners tendency to depend on a limited set of acknowledgment and turn-taking markers while underusing those that establish more complex logical or rhetorical relationships. By contrast, teachers' broader and or strategic use of DMs highlighted their role as pragmatic models, offering implicit input on how such markers can organize and clarify discourse.

Taking together, these results confirm that while students demonstrate awareness of certain DMs and employ them in predictable context, their overall repertoire remains limited. The gap between receptive awareness and productive application underscores the need for explicit pedagogical intervention. Instruction should move beyond raising awareness to guided practice, with a focus on underused categories, such as reformulates (I

mean), alignment markers (you know), and ideational connectors (so, because), by incorporating these into communicative activities, learners can be supported in expanding their pragmatic competence and achieving smoother, more coherent spoken interaction.

9. Conclusion

This study investigate the use of DMs among third-year Iraqi EFL learners at the University of Basra though Schiffrin's (1987) five-plan model. The result demonstrated that learners relied heavily on a limited set of basic markers (yes, okay, good) that facilitated turn-taking and acknowledgement, but showed limited use of ideational and reformulative markers necessary for expressing logical relations and managing discourse more strategically. In contrast, teachers employed a wider range of DMs, such as well, now, and all right, to structure the lesson, guide transitions, and model effective communicative practices. The contrast between teacher and student usage highlights a developmental gap in learners' pragmatic competence. When markers were absent, student contribution often appeared abrupt, fragmented, and less cohesive, underscoring the essential role of DMs in scaffolding clarity and less coherence. These findings suggest that while learners recognize and occasionally use DMs, they have not yet internalized their strategic application.

Pedagogically, the result call for explicit instruction in the density, variety, and contextual appropriateness of DM use. Integrating guided practice with markers of turn-taking (well, okay), reformulation (I mean), and alignment (you know) can help students move beyond minimal acknowledgment toward richer, more cohesive discourse. By fostering both awareness and productive competence, educators can bridge the observed gap, enabling learners to employ DMs not merely as fillers but as integral tools for managing interaction and achieving communicative clarity. Future research could build on these findings by examining how targeted

interventions impact learners' pragmatic development across different contexts and proficiency levels. Such work would deepen understanding of how DM instruction contributes to broader communicative competence in EFL settings.

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