Consciousness-Raising of Discourse Markers and Its Effect on EFL Writing Competency

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Abstract

This paper explores how consciousness−raising activities centered on discourse markers influence the academic writing skills of second−year female English majors at Idleb University. Using a qualitative methodology, the study employed close tests and analysis of written essays to examine changes in students' writing. Results indicated that these activities positively contributed to improving students' ability to use discourse markers effectively, leading to more coherent and structured academic writing. Based on these findings, the study recommends the integration of such activities into academic writing courses to enhance students' writing competence and discourse awareness.

رفع الوعي بأدوات الربط وتأثير ذلك على مهارة الكتابة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية

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ملخص الدراسة

تتناول هذه الدراسة تأثير أنشطة رفع مستوى التوعية التي تركز على أدوات الربط الخطابي في تحسين مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طالبات السنة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة إدلب . وقد اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج النوعي، مستخدمة اختبارات مغلقة وتحليل المقالات الكتابية لتتبع التغيرات في أداء الطالبات .وأظهرت النتائج أن هذه الأنشطة ساهمت على نحو إيجابي في تعزيز قدرة الطالبات على استخدام أدوات الربط بفعالية، مما انعكس في كتابات أكثر ترابطًا وتنظيمًا . وبناءً على هذه النتائج، توصي الدراسة بإدماج هذه الأنشطة ضمن مقررات الكتابة الأكاديمية، لدعم كفاءة الطالبات الكتابية وزيادة وعيهن بالخطاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدوات الربط الخطابي،، رفع الوعي، الكتابة الاكاديمية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، مهارات الكتابة.

1. Introduction:

1.1 Overview of Writing Challenges in EFL Contexts

Writing is often considered the most complex of the four major language skills in second or foreign language (L2) acquisition, largely due to the cognitive demands it places on learners (Bowen & Marks, 1994). These challenges are compounded when learners face cultural and linguistic discrepancies between their first language (L1) and English (Akef, 2007). In academic settings, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, strong writing skills are essential. Academic writing follows specific rules regarding structure, coherence, cohesion, and clarity. Among the devices that contribute significantly to these features are Discourse Markers (DMs) such as however, but, although, and therefore. These markers help to organize ideas and enhance textual flow.

1.2 Research Problem and Significance

Evidence suggests that even advanced L2 learners underutilize or misuse DMs in their writing. This deficiency can reduce the quality and clarity of their texts. The study aims to investigate how second-year students at the English Literature Department of Idleb University use DMs in their academic essays. Specifically, it explores how consciousness-raising (CR) activities impact students' use of DMs and, by extension, improve the quality of their academic writing. So, L2 learners, despite years of study, still fail to use DMs effectively in their academic writing. There is limited research on the most effective pedagogical strategies for addressing this issue.

1.3 Research Aims:

The study sets out to:

1. Analyze the current use of DMs in students' essays.

2. Evaluate the impact of CR activities on improving students' discourse competence and writing quality.

The findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of how explicit instruction in DMs can foster more coherent and effective academic writing among EFL learners. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of developing pragmatic competence, which refers to the ability to express meaning appropriately and effectively in context (Fung & Carter, 2007).

1.4 Research Hypothesis and limitations

The study hypothesizes that *consciousness-raising activities targeting DMs will significantly enhance the academic writing skills of the students.*

Despite its focused approach, the study has several limitations. The small sample size limits the applicability of the results to broader populations. The qualitative nature of the study introduces a degree of researcher subjectivity, and its findings may be context-dependent. Due to gender-

segregated education systems in place, the study focuses exclusively on second-year female students. This context provides a focused environment but also introduces certain limitations regarding generalizability. Finally, time constraints may have affected the depth of data collection and analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discourse Markers and Their Functional Importance in Writing

Discourse markers are linguistic elements that function to signal logical or semantic connections between units of discourse. These elements include conjunctions, adverbial phrases, and fixed expressions that are used to indicate relationships such as cause-effect, contrast, addition, clarification, or conclusion. Originally, DMs were considered peripheral to grammatical structure, but their importance became evident through research conducted by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who emphasized their role in textual cohesion. Schiffrin (1987) later reinforced this view, framing DMs as tools for organizing discourse at both the sentence and broader textual levels.

In academic writing, DMs are critical in helping writers present their arguments logically and persuasively. They allow for the structuring of complex ideas into a coherent narrative that is accessible to the reader. When properly utilized, DMs enhance both the readability and persuasiveness of a text. Conversely, inadequate or incorrect use often results in fragmented, ambiguous, or illogical writing—a recurring issue among EFL learners.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives and Linguistic Frameworks

The study of discourse markers has been approached from several linguistic and pragmatic perspectives. Schiffrin (1987) approached DMs as elements that ensure discourse coherence by linking various parts of speech and meaning. Fraser (1999) provided a contrasting interpretation, classifying DMs as pragmatic markers whose purpose is not to alter propositional content but to signal discourse relations.

Within the framework of Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986), Blakemore (1987) contends that DMs function procedurally

rather than conceptually. That is, they do not contribute to the propositional content of an utterance, but instead serve to guide the hearer or reader toward the intended interpretation by constraining the range of possible contextual inferences.

Fraser's taxonomy divides DMs into several types:

• Elaborative markers (e.g., "furthermore", "in addition"),

• Contrastive markers (e.g., "however", "on the other hand"),

• Inferential markers (e.g., "therefore", "as a result").

Each type serves to express a specific discourse relation, aiding in the logical development of arguments and structuring of information.

2.4 Empirical Research Findings on DM Use in EFL Contexts

Empirical research on EFL learners' use of DMs has produced several findings that can be grouped into three primary areas: frequency analysis, genre-specific analysis, and writing-quality correlation.

1. Frequency Analysis

Studies reveal repetitive reliance on a limited set of DMs, often due to first language (L1) interference and insufficient instruction. Arabic-speaking learners, for instance, frequently overuse simple coordinators like "and" while underutilizing more precise connectors like "however" or "consequently." This lack of variety negatively affects the coherence and depth of written arguments.

2. Genre-Specific Analysis

DM use differs across text types. Argumentative essays usually involve a higher number of contrastive and inferential DMs to strengthen reasoning and transitions between claims. Narrative and descriptive texts, by contrast, may rely more heavily on temporal markers such as "then," "afterward," or "eventually."

3. Writing-Quality Correlation

Some studies have found a direct relationship between DM accuracy and writing proficiency. Learners who employ a broader range of DMs with appropriate placement tend to achieve better organization and flow in their

writing. However, findings are mixed, with some research indicating that even correct DM use does not always correlate with high writing scores, especially when overall text structure is weak.

2.5 Pedagogical Interventions and Instructional Models

Numerous teaching methods have been explored to address the misuse of DMs by EFL learners.

1. Traditional Approaches

Traditional approaches focus on rote memorization or vocabulary-based instruction of DMs. While this method can build passive recognition, it rarely promotes active, functional use, especially in complex writing tasks.

2. Lexical and Input Strategies

Lexical approaches encourage learners to acquire common DM phrases as "chunks." Although helpful in conversation, this approach is less effective in academic writing due to the functional specificity of DMs. Input flood strategies increase exposure to target structures but do not ensure

learners will internalize or use them productively unless paired with deeper engagement.

3. Consciousness–Raising (CR) Activities

Consciousness–raising is the most effective strategy supported by research. Based on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, CR activities help learners recognize, analyze, and apply DMs in meaningful contexts. Examples include:

• Highlighting DMs in authentic texts,

• Sorting DMs by function,

• Comparing writing samples with and without DMs,

• Rewriting exercises using alternative DMs.

Such tasks build metalinguistic awareness and promote accurate production. Educators are encouraged to embed CR activities within writing instruction in a progressive format—starting with recognition and moving to production—to achieve long–term improvement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative approach conducted within a quasi-experimental framework is used to evaluate students' usage of discourse markers (DMs) in essay writing. The study references Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of cohesion and Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) by Taboada and Mann (2006) to assess cohesion and coherence. Because random assignment was not feasible, the design uses non-random existing groups—second-year English majors at Idleb University. Despite inherent limitations (e.g., lack of full control over variables), quasi-experimental designs are noted for higher external validity and real-world application.

Data collection involves:

• Pre-test/post-test assessments

• Multiple-choice cloze tests

• Five-paragraph essay writing tasks

• Observation

These methods aim to determine the correct, incorrect, and under-/over-use of DMs.

3.2 Participants

The study sample includes 75 female second-year English literature students aged 19–22, all Arabic speakers from Idleb University. All had prior instruction in paragraph and short essay writing and were exposed to DMs indirectly (e.g., through lessons on adverbs and conjunctions). From this group, 20 essays were randomly selected for analysis, excluding the strongest and weakest ones to maintain reliability and validity. The instructor's familiarity with students' capabilities strengthened the evaluation process.

3.3 Description of Treatment

The intervention consisted of five instructional sessions over five weeks, supervised by an experienced writing instructor.

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Session 1: Pre-test

• 10-item cloze test to assess students' recognition of DMs

• Essay writing on "The role technology plays in making life easier and more interesting"

• Aimed to establish a baseline of students' DM usage

Sessions 2–4: Treatment

• Focus on Fraser's (1999) classification of DMs: contrastive, elaborative, inferential, and reason-based

• Instruction used authentic academic essays

• Consciousness-raising activities included:

• Underlining DMs in texts

• Explaining their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions

• Corrective feedback for inappropriate DM use

• Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs)

• Semantic correction tasks (true/false and explanation-based)

Session 5: Post-test

• Another cloze test and essay ("Advantages and disadvantages of watching TV by children")

• Essays from the same 20 participants were analyzed

• The comparison between pre- and post-tests assessed learning outcomes and intervention efficacy

3.4 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

3.4.1 Content Analysis

A core tool for identifying patterns and frequency of DM usage across texts. While valuable, it's time-intensive and sometimes lacks contextual depth.

3.4.2 Observation

Used to examine behavior and engagement during sessions. Conducted as non-participant observation, allowing the researcher to record data objectively without influencing the group.

3.4.3 Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

These tests measure students' pragmatic understanding and are effective due to:

• Anonymity

• Flexibility in variable manipulation

• Suitability for capturing socio-pragmatic competence

Students were evaluated on their ability to select appropriate DMs, reflecting their grasp of coherence and textual organization.

3.4.4 Written Assignments

Provided authentic data for evaluating real-world application of DMs. Essay analysis was central to identifying improvement post-intervention.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

1. Overview of Assessment and Approach

The data analysis followed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were extracted from cloze test scores, while qualitative insights emerged from analysis of students' essays and observational notes. The research aimed to explore not only the frequency but also the functional and syntactic accuracy of DMs in students' writing.

2. Cloze Test Performance Analysis

The cloze test administered before the treatment revealed a generally weak grasp of discourse markers. Most errors stemmed from underuse, overuse, or misuse of DMs. In particular, students overused basic markers such as "and" and "also," indicating limited variety in their writing. Post-treatment results, however, showed a significant reduction in DM-related errors for 55% of participants. These students demonstrated improved awareness of the grammatical and semantic functions of DMs. The improvement was most notable in elaborative and contrastive markers. While some issues

persisted with causal and inferential DMs, the overall trend suggested that

CR activities contributed positively to students' understanding and

application of these markers, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: number of errors in the cloze tests in the pre/post-test

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
PRETEST	1	4	2	2	1	3	6	2	0	3
POSTTEST	1	2	3	2	0	1	1	1	0	1

	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20
PRETEST	0	1	3	2	2	5	3	2	3	2
POSTTEST	1	2	0	0	3	4	2	1	3	2

3. Written Assignment Results

Pretest essays were characterized by disjointed sentence structures and

simplistic use of basic DMs. Many students failed to use higher-level DMs

such as "however," "although," or "therefore," relying instead on

rudimentary connectors. This affected the overall coherence and flow of their writing. The dominant patterns included overuse of additive DMs and syntactic errors associated with DM placement.

Post-treatment essays demonstrated marked improvement in coherence and structural variety. Students such as S1, S4, S5, and S18 exhibited significant progress, incorporating a wider range of DMs accurately. For instance, S1 moved from short, unrelated sentences to complex sentences using a variety of contrastive and inferential DMs, showing a more logical flow of ideas.

Table 2: A sample of analyzing the frequency of DMs used in students' essays in the pretest

FREQUENCY OF	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
ELABORATIVE DMS	6	5	9	11	10	4	8	13	16	9
CONTRASTIVE DMS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
EXEMPLIFIERS	1	1	2	1	3	2	3	1	6	0

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INFERENTIAL DMS	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
REASON DMS	0	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2
CONCLUSIVE DMS	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
TOTAL	8	9	13	14	14	8	15	17	28	14

FREQUENCY OF	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20
ELABORATIVE DMS	12	9	8	18	11	17	13	6	6	18
CONTRASTIVE DMS	2	1	0	1	0	1	3	0	1	1
EXEMPLIFIERS	3	2	0	2	2	4	1	1	2	1

INFERENTIAL DMS	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
REASON DMS	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	1
CONCLUSIVE DMS	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
TOTAL	17	15	9	22	16	23	19	8	11	23

Table 3: A sample of analyzing the frequency of DMs used in students' essays in the post-test

FREQUENCY OF	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10
ELABORATIVE DMS	17	10	12	7	15	12	16	11	12	9

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CONTRASTIVE DMS	2	3	1	2	3	1	0	3	2	2
EXEMPLIFIERS	2	0	0	2	1	0	2	0	3	1
INFERENTIAL DMS	1	2	0	3	1	0	5	1	0	0
REASON DMS	1	0	2	3	3	1	1	2	2	2
CONCLUSIVE DMS	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1
TOTAL	24	17	16	18	24	15	25	18	21	15

FREQUENCY OF	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20
ELABORATIVE DMS	19	23	10	16	19	16	12	15	9	15
CONTRASTIVE DMS	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	4	1	3
EXEMPLIFIERS	1	0	0	2	2	1	2	2	1	0
INFERENTIAL DMS	2	2	0	0	2	1	1	4	2	0
REASON DMS	0	5	0	0	3	2	1	3	3	1

CONCLUSIVE DMS	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
TOTAL	22	30	11	20	27	22	18	29	17	20

Table 4 Comparison between the frequency of each type of DM in the pretest and posttest

TYPE OF DMS	FREQUENCY OF DMS IN THE ESSAYS	
	Pre-test	posttest
ELABORATIVE	170	275
CONTRASTIVE	16	32
EXEMPLIFIERS	38	22
INFERENTIAL	5	27
REASON	20	35
CONCLUSIVE	14	19

4. Changes in Writing Style and Sentence Complexity

The intervention also influenced sentence complexity. Students transitioned from simplistic constructions to compound and complex sentences. There was an increased use of subordinate clauses and proper punctuation around DMs. For example, S7 and S9 used DMs such as "nevertheless," "in contrast," and "as a result" to construct logical transitions between ideas. This shift indicated not only improved DM usage but also an enhanced understanding of sentence structure and coherence. Such developments are crucial indicators of academic writing maturity in EFL contexts.

5. Student Group Performance Trends

The students were categorized into three groups based on test performance: those with no improvement, those with increased errors, and those with improved results. Group 3, the largest, showed substantial gains in the appropriate use of elaborative and inferential DMs. This group benefited most from the CR activities and reflected the success of the intervention. Groups 1 and 2 exhibited minor or no changes. Some

students in these groups continued to struggle with misuse, indicating that while CR was effective for many, others may require more individualized or prolonged instruction.

6. Frequency and Pattern Analysis of DM Usage

Quantitative analysis showed that the most frequently used DMs after the intervention were chronological, emphasis, and conclusive types. This marked a shift from the pretest phase, where basic additive markers were overrepresented. The posttest essays showed an expanded DM inventory, with better distribution and functionally accurate use. Nevertheless, some students misused complex DMs such as "although," often pairing them incorrectly with "but," or placing them in grammatically unsuitable locations. This error highlighted the persistent influence of L1 structures and the need for continuous grammatical reinforcement.

7. Observation Notes and Learner Perceptions

Observations during the CR sessions revealed a tendency among students to view DMs as optional or stylistic, rather than functional elements crucial to coherence. In early exercises, many defaulted to "and" when prompted to connect ideas. The researcher noted that students often memorized DMs without fully understanding their logical function. For example, student $S13$ performed exceptionally in the cloze test but failed to demonstrate the same level of DM competence in her essay. This disconnect underscored the challenge of transferring passive recognition into active, meaningful use in writing.

8. Pedagogical Impact of CR Activities

The CR activities had a notable impact on students' awareness of different categories of DMs and their correct usage. Students became more confident in applying a broader range of DMs in varied contexts. Essays post−intervention demonstrated improved syntax, a richer vocabulary, and increased logical clarity.

The instructional techniques, including collaborative exercises, text analysis, and rewriting tasks, played a central role in internalizing DM usage. These findings affirm the value of CR methods in developing pragmatic competence among EFL learners.

9. Lingering Challenges and Limitations

Despite the improvements, challenges persisted. Some students continued to misuse DMs or placed them awkwardly in sentences. These issues were attributed to L1 interference, lack of exposure, and the short duration of the treatment. The analysis suggested that a longer, more iterative intervention cycle may be needed to reinforce accurate usage. Misuse of inferential and causal DMs remained common in certain students' essays, pointing to the need for more targeted instruction in these categories.

5. Conclusion:

Key findings indicate:

• Students improved in their correct and varied use of DMs after the treatment.

• Post-treatment essays included more elaborative, contrastive, and causal DMs, showing reduced dependence on overused markers.

• CR activities helped students understand the functional value of DMs, resulting in clearer, more coherent writing.

• Observations suggest students were previously unaware of the importance of DMs in structuring texts; CR strategies bridged this gap.

• The enhanced writing quality post-treatment highlights the pedagogical value of explicitly teaching DMs through structured awareness activities.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

This study provides evidence that CR activities effectively enhance academic writing in EFL contexts by improving DM use. Key instructional recommendations include:

• Embedding CR tasks into writing curricula to build metalinguistic awareness.

• Training instructors in designing student-centered, DM-focused activities.

• Encouraging learners to study academic texts for DM usage patterns.

• Creating hands-on writing sessions to practice varied DM integration.

These steps support the development of coherent, high-quality writing skills in EFL learners and contribute to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research and practice.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should:

• Include male participants to explore possible gender-related effects.

• Investigate different CR activity types across various language skills and genres.

• Use additional tools such as interviews or learner journals for deeper

insight.

• Explore the use of digital tools and platforms in delivering CR activities,

especially in online or blended settings.

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