

The use of Discourse Markers in EFL Students' Essay Writing

Ribut Surjowati

Faculty of Language and Science
Wijaya Kusuma Surabaya University
Surabaya-Indonesia
Surjowati88@gmail.com

Abstract—This paper is aimed at investigating the use of Discourse Markers (DMs) in the essays of high grade and low grade English Department Students of Wijaya Kusuma Surabaya University. As writing becomes the skill that the students have to master, it has become the main concern for lecturers including the elements of well-organized essay. One aspect which determines the students' ability to construct good and well-organized essay is the use of DMs. They are lexical expressions which signal the relation of either contrast, implication, or elaboration between the interpretation of discourse segment 2 and the interpretation of discourse segment 1 (Fraser, 1998, p. 302). This qualitative research uses data collected from the essay of 23 students divided into 12 high grade (Hg) students and 11 low grade (Lg) students. The findings show that Hg students employed more DMs than Lg students in quantity and in variety. In fact, the essays composed by Lg students indicates the lack of coherence and cohesion which may be caused by their lack of applying discourse markers in their essays. This problem was caused by the students' unfamiliarity to the use of these expressions in their writing and their difficulties in applying these expressions in their essays due to the lack of information from the lecturers and other sources. Therefore, it becomes the lecturers' homework for not only teaching how to compose an essay but also introducing the DMs needed in those essays.

Keywords—discourse markers; high grade; low grade; essay; coherence; cohesion

I. INTRODUCTION

Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 291) say that a text is not just a string of sentence, but it is a semantic unit. To compose a good written discourse, one will use discourse markers which are lexical expressions which signal the relation of either contrast, implication, or elaboration between the interpretation of discourse segment 2 and the interpretation of discourse segment 1 (Fraser, 1998, p. 302).

Discourse marker becomes important because it influences the text cohesion and coherence as Halliday mentions in his book *Cohesion in English* (1976). Therefore, one of the factors students' essay writing quality is determined how well they operate discourse markers in their essay. Thus it becomes an interesting area in an English as foreign language investigation because these lexical expressions play crucial roles in the creating the coherence and cohesion of their writing (Patriana Rachmajanti; S, Mukminatien, 2016).

Some researches on DMs has been done but mostly they focus on oral interactions and written discourse to

investigate the occurrences and frequencies of DMs used by native teachers and students or native students (Jalilitar, 2008; Karlina, Suparno & Setyaningsih, 2015; Patriana, Rachmajanti & Mukminatien, 2016). Few of them discusses the influence the use of different DMs. Therefore, it is the analysis of DMs used by the high grade (Hg) and low grade (Lg) students that the writer is interested in.

Examining the use of these lexical expressions is important, as this shows the students' competence in producing good and quality discourse. In other words, the presence of DMs in written discourse is as an indicator of students' good competence in writing. But examining the use of DMs in students' writing products written by these different grade students will give us more information about their way and competence of organizing a text in a powerful way (Fraser, 1988, p. 22) since so far it has been assumed that the high grade students use more discourse markers in their writing compared to low grade students (Jalilitar, 2008, p. 114). As Feng (2010) says that DMs play an important role in text's cohesion and coherence, it means that DMs have big effects on coherence and cohesion a piece of writing and students with good competence in writing will employ discourse makers in their writings to build coherence in their writing.

This research was done to give accurate information about those differences reflecting their different competence and a way of organizing text which then describing their competence in writing. The correct use of DMs will provide effective and satisfactory written discourse (Jalilitar, 2008) and insufficient knowledge and inappropriate use of DMs may therefore cause difficulty in creating coherence in writing because the presence of DMs themselves in written discourse is showing the writer's awareness in organizing the text (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Feng, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999). Hilker says that DMs have significant interactive role in discourse as they show a relationship between the interlocutors, namely, the speaker and the hearer, between the addresser and the addressee (Hilker, 1991 in Padmi and Dianita, in www.litu.tu.ac.th.FLLTCP.Proceeding).

DM in Linguistics is a word or phrase relatively syntax-independent and it does not change the sentence's meaning and somehow it does empty meaning, such as *so, and, but, furthermore, nevertheless* and *after all*. DM is also defined as verbal and nonverbal devices which provide contextual

coordination for ongoing talk (Schiffrin, 1987). Therefore, DMs are used to signal the relation in utterance to the immediate context with the primary function of bringing listener's attention to a particular kind of upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context (Redeker, 1991). Fraser (1999, p. 946) adds that DMs are expressions which 1) are drawn from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbials, or prepositional phrases, such as *and, however, as a result of that, but*, 2) have syntactic properties associated with their class membership, such as *the bank has been closed all day. Thus, we couldn't make a withdrawal*, 3) have a meaning which is procedural, such as *John is fat. In contrast, Jim is tall*, and 4) have co-occurrence restrictions which are in complementary distribution with their conceptual counterpart. In contrast imposes a more specific contrast than do but and on the other hand, such as *Harry is honest. In contrast he is not honest, I don't care for peas. Nevertheless, I like carrots*. In the first example *in contrast* cannot be replaced by *but* and *nevertheless* cannot be replaced by *in contrast* in the second example (Fraser, 1999, p. 945).

Regarding the significant contributions towards the acknowledgement of discourse study and the information about the students' competence in writing through the use of DMs, this research is aimed at investigating 1) whether the Hg students produce more various DMs than Lg students, 2) the types DMs used by high grade and low grade students in their essay, 3) the students' problems in using DMs in their essay.

II. METHOD

This research is descriptive qualitative research. It was conducted using qualitative method. The data were collected from the essay of 23 students which consist of 12 students are high grade (Hg) students and 11 are low grade (Lg) students. The procedures of analyzing data were 1) the data were collected from the two allotment of students' essay (high and low grade students' essays), 2) Each of the DMs used by the students from different groups was classified by following Fraser's (1996, 2005) taxonomy of discourse markers which were *elaborative markers, adversative markers, inferential discourse markers, temporal discourse markers, meta discourse markers (assessment markers, evidential markers and manner of speaking markers) and causal and inferential markers*, 3) the analysis started from counting the number of different classes of DMs used by each student from each group, in this case, the research result would inform that one group of writers would use DMs more frequently than another. The calculation was continued to investigate some types of DMs used in the essays. This would give information about the students' way and competence of organizing text in a powerful way, 4) the next analysis was investigating the students' problems in using the DMs by interviewing and examining the students' works on the essays.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Frequencies of DMs Used by Both The Hg and Lg Students*

In terms of frequency of occurrence, the Hg students in total employed 377 markers in their essay while the Lg students used 214 markers. Both of those groups of students (Hg and Lg) mostly used elaborative markers which is up to 50% of the total number of DMs they employed and then followed by causal: 13,2% and 12,6% contrastive: 12% and 10,7%, inferential: 10,6% and 13,5% temporal: 9,54% and 11,2% and finally meta discourse markers: 1,06% and 0,93%. If it is examined more deeply, the DM *and* seems to be used frequently both by the Hg and Lg students which are 45% and 47%. and what is interesting in these findings is that there are slight differences in frequencies of occurrence and variety of DMs employed by those two groups of students while Jalilifar (2008) says that the high grade students used more discourse markers in their writing compared to the discourse markers used by low grade students (Jalilifar, 2008, p. 114). However, there are some interesting findings in Lg students' essay DMs are mostly used redundantly, therefore the coherence and cohesion was difficult to achieve. Unlike Lg student's essays which lack of coherence and cohesion, the use of DMs in Hg students' essay make the essays run smoothly, as Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 291) says that a text is not just a string of sentence, but it is a semantic unit. To compose a good written discourse, one will use discourse markers.

In terms of the variety of use, the writer found that Hg students used more various DMs compared to Lg students. Hg students used *elaborative markers, casual markers, inferential markers, temporal discourse markers, assessment marker, manner of speaking markers, evidential markers, and contrastive discourse markers*. Meanwhile the Lg students used the markers used by the Hg students but they miss the *assessment and manner of speaking markers*.

B. *The Variety of Elaborative Markers*

As described previously, these markers are the most common among others and most frequently employed by these both groups of students. The finding identifies that the Hg students used DM *and* for about 45% and this is the most frequent occurrence in their writing after the use of *and also* (1,85%), *besides that* (0,79%), *as well* (0,27%), *I mean* (0,27%), *in my opinion* (1,59%), *I think* (0,53%), *it means* (1,32%), *in addition* (0,53%), *that is why* (1,04%), *and even* (0,53%). Similarly, the Lg students seem to overuse *and* 47,1% more than the Hg students besides other elaborative DMs such as *in this way* (0,93%), *and even* (0,46%), *as well* (0,46%), *as well as* (1,4%), *according to me* (0,46%). As Asassfeh, Alshboul, S and Alshaboul (2013) say in their analysis, that, *and* is the marker which constituted a ratio of 80% of the elaborative DMs employed in the essays. This means that students are familiar with these DMs. In line with, Ali and Mahadin (2016) who found that intermediate students have a greater tendency to overuse the DM *and*,

this present research supports these findings that the Hg students employed *and* less frequently compared to the Lg students, however the Lg students often used it incorrectly. In other words, the Dm *and* was used redundantly in their essays. For example: (1) there are cities that are considered left behind as in Kalimantan *and* Papua *and* there are cities that are considered successful as Jakarta *and* Surabaya. (2) In modern era, mobility is the slogan *and* that is why electronic devices or gadget are becoming lighter *and* smaller.

Some other types of elaborative DMs are found in Hg students' essays such as *that, as well, I mean, in my opinion, I think, it means, in addition, that is why, and even* but they are not employed by Lg students in their essays. Instead of using those DMs, they had tendencies to use *in this way, and even, as well, as well as, according to me* and these were not employed by the Hg students, as well, therefore, these two groups of students use not only different variety but also different frequency of DMs.

The use of DM makes the movement from one sentence to the next one smooth and logical. For example: (1) Before teaching, you should prepare all the the needs. In addition to the teaching materials, media or learning tools should be prepared, as well (Hg student), (2) In my opinion, it will be more qualified if the learning process is more active and fun. Active and fun here explains that the learning process can be alive (Lg student). This sentence is not cohesive because of the missing DM. This is one of the examples of the mistake most Lg students made in constructing sentences in their essays.

C. The Variety of Causal Markers

Causal markers are employed to confirm previous evidence and explain something such as *because, because of, due to*. Both the Hg and Lg students employed these DMs in the same variety but different in terms of occurrences which are *because* (114%, 9,2%), *due to* (0,53%, 0,46%), *because of* (1,32%, 2,8%). This gives information that the number of occurrence of these DMs is quite different. The DM, *because*, becomes the most frequently used DM by both groups in their essays.

D. The Variety of Inferential Markers

This types of DMs were employed in the same frequency by both groups of students but different varieties in their essays. However among those DMs, *so* becomes the most frequently employed inferential markers by the students from those groups. This finding gives different illustration that *because of* inferential marker is the most frequently employed inferential marker it was found in the research done by Vicou and Djiunovic (2011, p. 270) and Ali and Mahadin (2016). They describe that students employed inferential marker, *because of*, more frequencies than *therefore, so that, so, in short, finally, in summary, furthermore, we can conclude, and then, as a conclusion*. The students often use this DM while trying to conclude their preceding statement. Other types of inferential markers are not often used such as *in summary, in short or*

furthermore. Only few students with high competence in English used various inferential markers. For example: Some lecturers are qualified but some of them are not. So, if we want to have good learning process, the lecturers should know how is the best way to deliver the teaching materials (Hg student).

E. The Varieties of Temporal Discourse Markers

The next DMs found in the students' essays are temporal discourse markers which are commonly described as triggers for discourse relations expressing a temporal relation, signaling a shift in time or progression related to discourse. Observing the students' work, the writer did not find any significant differences in variety in Hg and Lg students' essays. Those two groups of students employed DMs in a similar way such as *first of all, second, third, the first, the second, the third, first, the last one, in the end, before*. They are to sign structural relations between the segments that host them and prior discourse segments and to describe a temporal relation between two segments, for example: (1) *The second*, the price of these two online transport equally have a relatively cheap price compared to public transportation (Lg student), (2) *The first similarity* is the product they sell. KFC and McD have the same main menu, it is fried chicken (Hg student). Those DMs were used to in their essays to indicate the sequences of steps they wanted to describe. In this way their essays flow smoothly.

F. The Varieties of Meta Discourse Markers

Some Meta DMs used by the students are only *assessment, manner of speaking, and evidential markers*. Even the Lg students only used *evidential markers* in their essays. Those markers are only employed 0,27% which means that the students, both the Hg and Lg, only employed 1 *assessment, manner of speaking and evidential markers*. However, those students use different kinds of DMs such as in expressing their confidence of the truth, an Lg student used DM, *certainly* while the Hg student used, *of course*. This does not make any differences in meaning but only affect their familiarity in using those markers. Other types of DMs such as *clearly, unluckily and actually* are not found in Lg students' essays because they miss using these DMs to maintain the coherence in their essays. For example:The smallest system is the satellite that surrounds the plane. Then the planets with surround a center called the solar system. *Clearly*, the sun and the stars have a good benefit to give the lights for the earth...

G. The Varieties of Contrastive Discourse Markers

Both Hg and Lg students employed contrastive DMs in different frequency and types. The findings show that the Hg students used a lot more various contrastive DMs compared to the Lg students such as *whereas, in contrast to although, even though, while, but, unlike, despite, but also*. These DMs emerges 6 times in the essays and they occur in different forms. The following examples taken from the Hg students work illustrate how they used these DMs. However, when the Lg students' essays were examined only 23 contrastive DMs were found. It means that the DMs are only 10,7% of the total DMs employed by the students and they only used four types such as *whereas, but, while,*

eventhough, although. For example: (1) *Unlike* Surabaya, Jakarta has highest criminality (Hg student), (2) Pop music is more varied in theme of poem and romance, *whereas* stream of rock music beats is faster and louder (Lg students), (3) *Eventhough* their grammar and vocabulary were not really good like native students, they have motivation to practice (Lg student).

H. The Problems of Using DMs

Based on the results of observation and questionnaires distributed to the students related to the use of DMs in their essays, there are four important point of information from those questionnaires that (1) the students are unfamiliar with those DMs because most of the lecturers did not introduce the use of DMs intensively in writing class, (2) they have no information that DMs influence the essays' coherence (3) they do not understand the concept of coherence and cohesion well (4) they familiar only with certain types of DMs because they often use them in some verbal activities (5) they tend to ignore the correct use of them in an essay.

IV. CONCLUSION

Both Hg and Lg students employed discourse markers in different varieties and numbers in their essays. Among them, the most familiar DM among the students is elaborative marker and which take 50% from the total DMs found in the essays. However, mostly the Lg students used DM redundantly and thus this is the indication of their understanding to those DMs As one of the factors to determine the cohesion and coherence of an essay, discourse markers are not informed intensively in writing class. Therefore it needs the lecturers' role in introducing and obligating the use of DMs in the students' essays.

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