

The Discourse Markers Used by Kurdish EFL Students: An Investigation

Asst. prof. Qismat M. Zahawi

Salahaddin University - Erbil

qismat.hussin@su.edu.krd

علامات الحوار التي يستخدمها الطلاب الأكرا د الدارسون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: دراسة استقصائية

أ.م. قسمت م. زهاوي

جامعة صلاح الدين - أربيل

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة استخدام الطلاب الأكرا د الدارسون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لعلامات الحوار (DMs) في البيئات التعليمية، وتحديدًا في محادثات الطلاب داخل الفصول الدراسية الجامعية. لذا، تستند الدراسة على محادثات الطلاب المسجلة في مادة المناظرة الأكاديمية. وقد تم إعداد مجموعة البحث من خلال تسجيل محادثات ٤٣ طالبًا جامعيًا يدرسون في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية الأساسية / جامعة صلاح الدين. أشارت النتائج إلى أن الطلاب الأكرا د الدارسون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يستخدمون علامات الحوار لتسهيل تطوير الخطاب في مختلف المستويات الوظيفية؛ ومع ذلك، فإنهم لا يستفيدون منها بشكل كامل في محادثاتهم. أما بالنسبة لتأثير الجنس على استخدام علامات الحوار، فقد أظهرت النتائج اختلافًا في التكرار؛ يتفوق استخدام الطالبات الكرديات المتعلّقات للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لعلامات الحوار على نظرائهن الذكور. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، لوحظ فرق كبير بين استخدام المتحدث لعبارات "أعتقد" و"أعني" لصالح الإناث اللواتي يؤديان وظائف اللباقة والكراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الخطاب الصفي، علامات الخطاب، الوظيفة.

Abstract

The current study examines the use of Discourse Markers (hence forth DMs) by Kurdish EFL students and calls attention to discourse markers in educational settings, in specific student conversation in university classrooms. Thus, the study is based on students' recorded conversation in academic debate module. The research corpus was composed by transcribing the conversation of 43 undergraduate students studying at English Department in College of Basic Education/ Salahaddin University.

The results indicate that Kurdish EFL students utilise DMs to facilitate discourse development throughout different functional levels; yet, they do not entirely reap advantage from DMs in their conversations. As for gender influence on DMs use, the results have shown frequency difference; Kurdish female EFL students' use of DMs outweighs their male peers. In addition, a significant difference between speaker usage of the DM 'I think' and 'I mean' was noticed in favour of the females serving the functions of politeness and courteousness.

Keywords: EFL Students, Classroom Discourse, Discourse Markers, Function

1. Introduction

In oral communication, speakers tend to spontaneously use specific invisible components in order to make their speech more comprehensible and coherent. Among these components, as Aşık and Cephe (2013) argue “speakers naturally use certain units of talk”. The most common type of these talk units are discourse markers.

The essence of any successful spoken exchange is the proper use of DMs. The occurrence of DMs characterizes any natural conversation, including classroom conversation. They serve to add coherence to speech. Besides, they contribute to fulfil other functions such as directing turn-taking and managing what speakers say in relation to previous units. Hence, learning these DMs is indispensable both for first language and second language speakers (Nookam, 2010).

Recent corpus analysis of spoken discourse revealed that DMs are among the highest ranked word forms (Fung and Carter, 2007). Accordingly, DMs have gained recognition in academic researches. As the rapid evolution of discourse analysis proceeded, linguists and teachers started to implement the research findings in language teaching and learning, and which yielded great outcomes in the field (Sun, 2013).

Lam (2009) asserts that the appropriate use of DMs help non-native learners of English gain the naturalness of talk in the spoken discourse of a foreign language. Attaining such nativeness is a good source of satisfaction and accomplishment for learners that make them feel comfortable while learning a foreign language. The use of DMs has prime pedagogical importance since it contributes to enhance the pragmatic and communicative competence of speakers (Aşık and Cephe, 2013). Othman (2010) point out that DMs act positively in classroom context as productive conversational endeavours that fulfil pedagogical purposes in educational settings

1.1 Discourse Markers (DMs)

Different terminologies have been used in the literature to refer to DMs: discourse connectives, discourse operators, discourse particles, discourse signaling devices, pragmatic connectives, pragmatic expressions, pragmatic markers, semantic conjuncts, and sentence connectives. Until 1985, the term discourse particle was the predominant, since then, discourse markers DMs became more recommended (Aijmer, 2002; Zarei, 2013). As regards the different terminologies used for DMs, researchers did not reach a broad consensus because of their different research perspectives (Fraser, 1999 and Han, 2008).

Quirk et al (1985) and due to the interactional effect of DMs, believe that DMs help maintain intimate relationship with people in everyday conversation, they call these markers ‘intimacy signals’. Similarly, Crystal (1988) states that DMs serve as the “oil which helps us perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and interaction smoothly and efficiently” (p. 48). Therefore, they are also significant in teaching English as a Foreign Language. Schiffin (1987), (cited from Zarei, 2013),

made a successful attempt to present a detailed description of DMs and illustrated them as "sequentially-dependent" units in a discourse. According to Kohlani (2010), DMs help to achieve the communicative objectives of language. DMs' connect textual units bigger than the sentence and direct the listeners' interpretation of text according to the speakers' communicative intents.

Özer and Okan (2018) define DMs as "lexical items such as *oh, well, but, you know, I mean, actually, and, okay* etc., which have various functions notably serving as connective elements of speech" (p.51). In Fraser's (1999) view (as cited in Sun, 2013), DMs refer to a group of lexical expressions basically derived from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. In the view of Zarei (2013), SMs consist of words/ phrases that function within the linguistic system to lay down the interrelation between grammatical units in a discourse. In addition, they have pragmatic functions as well. Thus, it can be said that DMs fulfil great multifunctionality in conversation. As Schiffrin (1987) contends that the appropriate and well-functioned application of DMs results in discourse coherence. Looking at DMs linguistically and functionally is essential to understand "how texts are produced, re-expressed, reformulated, distributed, and consumed in social contexts such as EFL classrooms" (p.23).

Although DMs are essential cues in organising a discourse, yet they are often grammatically and pragmatically optional, in the sense that they can be omitted in utterances without any syntactic or pragmatic consequence (Carter and McCarthy 2015).

As for Hall and Versplaetse (2000), they deem language classrooms as discourse communities where students make progress their language through interaction with teachers and peers. Concerning the significance of DMs, Walsh (2011) point out the important role played by DMs to maintain and achieve conversational continuity. "They function like punctuation marks on a printed page: consider how difficult it would be to read a newspaper without punctuation. The same applies in a classroom if teachers fail to make appropriate use of discourse markers" (p.7).

On the whole, DMs aid to bring the speakers' and listeners' attention to a specific type of connection with the forthcoming utterance and the actual context of discourse.

Fung and Carter (2007) classify DMs into four main types:

- Interpersonal – such as *I see, I think, ok, great, etc.*
- Referential – such as *because, and, or, so, anyway, etc.*
- Structural – such as *now, right, first, then, next, etc.*
- Cognitive – such as *I mean, well, sort of, etc.*

As for DMs functions, Brinton (2008) sorts them out into two main types: interpersonal which shows the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and textual which points out the relationship between prior and subsequent sentences. Subsequently, he further divides interpersonal functions into two groups: subjective

(shows speakers' attitude), and interactive (concerns actions made by a speaker towards the hearer).

1.2 Characteristics of DMs

The Characteristics of DMs have been elucidated differently by different scholars in the literature. Yet, Brinton (1996) and Jucker and Ziv (1998) provide the most plausible clarification:

- DMs are an attribute of oral rather than of written discourse.
- They are frequently used in oral discourse.
- They are short and phonologically reduced items.
- They may occupy different positions in a sentence initial, medial, and final.
- They are neutral in the sense that they have little or no prepositional meaning.
- They have no clear grammatical function in the sense that they may appear outside the syntactic structure or broadly attached to it.
- They are optional rather than obligatory features of discourse. Their non-existence in a sentence does not affect grammaticality or unintelligibility of that sentence.
- They are multifunctional working on the syntactic and pragmatic levels at once.

1.3 Aims

This study aims at:

1. investigating the DMs used by Kurdish EFL students in their conversation
2. identifying the functions for which DMs are used by Kurdish EFL students
3. examining whether gender influences the use of DMs

1.4 Research Questions

This study attempts to respond to the following questions:

1. What are the DMs used by Kurdish EFL students in their conversation?
2. For what functions do Kurdish EFL students mostly use DMs in their conversation?
3. To what extent does students' gender influence the use of DMs in their conversation?

1.5 Previous Studies

It is worth mentioning that the previous studies of discourse analysis in the Kurdish literature have occupied a large space in linguistics. Most of them are theory-based in the sense that they determine what functions these DMs serve in sentences. Yet, there is a dearth of study on discourse analysis in the field of teaching and learning English language. On this ground, it is hoped that this study elucidates this neglected aspect of language teaching and learning.

In his study, Shareef (2015) explored the use of different types of DMs in Kurdish EFL undergraduate (first and third year) student's writing. The first year students

showed inability to use all the kinds of DMs; while third year students misused and overused most kinds of DMs.

Saleem and Ameen (2021) conducted a study to probe into the problems that are encountered by Kurdish EFL students when they translate DMs from English into Kurdish. The results indicated that some DMs may have different possible translation choices. In addition, there are no equivalents for some DMs when translating them into Kurdish.

Investigating Kurdish EFL university instructors' attitudes towards written and spoken discourse markers, Mohammed and Abbas (2023) concluded that the instructors positively view the role and use of written and spoken DMs in EFL classrooms. Although DMs have pragmatic and pedagogic values, the researchers found out these markers were marginalised in written and spoken materials in the Kurdish context and were not emphasised by the teachers in their speech. In another study conducted by Salih and Tahir (2023), the results demonstrated that Kurdish EFL students use different pragmatic markers in their writing "with some markers being overused and others being underused".

2 Method

2.1 The Participants

The participants in this study consist of a class of university Kurdish EFL students in College of Basic Education at Salahaddin University. There are forty students in the class: 28 female and 12 male students. Their age range between 18 and 20. They are first grader BA students majoring in English language. They attend academic debate classes twice a week, two hours for each class. In academic debate module, students usually hold debate about different topics relevant to students' life or pertaining to hot topics of the week. At other times, they choose a short story and discuss it extensively. In this research, two of these sessions were audio recorded.

2.2 Procedures for Data Collection

As for research instrumentation, two tools were used: students' conversation audio-recordings for the quantitative data and classroom observation for the qualitative data. Firstly, with the approval of the students, their natural and dynamic conversation in academic debate module was recorded. The participants were aware of the recording; yet, they were not notified about the aim of the study. A small-scale research corpus was developed by recording the discussions of Kurdish EFL students about their assigned topics and their interaction with their class-mates during the debates. Most of the discussions were listened to and a selected fragment was chosen as the key source of data to be analysed and interpreted as it constituted a rich and representative of oral interaction among the students.

The type of recording set was selected beforehand; a portable audio-recorder of professional quality was used to record the students' conversation. 120-minute fragment of students' conversation was taken as an input. This fragment was selected

due to its representativeness and richness from the oral interaction among the students. Thereafter, the researcher utilised CLAN (Computerized Language Analysis) to transcribe the audio recording into written data format for analysis. For the analysis, the transcriptions were first read by the researcher to identify and annotate DMs. After the DMs were identified, they were categorised based on the functional category they belonged to. Then, frequency-driven quantitative analysis was performed.

Notably, the researcher observed the class for three sessions each of two hours (total six-hours observation) in order to obtain a complete and all-embracing understanding of students' conversation as a social phenomenon by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. It is worth mentioning that two teachers were invited to have a say in interpreting the examples of DMs functions to ensure reliability of the data.

Labeling DMs was not an easy task for the researcher since there is no agreed upon methodical way to label DMs so far. Therefore, the researcher and two inter-raters deployed Brinton's (2008) (as cited in Pan and Aroonmanakun, 2022) distinctive features of a DM: "phonologically unstressed, syntactically independent, and little or no propositional meaning" (p.195).

The researcher chose three hot topics from the debate titles in order to precisely assess students' conversational ability in a range of authentic topics that are relevant to students' life: Education, Tourism, and Fast food.

2.3 Data Analysis and Discussion

The students adopted various ways to organise their conversation and further direct the listeners what is happening. For instance, at the initiation or transition points of speakers' turns, some specific words or phrases such as yeah, oh, well, great, so, all right, you know, I mean, etc. are used to connect segments of the discourse to one another in a logical way.

The multi-category scheme proposed by Fung and Carter (2007) and Brinton's (2008) function taxonomy which encompasses a functionally-based taxonomy of DMs in spoken language are adopted in this study as the analytical framework. These taxonomies consist of four functional domains: Interpersonal, referential, structural and cognitive categories., and interpersonal and textual on the other hand.

Let's consider this extract from students' conversation as an example:

S1: **So**, I've made my decision and I am going to travel to Turkey.

S2: A wonderful idea.

S3: **Well**, you need to obtain a visa

S2: **Right**.

S1: **Anyway**, I wonder if either of you know someone in the embassy so as not to wait for hours there.

S2: You can **perhaps** enjoy your waiting time by having some refreshment.

The DMs in this extract have a number of uses:

- **So** marks the beginning of a new part of the conversation.
- **Well** marks a change in the focus (from travelling to needing a visa).
- **Right** marks a response (S2 is agreeing with S3).
- **Anyway** marks a shift in topic (from obtaining a visa to knowing someone).
- **Perhaps** is used for hedging (S2 avoids helping S1).

In some cases, a DM is used to convey more than one meaning, for example, 'You know' is used to fulfil divergent interpersonal and textual functions in students' oral communication:

- Interpersonal function (speaker's attitude): **I mean**, travelling to another country is wonderful, but I just don't enjoy it.
- Textual function (as a repair): We will meet in the library; **I mean** the cafeteria.

Checking and carefully contemplating the 120-minute fragment of students' conversation revealed that Kurdish EFL students used different DMs to serve different functions. DMs have been utilised for the four functions: referential, structural, cognitive and interpersonal, but at a different rate. They used DMs to mark different functions like textual relationships, arrangement, transition and continuation of topics, conclusion, repairs, hesitations, solidarity building device to indicate shared knowledge and express attitudes as follows:

Table (1) Distribution of DMs in the conversation

Distribution of words			Distribution of DMs
Total word count	3200	100%	220 DMs
Content words	1300	41%	6.9 % of the total
Function words	1900	59%	11.6 % of function words

Table (2) Frequency and use of DMs in the conversation

DM	Frequency	Use
Right	3	Start a conversation
Ok	4	
To begin with	4	
So	8	Begin a new narration Mark a result/ consequence
	3	
Anyway	6	End a conversation
Right	3	
Ok	4	
Anyway	4	Change or manage a conversation
And	9	Order what we say
Then	6	
First	4	
Second	2	
In general	3	
What's more	3	
To sum up	2	

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I mean	12	Say something in another way
In other words	3	Search for the right word
You know	11	Shared knowledge
You see	4	Mark an involvement
Fine	1	Response tokens
Good	3	
Great	3	
Certainly	3	
Exactly	2	
Yes, yeah	10	
No	2	
I think	19	Show attitude
Actually	5	
Basically	2	
Hopefully	2	
If you ask me	1	
In fact	3	
To be honest	4	
I am afraid	5	
Unfortunately	3	
Obviously	3	
Fortunately	3	
Undoubtedly	2	
Indeed	3	
Perhaps	3	Look less direct/ hedge
May be	3	
Probably	4	
Just	2	
Well	8	Face-threat mitigator
	4	Search for the right phrase
Um...	6	Introduce a new topic carefully
Wow	5	Shows a positive/ negative emotional response
Oops	3	
Oh	5	

Deeply pondering on the above table reveals that the DMs **I think** with the frequency 19 (8.6%), **well** with the frequency 14 (6.3%), **I mean** with the frequency 12 (5.4), **you know** with the frequency 11 (5%), **so** with the frequency 11 (5%), **yeh** with the frequency 10 (4.5%), **you know** with the frequency 10 (4.5%), and **and** with the frequency 9 (2.2%) are the most frequently used DMs by Kurdish EFL students, as illustrated in the table below:

Table (3) The most frequently used DMs by Kurdish EFL students

Discourse marker	Frequency	Percentage
I think	19	8.6 %
Well	14	6.3 %
I mean	12	5.4 %
You know	11	5 %
So	11	5 %
Yeah	10	4.5 %
Any way	10	4.5 %
And	9	2.2 %

It is noticed that the DM **'I think'** with the frequency (19, 8.6 %) was the mostly used DM by Kurdish EFL students. This high frequency is due to the divergent functions it can serve. This result is in alignment with the work of Li and Pang (2022), who accentuate the significance of the DM **'I think'** and highlight its frequent use by referring to its various grammatical and discoursal functions. They mention to these functions: epistemic function to express an opinion, hedging functions to express uncertainty or politeness, interaction functions as a hesitation marker, and cognitive functions showing how one thinks.

The second frequently used DM is **'well'** with the frequency (14, 6.3 %). This result accords with Aijmer's assertion (2016) who considers **'well'** as a focal DM that can offer divergent functions in a conversation. The DM **'well'** which has the textual functions marking a request and marking a question. However, it was mostly used with the interpersonal function face-threat mitigator by Kurdish students.

'I mean' appears in the students' conversation with the frequency (12, 5.4 %). As Tree and Schrock (2002) state **'I mean'** indicates something about positive politeness that exhibits a speaker's lack of precision, which in turn allows more room for the addressees to express their attitudes.

'You know' with the frequency (11, 5 %) was mostly used by Kurdish EFL students in turn taking and turn holding. This result agrees with that of Tree and Schrock (2002), who believe that turn management is a key function of **'you know'**. Further, they maintain that using **'you know'** makes speech more casual and reduces social distance.

Similarly, **'so'** got the same frequency (11, 5 %). Although the DM **'so'** has a textual function marking a result or consequence, it was mostly used by Kurdish students to mark a beginning of a new narration.

In the fifth frequency rate, **'yeah'** and **'any way'** appear with the frequency (10, 4.5 %). **'Yeah'** is mainly used as discourse token with the functions: continuer, an agreement marker, a turn-taking marker, or a disfluency marker (Thuy, 2019). However, it was noticed that the Kurdish students showed over-reliance on one specific function, that is showing agreement.

‘Any way’ is used with the function of managing a conversation/returning to the main point or change the course of conversation.

The DM ‘and’ appeared with the frequency (9, 2.2 %) in students’ conversation. The students tended to use ‘and’ as an all-purpose DM to serve several functions: introduce additional information, insert a comment, connect similar words that need to be taken jointly etc.

With the function of DMs in mind, it is crucial to report that Kurdish EFL students were more inclined to use DMs for interpersonal functions more than textual functions. Analysis of the results revealed that DMs were used to fulfill a number of textual and interpersonal functions contributing basically to the coherent and pragmatic flow of the discourse generated in classroom interaction. DMs were used by Kurdish EFL students as a lubricant that helped them create an effective and smooth flow of information; nonetheless, they were not skillful users of them. Specifically, the students used DMs for these functions in common: start, manage, or end a conversation; express opinion, politeness, or uncertainty; show positive agreement and build rapport; and turn management. Doubtless to say, cultural and social influences are decisive factors that make Kurdish students use DMs for politeness and affinity rather than their textual functions.

As far as gender is concerned in the use of DMs, there exists differences in the results. The result shows a tendency of gender difference regarding the frequency and function of the DMs as is shown in the table below:

Discourse marker	Female use	Male use
I think	13 68%	6 32%
Well	8 57%	6 43%
I mean	9 75%	3 25%
You know	8 73%	3 27%
So	6 55%	5 45%
Yeah	6 60%	4 40%
Any way	5 50%	5 50%
And	5 56%	4 44%
Total	60 62%	36 38%

A gender comparison reveals significant difference between speaker usage of the DM ‘I think’ and ‘I mean’. However, the study does not show a significant gender difference in the usage of markers ‘so’ ‘yeh’, ‘any way’, ‘and’, and ‘you know’. This result is in accordance with the statement of Östman (1981), who argues that the basic function of the DM **you know** lies at the respect level of politeness; it is instinctively used by women more than men in natural conversation.

Besides that, it has been noticed (shown in table above) that Kurdish female EFL students’ use of DMs outweighs their male peers. This result is congruent with Erman (1993) who alleges a gender difference in using DMs in terms of their frequency,

functions, and contexts of occurrence. It is asserted that women use DMs more than men.

Strikingly, the researcher noticed that the students' use of DMs was less than the normal rate. The rate between the number of DMs and the word count reveals that Kurdish EFL student's conversation does not abound with DMs. They tended to link sentences in terms of prosodic features that provide context where they emphasise the right words, use voice pitch, and take appropriate pauses. In other words, they skipped using necessary DMs. This was affirmed by Hellermann and Vergun (2007), who contended that non-native speakers use few discourse markers as compared to native speakers. They also argued that the overuse of DMs by some speakers can be attributed to their being more acculturated to the English culture.

This finding also concords with Pan and Aroonmanakun's (2022) assertion that when EFL students are exposed to unnatural linguistic input in traditional teaching which emphasizes on English grammar and propositional meanings of words (the prevalent pedagogy in the Kurdish context), this would lead to low frequency use of spoken DMs on average. They further argue that having a native-like competency in the use of DMs as an established norm to be acquired by foreign learners of English does not exist in previous researches. In other words, Kurdish EFL students are not conditioned to use DMs in the same way or at a similar frequency as native English speakers.

Not having one-to-one correspondence between English and Kurdish DMs creates difficulties for Kurdish EFL students to master English DMs. This discrepancy of DMs may result in lack in the pragmatic competence of Kurdish EFL students, which in turn leads to either overuse or underuse of English DMs. In specific, Diskin (2017) proclaims that using DMs in oral communication is problematic and difficult for foreign learners to learn since it demands a high level of competency on the level of linguistics, pragmatics, and socio-cultural awareness.

In summary, the findings disclose the fact that DMs are not completely ruled out in the speech of Kurdish EFL students but they are used less frequently. Kurdish non-native speakers tend to use DMs for both interpersonal and structural purposes, yet, they are less familiar with the range of possibilities of these items. Besides, the findings show the limitedness of the variety and the range of DMs utilised by Kurdish EFL students and they are restricted to particular items, which consequently led to an over-dependence on some common DMs which might result in pragmatic oddness and obsolescence.

3 Conclusions

In light of the research findings, it is clear that DMs are a salient set of devices which help to orient the listener to the complete structure of a conversation and facilitates mutual understanding as they oil the wheels of communication. This research has led to the conclusion that Kurdish EFL students used DMs to facilitate discourse

development and management throughout different functional levels. Furthermore, Kurdish EFL students do not entirely utilise and reap advantage from DMs in their conversations.

As for gender influence on DMs use, the results have shown frequency difference; Kurdish female EFL students' use of DMs outweighs their male peers. In addition, a significant difference between speaker usage of the DM 'I think' and 'I mean' was noticed in favour of the females serving the functions of their politeness and courteousness.

4 Recommendations

- English spoken DMs should be given more attention and studied comprehensively so as to raise Kurdish EFL students' awareness as regards the importance of using DMs appropriately in their spoken communication, and to get wind of its patterns and different uses.
- It is essential to carry out further studies in order to determine how Kurdish EFL students use DMs in their English oral communication and compare the results with their use of native DMs having in mind exploring how L1 Kurdish language affects the use of English spoken DMs by Kurdish EFL students.

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