The Importance of Discourse Markers in English Speaking A case study of 3rd year English majors at Haiphong University

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Abstract: *This paper aims to investigate into the applicability of discourse markers among 3rd English majors then evaluate how important they are in helping speakers and hearers achieve a common understanding while making conversation as a coherent tool. The author carried out this case study on 40 of 3rd year English majors (01 class) by giving pre-test, post-test (speaking tests) and observations. The findings of the study show the remains and how the students use discourse markers in speaking or making conversation. Through the analysis on both the qualitative and quantitative results, the study supports and proves the importance of discourse markers in English learning and teaching. It also points out the problems faced by a group of 3rd English majors and suggests some possible solutions for both teachers and students to solve the problems. Later this study provides a possible way for the future teaching of discourse markers, which in turn might provide a useful framework for teaching methods.*

Keywords: *Importance*, *discourse markers, English speaking, 3rd English majors*

1. Introduction

To trace back to the history, I. Harris and T. F. Mitchell initiated the idea on discourse analysis in the middle of the 20th century. And Discourse Analysis was first used by Harris in his book Discourse Analysis (1952). Later Mitchell further developed the theory in The Language of Buying and Selling in Cryenaica (1957). With time passing by, the study of discourse is receiving more and more attention and gradually broadening its category and influence on many aspects.

The production and comprehension of coherent discourse is an interactive process which requires several different types of knowledge. According to Shiffrin, one type of competence is social and expressive----the ability to use language to display personal and social identities, to perform actions, and to negotiate relationships between self and other. Still other types of competence are cognitive, e.g. the ability to organize conceptual information and to represent it through language, and textual, e.g. the ability to create and understand messages within units of language longer than a single sentence. Hence, people need to use a coherent tool to connect a more complicated sentence or more. Discourse markers appeared to help hearers and speakers to

2. Content

2.1. Literature review:

2.1.1. The definitions of discourse markers

As Richard Nordquist, 2020 a discourse marker is a particle (such as oh, like, and you know) that is used to direct or redirect the flow of conversation without adding any significant paraphrasable meaning to the discourse. Also known as DM, discourse particle, discourse connective, pragmatic marker, or pragmatic particle.

In most cases, discourse markers are syntactically independent: that is, removing a marker from a sentence still leaves the sentence structure intact.

Traditionally, discourse markers are restricted only to speech, as it is showed in the following definitions: Discourse markers are: Linguistic expressions that is used to signal the relation of an utterance to the immediate context with the primary function of bringing to listener's attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context (Redeker, 1991) ISSN 1799-2591; Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 3, No. 11, pp. 2136-2140, November 2013 © 2013 ACADEMY PUBLISHER Manufactured in Finland. doi:10.4304/tpls.3.11.2136-2140 © 2013 ACADEMY PUBLISHER.

Discourse markers which display the speaker's understanding of the contribution's sequential

relationship or relevance to the information set as established by the immediately preceding contribution (Goldberg, 1980). Certain set of signals in the conversationalist's speech, used to introduce level shifts within the conversation, or to prepare listeners for the next run in the logical argument (Keller, 1979). Expressions which help the speaker divide his message into chunks of information and hence they also help the listener in the process of decoding these information units (Erman, 1986).

Most of the above-mentioned definitions bound discourse markers only to spoken language. Since, discourse markers are used to maintain and achieve conversational continuity and seen as response signals and essentially interactive to express the relation or relevance of an utterance to the preceding utterance or to the context.

2.1.2. Functions of Discourse Markers

"Although somewhat dated, [this list of functions based on Laurel J. Brinton (1990:47f)] is still relevant to current studies of discourse markers. According to the list, discourse markers are often used:

a, to initiate discourse

b, to mark a boundary in discourse (shift/partial shift in topic)

c, to preface a response or a reaction

d, to serve as a filler or delaying tactic

e, to aid the speaker in holding the floor

f, to effect an interaction or sharing between speaker and hearer

g, to bracket the discourse either cataphorically or anaphorically,

h, to mark either foregrounded or backgrounded information."

(Simone Müller, *Discourse Markers in Native and Non-Native English Discourse*. John Benjamins, 2005)

2.1.3. Classification of Discourse Markers

* Enumeration/ Addition

Enumeration such as: first, second, third, …

Addition: in addition, furthermore, moreover, …

* Summation: in conclusion, overall, in a nutshell, …

* Apposition:

Restatement: which is to say, in other words, namely, …

Example: for example, for instance, …

* Result/ interference: therefore, thus, hence, …

*. Contrast/ concession:

Contrast: on the one hand, on the other hand, in contrast, …

Concession: however, anyway, nevertheless, though, …

Transition: by the way, incidentally, …

2.1.4. Importance of discourse markers in English speaking

Vande Kopple (1985) shows that discourse markers are a kind of linguistic items which appear both in spoken and written language and are those items which can help the reader/listeners organize, interpret and evaluate the information.

Since, effects of discourse markers on speaking can be said to include two processes: comprehension and production. During the comprehension stage, students try to get an idea of what to be learned, e.g. the definition, classification, features and structure and try to make out the relevant theory and how it works or functions. This process is fulfilled largely by a great amount of input such as through reading, thinking and teacher's explanation. After contacting with 40 students for a period of time, I find out learners will know the basic and general knowledge of what to be learned. But this doesn't mean that they have acquired everything and been able to use them successfully, especially in speaking.

Effects of discourse markers on speaking process. The first stage is just memorize and recognize the basic and frequently-used discourse markers with the help of teachers who point out and explain these items in texts. Students begin to realize that their existence is somewhat helpful. Then students begin to try using the items they have learned in their speaking. Teachers are supposed to provide timely help by correcting their wrong and inappropriate uses.

During this period students are required and encouraged to read more and listen more model materials and try to pay attention to these special items and learn to use them. Then through constant practice, students are supposed to come to an advanced level to learn and know some knowledge about discourse and discourse analysis such as the important cohesion and coherence view in discourse analysis, discourse structure, and discourse style, which will greatly help them.

2.2. Methodology, finding and discussion

2.2.1. Methodology

* Informants

Participants are 40 3rd year English majors of Haiphong University. The English acquisition of informants varies much from very limited into groups of excellent, good, fair language competence. They are all 3rd year English majors of Haiphong University; average age is 20, lowest 19 and highest is 23.

2.1.2. Data collection

Participants joined 2 rounds of survey; survey one three days before survey two in order to ensure truthfulness, consistency and accuracy in the surveys. 40 students are met and taking the sample test of speaking skill.

* Data analysis

Finding frequency distribution as seen from parameters by using quantitative method.

Qualitative method is used to review the typical mistakes sections.

Once the findings are available, a hypothesis is formulated, and then is tested against the facts through an oral interview.

2.2.2. The findings and discussion

Through analyzing 40 speaking tests of 40 English majors, the author gets the following result: 35% using correct discourse markers, 30% rarely using discourse markers, 20% and 15 % no discourse markers are used. This fact apparently leads to the students' marks of speaking skill are not so high

The results from the study also support the idea that discourse markers do occupy a position in English learning and teaching. However, on the other hand, the study also points out some problems or the situation of English majors concerning the use of discourse markers in their speaking: in spite of the students' realization of the importance of discourse markers in language leaning, the students cannot use them well in everyday conversation, which indicates that more support, guidance and instruction from teachers are needed and in terms of the students, more attention and exercises are necessary in order to obtain the automatic application of these discourse markers.

According to the study, the appropriate meaning of discourse markers depends on their surrounding context and the marker itself does not add any meaning, therefore can be deleted from a text without any apparent sacrifice to meaning. However, in spite of this empty interpretation, they might facilitate comprehension of spoken text by acting as filled pauses, therefore gibing listeners more time to process the speech signal and making its segmentation more explicit.

3. Conclusion

In short, it will be a good way to understand, use and combine discourse markers approach with other methods to facilitate speaking process and ensure a learning success. At the same time another thing which is worth emphasizing is that since over emphasis on discourse markers may distract students from the very subject matter, and lead to a failure in understanding, thus any over emphasis on the learning *and teaching of discourse markers should avoided in order to bring out a most* efficient and effective result.

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