Discourse Markers in L1 and Chinese L2 English Conversations: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Discourse markers frequently appear in people's daily oral communication, and they are diverse in types and functions. As a result, many linguists have conducted in-depth studies on discourse markers from various perspectives, producing a large amount of relevant literature on the theme of discourse markers. However, little research has been devoted to reviewing the existing literature to provide more researchers with the current state of research on discourse markers. This study represents a systematic literature review related to discourse markers in dialogues from native English speakers and non-native English speakers. Through thematic analysis, a qualitative research method, studies of discourse markers in dialogues from native English speakers and non-native English speakers were systematically analyzed. The findings suggest that women are more proficient in DMs than men, the longer they have lived abroad the more proficient they are in DMs, the higher the level of English proficiency the more proficient they are in DMs, and so on. Also, there is a lack of innovation in the way discourse markers are categorized regarding the use of discourse markers by different types of native English speakers and non-native English speakers. In addition, different scholars have different definitions and explanations about the functions of discourse markers in dialogues, but in general, the DMs functions in different studies are homogeneously defined and classified. This study enriches the research related to discourse markers in dialogues from native English speakers and non-native English speakers, with a systematic literature review to understand the current state of research and research gaps, which is conducive to providing ideas and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: discourse markers, dialogues, non-native English speaker, native English speaker

1 Introduction

Dialogues are one of the most common forms of communication in people's daily lives either online or offline. In communication, people use different features and styles of discourse markers within dialogues to exchange information. Discourse markers play an important role in helping speakers engage in a more balanced and smoother com-

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munications [1]. As a result, speakers tend to use discourse markers in their expressions, such as “like”, “you know” and “I mean”.

First of all, regarding the definition of discourse markers (DMs), which is adopted in this study, DMs are defined as lexical expressions of a discourse level beyond the syntactic level, indicating conceptual or linguistic relations between contexts [2]. Secondly, regarding the functions and roles of DMs, Fung and Carter pointed out that DMs play significant roles for language learners at the interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive levels [3]. DMs are used in interpersonal communication as a tool for building solidarity, denotatively to indicate textual relations structurally to locate and organize discourse, and cognitively to indicate thought processes in speech and confirmation of the speaker’s level of understanding of the listener [3]. Moreover, DMs can act as exclamations, social communication formulas, and hesitation fillers in different linguistic expressions [4].

At present, there are numerous linguistic studies on the use of DMs by native English speakers and the acquisition of DMs by non-native English speakers. Among the existing studies, plenty of studies have used corpus, interviews, and discussions from native and non-native English speakers, combining quantitative and qualitative studies to analyze the use of DMs in conversations. However, few studies have systematically reviewed previous studies of DMs in dialogues with native and non-native English speakers.

This study fills the research gap mentioned above by working on the types and functions of DMs used by native and non-native English speakers in dialogues such as which functions of DMs they tend to use, as well as, differences in the use of DMs by different groups of native and non-native English speakers based on gender, age, and English proficiency. Finally, this systematic review can point out research gaps in this area, thus providing suggestions for future research. Therefore, this study enriches research on DMs by non-native English speakers and native English speakers. It offers synthesized sources for researchers who are interested in understanding the status and gaps of DMs in dialogues from native English speakers and non-native English speakers.

This study is guided by two research questions:

(1)How do different groups of native and non-native English speakers use DMs in dialogues?

(2)Which DMs and which functions are used by native and non-native English speakers in dialogues?

2 Methods

As a systematic literature review study, this study utilizes Google Scholar, a scholarly search engine, and two databases: Web of Science and Linguistic Language Behavior Abstract, to collect relevant previous studies. The search keywords include: discourse marker, pragmatic marker, non-native English speaker, native English speaker.

Afterward, the literature searched from the three databases is selected using the screening criteria: 1) literature in English, 2) discourse markers in spoken conversa-

tions, and 3) spoken conversations from native English speakers and Chinese second language learners of English. After screening, the needed literature was downloaded and compiled into one folder. In total, there are 19 references used in this literature review, from 1999 to 2024. In particular, the findings section of the literature review used 15 references in total. Their specific classification, total number and percentage will be shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. References used in the Findings

Findings	Total Number	Percentage/%
Group differences	8	53
Discourse Marker Functions	7	46

Then, the literature was analyzed for data using thematic analysis, a qualitative research method. Specifically, first, the Introduction section of the articles was reviewed to gain an overall picture of each study. Secondly, the participants, research method, research questions, and findings were reviewed for research design and results. Finally, the Conclusion section of the studies was reviewed for major findings. Following the extraction of information from the literature, the extracted information was categorized and integrated according to its relevance to research questions. The literature analyzed in this study is divided into two main categories. The first category is the participants of research on dialogues, which includes two subcategories respectively, native English speakers and Chinese non-native English speakers. The second category is the functions of DMs in dialogues, which includes three subcategories: the overall functions of DMs, the functional category, and the functions of particular DMs.

3 Findings

3.1 Group Differences

About the literature on non-native speakers of English as research participants. Chinese English as Foreign Language Learners' use of DMs may differ depending on gender and identity through classroom discussions and interviews [5]. Specifically, females use DMs more frequently than males, and identity influences the use of DMs [5]. In addition, Chinese non-native English speakers in the United States also demonstrate differences because of gender and social background, in the use of DMs, but age and length of stay in English-speaking countries showed weaker influences [6]. Wei conducted a comparative study of Chinese non-native English speakers with different levels of English proficiency, and reported that students with advanced and intermediate levels of English proficiency showed similar use of DMs, they tended to use certain DMs more frequently, showing that the better the English proficiency, the more active the students are in utilizing DMs to build up the coherence of interaction [7]. Meanwhile, the use of DMs by adult English language learners without formal English instruction was analyzed using classroom interactions and interviews [8]. Those with higher levels of English proficiency were more proficient in the use of DMs and were better able to assimilate into the English-speaking culture [8].

About the study of native English speakers as research participants, Erman studied the use of "you know" in adult and adolescent DMs in the UK and the US and showed that adults and adolescents do not use "you know" in the same way, with adults tending to use "you know" as a means of coherence [9]. In contrast, adolescents focus on "you know" as a confirmation that a message has been successfully communicated [9]. Furthermore, Macaulay collected information on the use of "you know" in DMs in Scotland using two different methods, interviews and same-sex conversations [10]. The results of the study indicated that there are differences in the use of "you know" in terms of age, gender, and social class, which includes six findings [10]. For instance, adolescents use "you know" less than older people, women use "you know" more frequently than men, and the middle class uses "you know" in the middle of the discourse for self-repair or elaboration purposes, while the working class uses it mainly at the end of sentences [10].

In an overall view of native English speakers and non-native English speakers as a whole, non-native English speakers do not view DMs as favorably as native English speakers, which may lead to non-native English speakers deliberately avoiding the use of DMs in dialogue [11]. This view is supported by Blanchard's Corpus study on the use of "like" in DMs, which shows that non-native English speakers and English Native English speakers use the DMs "like" less [12].

3.2 Discourse Marker Functions

In terms of the functions of DMs, Fedriani and Sansó stated that the main function of DMs is to keep things coherent, in addition to other functions such as politeness marking, turn marking, and hesitation marking [13]. To be more specific, DMs may entail four functions [13]. First, ideational function refers to discourse relations in real events [13]. The second, rhetorical function means the language of discourse relations between epistemic and speech act events as well as meta-linguistic functions [13]. Third, the sequential function indicates the structure of discourse fragments. Fourth, the interpersonal functions pertain to the interaction between communicators [13]. Erman defined the function of DMs as a monitor of discourse and states that DMs play this role mainly in the textual, social, and meta-linguistic domains [9]. The textual domain indicates the fact that speakers use DMs to turn fragments into coherent texts [9]. The social domain means the use of DMs for fluent and meaningful communication between conversationalists [9]. The meta-linguistic domain shows the fact that DMs focus on the language itself [9].

In the study which gave different functions played by different DMs are shown in the Table 2. Truong pointed out that DMs such as "anyway" and "right" make the conversation open or close, "you know" and "I mean" enhance interactionality and reciprocity, "because" and "so" explain the reason and result [14]. Specially, "so" can function as opening the floor [15]. Truong also mentioned that "and", "or", and "but" can linking and expand different opinions [14]. Balbay and Dogan added that "but" and "however" can be used to show the disagreement of opinions [16].

Table 2. Different functions played by different DMs.

Discourse Markers	Functions
Anyway and Right	To make the conversation open or close
You Know and I mean	To enhance interactionality and reciprocity
Because	To explain the reason and result
So	To explain the reason and result and opening the floor
And and Or	To link and expand different opinions
But	To link and expand different opinions and show the disagreement of opinions
However	To show the disagreement of opinions

About the study focus on the specific DMs. Blanchard pointed out that the most frequent function of "like" as DMs in spoken interactions is to emphasize context and emotion further, which means to give more detail to the upcoming information and to make the dialogues more engaging [17]. Fox and Schrock summarized five functions of "you know" in DMs: interpersonal, turn management, repair, monitoring, and organization [18]. Interpersonal function has three different sub-functions, the first is to attract the listener's attention, the second is to express uncertainty when expressing conflicting information, and the third is to express politeness when faced with face-threatening statements [18]. The second function is turn management, which indicates that "you know" occurs at any place of the discourse, whether at the beginning, middle, or end [18]. The third function is repair, which refers to the occurrence of predictable repairs in order to enable the listener to draw the desired conclusion [18]. The fourth function is monitoring, which refers to the use of "you know" to go back-channelling [18]. The last function is organization, which has three different sub-functions, the first is topic shifting, such as introducing background, reasons, justifications, implications, and closing the discourse [18]. The second function is emphasis, which is to highlight the main idea and focus [18]. The third function is a quotation, which is the introduction of existing information [18]. The functions of "I mean" are divided into three main categories. The first category is argumentation management, which means to correct the content [19]. The second category is communication management, which implies to gain time to organize the ideas [19]. The third category is interaction management, which aims to weaken the tones [19].

4 Discussion

To answer the first research question, different groups of non-native speakers of English according to gender, background, and English proficiency showed various characteristics in use of DMs. Among previous studies, there is a consensus that women are more proficient in DMs than men, the longer they have lived abroad the more proficient they are in DMs, and the higher the level of English proficiency, the more proficient they are in DMs [4-6]. Despite the homogeneity of the categorization of groups of non-native English speakers and the consistency of the conclusions in previous studies, lack of new speaker group classification perspective is also obvious in related research.

For native English speakers, few studies have examined the use of DMs as a whole, instead, most have focused on analyzing the use of a particular DM. For example, many studies take "you know" in DMs as an illustration of the existing studies that give conclusions in terms of three different groups, namely, gender, identity, and social background. In comparison to non-native speakers of English, there are fewer types of studies and the analytical aspects of the same types.

The research on the functions of DMs has received extensive attention from the linguistic community.

As for the second research question, among the studies focusing on the overall function of DMs, there is a need to study the overall function of DMs from different perspectives. Nonetheless, there is also variability in the categorization of different aspects of DMs' functions and the interpretation of different functions. In the meantime, numerous studies have focused on the different functions of different DMs in discourse and made a specific categorization for DMs. In the categorization of DMs, the types and examples of DMs are not comprehensive. On the other hand, there are also a large number of researchers devoted to the study of specific DMs, and in this category, most of the researchers tend to study common DMs, such as you know in the literature review mentioned above, and neglect the other DMs.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides a systematic review of the relevant literature by exploring how different groups of native and non-native English speakers use DMs in dialogues and which DMs and which functions native and non-native English speakers use in their dialogues. First of all, for the use of DMs in dialogues among different groups of Chinese non-native English speakers, most of the studies have categorized the groups into gender, age, socioeconomic background, English proficiency, and so on. The findings and categorization methods are similar in previous studies. Literature on the use of DMs in dialogues by native English speakers is less than that by second language learners, and so are the categorization parameters (age dominates the categorization of the native speaker group). Moreover, most of the existing literature on the analysis of DMs by native English speakers focuses only on one particular DM instead of DMs as a whole. Secondly, as for the function of DMs, there is no unified statement about the function of DMs in linguistics, as different scholars have different classifications and definitions of DMs functions.

Consequently, future research may work on filling in the gaps. Specifically, the categorization of native and non-native English speakers could have a new category (e.g., professional background) for comparative analysis. Finally, for the functions of DMs, there is a need for a richer overview of the different classifications and definitions of the functions of DMs, to find out the similarities between them summarize them, and come up with a unified classification framework of DMs functions.

This study enriches the literature related to DMs in dialogues by synthesizing literature. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of different groups of Chinese non-native English speakers examines the role played by DMs in dialogues in the era of cultural

interactions, to help these speakers better communicate with native English. Besides, this study can provide a basis for the pedagogical development of DMs, optimize non-native English speakers' learning and use of DMs, and provide help for them to communicate in a native English-speaking environment.

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