The writing makers of college students: A discourse analysis

Lu, Hayden ✉
University of Mindanao, Philippines (iamhaydensity@gmail.com)

Dahunog, Iel Lykha
University of Mindanao, Philippines (i.dahunog.124767.tc@umindanao.edu.ph)

Morales, Jenny Rose
University of Mindanao, Philippines (j.morales.125233.tc@umindanao.edu.ph)

Ranain, Norhynie
University of Mindanao, Philippines (n.ranain.124451.tc@umindanao.edu.ph)

Abstract

The primary aim of the study was to analyze discourse markers used in the twenty essays of first-year GE 2 students at the University of Mindanao Tagum College by adopting Functional Classes of Discourse Markers, Misuse Patterns of Discourse Markers Theory, and Rhetorical Structure Theory. The result showed that the most widely used discourse markers were "and" (44 %), followed by "because" (15%), "but" (8%), "so" (7%), "or" (7%), "when" (6%), "for example" (5%), "then" (2%), "also" (2%), "thus", "lastly," "therefore," and "as a result" (1%). The findings also revealed that students employed elaborative markers to link phrases to add information, inferential markers specify reasons, contrastive markers introduce opposing statement, and temporal markers indicated events happening at the same time. In addition, students misused some discourse markers in their writing. The study also concluded that students' ability in using discourse markers has to be developed to write the flow of their thoughts in a meaningful and precise manner for readers.

Keywords: discourse markers, written discourse, discourse analysis, discourse, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Students are expected to demonstrate linguistic abilities such as composing, developing, and analyzing ideas and discourse knowledge, primarily in writing. Halliday (2014) said that what distinguishes good writing is cohesion and coherence, which are essential factors in the creation of comprehensive texts. Hence, the writer must create a text that will be easily understood for the reader to comprehend the meaning of a text. Furthermore, text organization is one of the most critical factors in determining a good piece of writing, particularly among undergraduates, as they are required to learn how to write various types of essays in class and are also evaluated academically through writing (The University Library; Haruna, Ibrahim, Ibrahim, & Yunus, 1984). The goal of communication, whether spoken or written, is to deliver the correct meaning or message, as well as to meet the needs of others. For this reason, cohesion and coherence must be considered when planning to write a well-organized text. It is stated that there are some relationships between those sentences that are a feature that cannot be separated from a text, one of which is discourse markers.

Al-Khazraji considered discourse markers as phrases and words connecting one discourse section to another. A writer employs these markers to create a unified, reader-friendly text. Additionally, Markham (2019) mentioned that discourse markers are numerous and diverse linking words or phrases that connect sentences and can appear at any point in oral or written discourse, starting, middle, or end. Furthermore, Banguis said that discourse markers are imperative in organizing human thoughts to deliver clear messages. Despite the claims about the influence of discourse markers on the comprehensiveness of written works, Quintero found that one of the main difficulties that students perceive when authoring an essay is related to coherence and cohesion which is related to the usage and employment of discourse markers in their written compositions.

In this qualitative discourse analysis study, we identify the discourse markers utilized and the errors made while using written discourse markers, which determined by analyzing how students use discourse markers in their essays. The researchers realize their study based on the writings of first-year GE 2 students at the University of Mindanao Tagum College (UMTC). The data acquired from academic articles written between the years 2021 and 2022. To achieve the study's objectives, essays are used to collect data. Considering this, the essays are evaluated using Fraser's (2006) taxonomy of discourse markers as the primary foundation for recognizing and categorizing the discourse markers in the students' writings. Misuse Patterns of Discourse Markers by Kao and Chen is used to analyze the misused discourse markers, and Rhetorical Structure Theory by Mann & Thompson is also used to know how students employ discourse markers in their essays. The data are analyzed using discourse analysis. In addition, the study does not include essays written by students from other year levels, subjects, or schools outside the first-year students at UMTC in GE2 class; hence, they are excluded from the study.

The findings of this study provide factual information that benefit educational institutions, teachers, students, and future researchers. The results also aid in improving teaching discourse markers and continue developing the students' written competence. Moreover, the study further allows students to be aware of their ability and knowledge about different kinds of discourse markers that frequently affect the meaning or context in the written essays. Additionally, the outcomes and description of this study would be an outstanding contribution to restraining the complications when it comes to teaching discourse markers.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

➢ What are the Discourse Markers present in the essay?

➢ What Discourse Markers are misused in the essay?

> ➤ How were Discourse Markers used in the essay?

This research is based on three theories. The first theory is by Bruce Fraser (1990). He studies Discourse Markers from a grammatical, pragmatic standpoint. In his 1999 study, Fraser describes Discourse Markers as a pragmatic class of lexical expressions taken primarily from the syntactic types of conjunctions, adverbials, and prepositional phrases. Discourse Markers indicate a connection between the interpretation of the section they introduce, Segment 2, and the preceding part, Segment 1. They have a procedural rather than a conceptual, fundamental meaning, and their more particular interpretation is 'negotiated' by the linguistic and conceptual context. Fraser (1994) distinguishes three "potential syntactic arrangements of DMs in sequences, ignoring the initial/medial/final option": (a) Segment 1, Discourse Marker+Segment 2, (b) Segment 1. Discourse Markers + Segment 2, (c) Discourse Marker+Segment 1+Segment 2. He identified four fundamental semantic relationships: Contrastive Discourse Markers, Elaborative Discourse Markers, Inferential Discourse Markers, and Temporal Discourse Markers.

Both theories mentioned above serve as tools in conducting this research. Fraser's Functional Classes of Discourse Markers (2006), Kao and Chen's Six Misuse Patterns of Discourse Markers (313-314), along with Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann & Thompson, 1988) enable us to determine the discourse markers found in the essays, identify discourse markers that are misused discourse markers, and how students of UMTC used discourse markers in their essays.

2. Method

This study was primarily concerned with analyzing Discourse Markers in students' writings. So, to collect data for analyzing the Discourse Markers used by first-year students at the University of Mindanao Tagum College (UMTC), the researchers used the essays written by randomly selected 20 students in the GE 2 Purposive Communication with Interactive Learning course as primary data. Qualitative researchers used written artifacts as a data source "for appreciated historical insights, identifying possible leanings, and explaining how things should become what they are" (Astari, p. 34).

The analysis of the essays was based on Fraser's Taxonomy of Discourse Markers Model (2006) because of the discourse marker commonly reinforced in written texts. It was one of the most comprehensive taxonomies for classifying discourse markers and was highly relevant to academic written discourse (Rabab'ah, Ma'touq, & Alghazo, 2007). Many researches, like this one, adhere to Fraser's (2006) previous categorization since its attention was not only on the semantic content of the segments but also on the discourse roles of discourse markers. The taxonomy of Fraser was also fitted in the analysis procedure of this study. Fraser distinguished four classes of discourse markers: contrastive discourse markers, elaborative discourse markers, inferential discourse markers, and temporal discourse markers. This taxonomy aided in analyzing coherence relations, sentences, and clauses joined for rhetorical purposes such as elaboration, condition, cause, or justification.

3. Results

The Discourse Markers (DMs) found in 20 essays written by 20 first-year students at the University of Mindanao in their GE 2 Purposive Communication with Interactive Learning course in the academic year 2021-2022 were identified by the researchers. As the essential reference for the analysis, the researchers used Fraser's (2006) Taxonomy of DMs, which was categorized into four: Contrastive Discourse Markers (CDM), Elaborative Discourse Markers (EDM), Inferential Discourse Markers (IDM), and Temporal Discourse Markers (TDM). 100 discourse markers were found, coded, and classified under the four classes of Fraser's Taxonomy of Discourse Markers (2006). In this regard, the researchers tabulated and displayed the data in table 3 to provide a concise description of the entire data set and to assist the reader in quickly interpreting the data for the answer to the first research question, as described below.

4. Discussion

Based on the analysis, students employed a variety of discourse markers in their writing, with "and" (44 %) being the most frequently used discourse marker. This is followed by "because" (15%), "but" (8%), "so" (7%), "or" (7%), "when" (6%), "for example" (5%), "then" (2%), "also" (2%), "thus", "lastly," "therefore," and "as a result" (1%), respectively. This analysis also supported Fraser's claim that "and" and "but" are primary discourse markers because they are the most used markers in their respective classes (301). However, based on findings, the supposed primary discourse marker "so" under the IDM category is replaced by "because." Additionally, identified primary temporal discourse marker, "then," was only used twice in the essays.

The most commonly used discourse marker, which is used overwhelmingly more than the others, is "and." The same findings were found in some related studies. The results of Sherly's study on the discourse markers used in academic writing by male and female students revealed that the elaborative discourse markers used in female students' essays were different from those used in male students' essays, yet "And" was still the most prevalent discourse marker used by both genders. The over-reliance on "and" is familiar to L2 English users who use it repeatedly in a sentence to elaborate further on an idea (Dumlao & Wilang, 2006). In this sense, first-year students of the University of Mindanao Tagum College can be inferred that are more likely to employ the discourse marker "and" to elaborate on their ideas. In addition, it is expected that elaborative discourse markers are used heavily in written academic texts as writers have the greatest need for the elaborative function.

"And" is followed by "because" as the second most frequently used discourse marker in students' essays. The appeal of "because" as a causative discourse marker among students could explain its frequent usage (Rabab'ah, Ma'touq, & Alghazo, 2020). The marker "because" was dominantly utilized in connection to some aspect of the previous statement in the context. The discourse marker "but" follows. This analysis yields the same result as Syahdanis (162). Contrastive discourse markers (CDMs) were his study's third most prevalent type of marker because students frequently utilized the primary discourse marker "but." Students used the discourse marker "but" to compare and contrast one idea with another and present the opposing opinion. It should emphasize that only the contrastive discourse marker employed by the students in this study suggests that they are more likely to utilize "but" to present a contrast in their ideas. Furthermore, this could be due to a high degree of exposure to this marker at an early stage of English language learning (Rabab'ah, Ma'touq, & Alghazo 212).

After "but" comes "so" and "or." It has been discovered that students are more likely to use "so" in their essays instead of using the other inferential discourse markers that serve the same function, such as "thus" and "as a result." This situation occurred possibly due to learners' attempt to be more personal, emotional, and subjective, which aligns with Choemue and Bram's findings (1220). The discourse marker "or" is one of the fourth most frequently used in the essays of GE 2 first-year students of the University of Mindanao. It is employed chiefly to indicate choices or different suggestions. The same observation is congruent with the study of Alsaawi (169). Surprisingly, "then" is not the primary discourse marker under the temporal discourse marker (TDM) in this analysis; it is "when." This result is quite surprising because it indicates that students could know how to use "when" as a temporal marker in a text. However, they were placed incorrectly in some segments. Thus, it is concluded that students may lack sufficient knowledge on how to use 'when' as temporal markers in a sentence. Additionally, the students use an elaborative marker to support their arguments, such as "for example," which clarifies the statement by giving examples.

Moreover, the majority of misuse patterns affect the cohesion of the clauses. Based on the analysis, the Discourse Markers "but" and "because" are prevalently misused markers since "but" is analyzed as a distraction, and "because" is identified to commit surface logicality because it failed to enforce logicality on segments without definite meaning. This leads to the inappropriate placement of specific discourse markers that make the sentences more difficult to comprehend and obscures the link between the two segments of the text. It has been demonstrated that students can use discourse markers without adequately understanding their function, resulting in various patterns of misuse.

Thus, out of the six misuse Discourse Marker patterns proposed by Kao and Chen (313-314), only four were identified in the 20 essays of GE2 students. These are a distraction, overuse, wrong relation, and surface logicality. Additionally, one must use punctuation correctly to prevent using the same discourse markers in a phrase or avoid misusing markers. This is backed by Riznanda's (2021) argument that to offer a coherent explanation, students must have adequate knowledge of the proper functions of various discourse markers to improve the quality of their writing and create text cohesion (9-10).

Based on the result, some students know enough about Discourse Markers' functions. Nisa concluded that the mastery of cohesion tools positively correlates with academic essay writing skills (971). Therefore, mastery of Discourse markers is used to determine the high and low levels of students' essay writing skills. This apparent variation in the use of Discourse Markers by first-year students at the University of Mindanao Tagum College enrolled in GE2-Purposive Communication during the academic year 2021-2020 demonstrates that students only used familiar discourse markers, resulting in the complete absence of other markers. This finding supports Al-khazraji's (2019) conclusion that the efficient use of Discourse Markers is an essential element. A lack of it is seen as a novice error among second language writers. This study is also in line with Rabab'ah's conclusion that there should be an awareness of the importance of using discourse markers correctly for cohesion and coherence, as well as the impact of misusing discourse markers on oral and written communication.

5. References

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