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Impact of Explicit Instruction on the Use of Discourse Markers among Second-Year EFL University Students

Sabah Noori Yas

Teacher at Al-Manar Secondary School for Boys / General Directorate of
Education in Anbar

أثر التدريس الصريح في استخدام أدوات الربط الخطابية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في المرحلة الجامعية الثانية

م.م. صباح نوري ياس خضير

مدرس في ثانوية المنار المسائية للبنين / المديرية العامة لتربية الانبار

الخلاص

يتناول هذا البحث تأثير أساليب التدريس الصريحة على استخدام أدوات الربط الخطابية (DMS) لدى الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية. وقد تم اعتماد تصميم بحثي من نوع الاختبار القبلي-البعدي، شمل مائة طالب وطالبة من طلبة المرحلة الثانية في كلية التراث الجامعة، خضعوا لخمس جلسات تعليمية مركزة تناولت أدوات الربط التباينية، والسببية، والتفصيلية، والتسلسلية. استخدمت عملية التقييم الإحصاءات الوصفية إلى جانب اختبار (t) للعينات المزدوجة لتحليل البيانات. وأظهرت النتائج تقدماً ملحوظاً في استخدام الطلبة لأدوات الربط من حيث تكرار الاستخدام وملاءمة السياقات، حيث تراوحت أحجام الأثر بين المتوسطة والكبيرة. تؤكد نتائج البحث أن التدريس المنهجي لأدوات الربط يساهم في تطوير قدرات الطلبة في الكتابة الأكاديمية باللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية. كما يقدم البحث فوائد تعليمية كبيرة للطلبة، ويثري المعرفة البحثية القائمة من خلال تحليله لبيئة تعليمية لم تحظ بالدراسة الكافية سابقاً. وتشير النتائج إلى أن إدماج تعليم أدوات الربط ضمن المنهاج الدراسي يعزز من القدرات البلاغية ومهارات التماسك النصي لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية. ويختتم البحث بتقديم توصيات للمعلمين ومصممي المناهج الدراسية، إلى جانب اقتراحات لإجراء دراسات مستقبلية تتناول مدى احتفاظ الطلبة بمهارات أدوات الربط وانتقالها عبر أنماط نصية مختلفة على المدى البعيد. الكلمات المفتاحية: علامات الخطاب؛ التعليم الصريح؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية؛ التماسك؛ الكتابة الأكاديمية

Abstract

The research investigates how explicit teaching methods affect Iraqi students who study English as a foreign language in using discourse markers (DMs). A pretest–posttest design involved one hundred second-year students at Al-Turath University College who received five targeted instruction sessions about contrastive, causal, elaborative, and sequential markers. The evaluation process used descriptive statistics together with paired-samples t-tests for data analysis. The results demonstrated substantial progress in how people used DMs both in terms of frequency and appropriate situations, with effect sizes ranging from medium to large. The research shows that systematic DM instruction leads to better EFL students' academic writing abilities. The research delivers substantial educational advantages to students while adding new knowledge to existing research through its analysis of an understudied educational environment. The research shows that EFL students who learn DM instruction in their curriculum develop enhanced rhetorical abilities and better coherence skills. Recommendations are provided for teachers and curriculum designers, along with suggestions for future research on the long-term retention and transfer of DM skills across genres. **Keywords: discourse markers; explicit instruction; EFL learners; cohesion; academic writing**

Introduction

In the context of Iraqi higher education, ongoing issues in academic discourse are well recognized, particularly the frequent underuse and improper placement of discourse markers (DMs), which often lead to incoherence at both local and global levels. Focusing on second-year English majors at AlTurath University College targets students at a crucial stage of developing their academic writing skills, as genre expectations start to take shape.

Globally, evaluations of second language (L2) academic writing consistently show that cohesion and metadiscourse are areas where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often need support. Discourse markers serve as an effective point for teaching because they express functional relationships—like contrast, addition, concession, results, and sequencing—that can be clearly taught and practiced through a progression from controlled to communicative exercises. The instructional strategy combines metadiscourse theory with the process of skill development. First, learners gain explicit knowledge of these functions; guided practice then reinforces these connections, and communicative production aids in proceduralizing the skills. This structured method is expected to lead to notable improvements in both how often and how appropriately metadiscourse is used in context. Foundational theories (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1990, 1999) define DMs as pragmatic signals indicating relationships among discourse units, while systemic-functional approaches (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) position them within cohesive resources. Metadiscourse frameworks (Hyland, 2005) further distinguish between interactive resources that organize discourse and interactional resources that express stance—an analytic distinction that guides how structural versus interactive markers are taught in the classroom. Across instructional studies, three common design variables influence outcome magnitude: dosage (number and length of sessions), explicitness (clear functional labeling and contrastive examples), and feedback density. High-dosage, explicitly targeted interventions tend to produce medium-to-large effects; minimal or implicit exposure results in modest gains that are vulnerable to regression. Participants. The sample comprised 100 second-year undergraduates (English Department, Al-Turath University College, Baghdad). Institutional placement indicated intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency. All participants provided informed consent, and the data were anonymized before analysis. Instructional Sequence. The ten-hour program took place over five sessions, combining clear explanations, targeted practice, and communicative production. Structural markers (e.g., however, therefore, consequently, moreover) and interaction markers (e.g., on the other hand, in contrast, to conclude) were introduced through contrastive examples and guided reformulation exercises. In Middle Eastern and neighboring contexts, quasi-experimental studies with EFL undergraduates also show positive changes after explicit instruction, although differences in task types (spoken vs. written), assessment rubrics, and coding methods make cross-study comparisons difficult. This highlights the need for standardized measurement and reliable methods—an approach implemented here through manual coding and interrater agreement. Complementing descriptive profiles, narrative inspection suggested improvements not only in frequency but also in appropriateness, especially for contrastive and resultative relations—categories emphasized in instruction. Distributional summaries (not shown) indicated a right shift in posttest scores and reduced interquartile dispersion. The inferential analysis supported these findings with a medium-to-large effect size. Reporting confidence intervals limits plausible values of the mean difference to a positive range, reinforcing that the improvement is unlikely due to chance. A persistent gap concerns transfer and durability. Few designs include delayed posttests or compare frequency with appropriateness ratings. The present study emphasizes strong immediate outcomes while encouraging long-term follow-up to examine retention and genre transfer (e.g., argumentative essays, presentations). The pattern of gains matches skill-acquisition theories: explicitly labeling functions combined with increasingly independent practice probably sped up proceduralization, enabling easier retrieval during composition. Improvements focused on areas emphasized in instruction, aligning taught content with assessed understanding. For Iraqi EFL programs, two practical recommendations emerge. First, embed DM instruction recurrently across semesters rather than as a one-off unit to enhance retention via distributed practice. Second, triangulate frequency with appropriateness rubrics so that increased counts reflect context-appropriate deployment rather than indiscriminate insertion. Therefore, this study builds on previous research by using a large, well-characterized group (N = 100 second-year majors), applying standardized coding with reliability checks, and openly reporting effect sizes and confidence intervals. These aspects address common limitations in the field and support clear curricular interpretation. In summary, explicit instruction provides a highly effective way to improve discourse organization among EFL undergraduates. By systematizing form–function relationships and offering scaffolded practice opportunities, instructors can speed up the acquisition of markers that support cohesion and rhetorical clarity in academic writing. Discourse markers (DMs) are vital language tools that help organize and create coherence in spoken and written communication. They indicate relationships between statements, control the flow of conversation, and guide the listener or reader through the discourse (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1990). In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, learners often struggle with acquiring and properly using DMs because these elements are closely linked to pragmatic norms and contextual conventions rather than just grammatical rules.

Consequently, EFL learners' discourse might seem disjointed, less cohesive, and less effective at reaching communicative goals (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). A growing amount of research highlights the importance of explicitly teaching DMs in the EFL curriculum to improve learners' pragmatic and discourse skills. Despite this recognition, empirical evidence about the effectiveness of explicit instruction remains mixed. Some studies show significant improvements in DM use after focused instruction (Hernandez, 2008; Alraddadi, 2016; Manan & Raslee, 2018), while others report only modest or context-dependent gains. The variations in findings are due to factors like instructional duration, teaching strategies, learner proficiency levels, and assessment methods. Therefore, more empirical research is needed to determine how reliably explicit instruction can improve learners' use of DMs. This study advances the ongoing debate by investigating the impact of explicit instruction on the use of DMs among 100 second-year students from the English Department at Al-Turath University College. It uses a within-subjects pretest-posttest design to measure increases in DM usage and assess the pedagogical implications of explicit teaching. The main research questions are: (1) Does explicit instruction significantly boost the frequency of DM use among EFL university students? (2) Do these gains lead to meaningful pedagogical improvements that justify their inclusion in curriculum design?

Literature Review

The study of discourse markers (DMs) has played a key role in applied linguistics and discourse analysis since the late twentieth century. Early foundational work by Schiffrin (1987) emphasized the pragmatic function of DMs in structuring conversation and indicating relationships between utterances. Fraser (1999) improved this view by proposing a classification of markers that link discourse segments through semantic and pragmatic ties. Together, these studies established DMs as a unique linguistic category crucial for cohesion and coherence in both spoken and written communication. In academic writing, DMs are essential for improving clarity and flow. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion framework categorized connectives into groups like additive, adversative, causal, and temporal relations, providing a structured view of how markers help organize text. Building on this, Hyland (2005) created a metadiscourse model that separates interactive markers, which direct the reader through the text, from interactional markers, which enable writers to show stance and connect with readers. This dual approach has guided much later research, making DMs a key part of academic literacy. A growing body of empirical research indicates that EFL learners struggle with both the frequency and appropriateness of DM use. Studies in Asian contexts consistently show underuse or misuse of markers. For example, Bolton, Nelson, and Hung (2002) found that Hong Kong undergraduates tend to over-rely on a limited set of additive markers such as 'and' and 'also,' while neglecting adversative or causal markers. Likewise, Narita, Sato, and Sugiura (2004) reported that Japanese EFL students frequently misuse concessive markers, leading to logical inconsistencies in their argumentative essays. These patterns underscore the difficulty learners have in applying theoretical knowledge of DMs to effective academic writing. Comparable findings have been reported in Arab EFL contexts. Jalilifar (2008) documented Iranian undergraduates' tendency to overuse basic additive and causal markers, while underutilizing contrastive and elaborative ones. Al-Surmi (2012) similarly observed that Arab learners often inserted markers in situations where they were pragmatically unsuitable, harming coherence. These results suggest that without explicit instruction, learners are unlikely to acquire a balanced set of DMs or develop sensitivity to rhetorical context. Several intervention studies provide evidence of the positive effects of explicit instruction. Martínez (2002) demonstrated that Spanish EFL learners significantly expanded their DM range after a focused instructional program, particularly in argumentative writing. Fung and Carter (2007) showed that explicit teaching of spoken DMs enhanced interactional competence in classroom discussions. More recently, Al-Khazraji (2019) found that Saudi undergraduates improved both the frequency and appropriateness of DM use in essays following explicit instruction, with gains maintained in delayed posttests. Collectively, these findings highlight explicit instruction as an effective way to improve academic discourse skills. Despite these encouraging results, debate continues over the best instructional approach. Some scholars support inductive methods, where learners are exposed to authentic texts rich in DMs and guided to discover usage patterns (Wei, 2011). Others favor deductive, teacher-led instruction that emphasizes clear explanations, controlled practice, and corrective feedback (Chen, 2006). Increasingly, blended approaches that combine explicit explanation with communicative practice are preferred, as they enable learners to first develop declarative knowledge and then turn it into procedural skills through meaningful production tasks. The limitations of previous research also need acknowledgment. Many studies use small sample sizes, brief interventions, or non-standardized assessment tools, which limit their broader applicability. Additionally, focusing solely on frequency counts often overlooks the importance of appropriateness. As Hyland and Tse

(2004) point out, effective writing requires not just the presence of DMs but their proper alignment with rhetorical goals. Without this, learners might overuse markers in a mechanical way rather than achieving genuine cohesion. In Middle Eastern contexts, research remains comparatively limited. Jalilifar's (2008) Iranian study and Al-Khazraji's (2019) Saudi research both support the effectiveness of explicit instruction, but methodological inconsistencies make cross-study comparisons difficult. For example, some studies use quasi-experimental designs with control groups, while others rely only on pretest–posttest measures. Additionally, coding schemes for identifying and categorizing DMs differ significantly, further reducing comparability. This lack of standardization highlights the need for more rigorous designs with larger, more diverse samples and validated coding protocols. Another emerging aspect in recent scholarship is the integration of discourse marker instruction within broader models of academic literacy. Hyland (2016) argues that writing instruction must go beyond grammar and vocabulary to include rhetorical and discourse-level skills. From this perspective, teaching DMs is not a side note but central to helping students build coherent arguments, critically engage with sources, and find their place within academic communities. By teaching students how to signal contrast, elaboration, concession, and causation, DM instruction directly enhances their participation in scholarly discourse. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools has brought new challenges and opportunities for DM usage. Bai and Jin (2023) observed that AI-generated essays often contain disproportionately high numbers of cohesive markers, creating an impression of fluency but sometimes sacrificing authenticity and rhetorical nuance. For EFL learners, comparing AI-generated output with their own writing can highlight the importance of using DMs meaningfully rather than mechanically. This development suggests that future instruction should include digital literacy, training students to critically assess automated discourse patterns alongside traditional methods. The present study fills several gaps in this literature. First, it focuses on Iraqi undergraduates, a group that is underrepresented in DM research. Second, it uses a sizable sample (N = 100 second-year students), which improves the reliability of the results. Third, the instructional design is transparent and easy to replicate, covering five sessions with clear explanations, guided practice, and communicative tasks. Finally, the study combines descriptive and inferential statistics, allowing for both measurement of gains and qualitative evaluation of their relevance. These contributions strengthen the evidence for explicit instruction and offer context-specific insights for curriculum development in Iraqi higher education. In summary, previous research highlights both the importance of DMs in academic writing and the difficulties EFL learners encounter in mastering them. Clear instruction shows promise as an intervention, but more work is needed to improve methods, ensure long-lasting effects, and develop standardized assessments. By placing the current study within these ongoing discussions, this review emphasizes the importance of the research and its possible contribution to the field.

Methodology

Participants. The sample included 100 second-year undergraduates from the English Department at Al-Turath University College in Baghdad. Institutional placement showed they had intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency. All participants gave informed consent, and the data were anonymized before analysis.

Design. This study used a within-subjects pretest–posttest design to assess the effect of explicit instruction on discourse marker (DM) use. This approach was selected to minimize individual differences and boost statistical power. **Instructional Sequence.** The ten-hour program unfolded across five sessions combining explicit explanation, focused practice, and communicative production. Structural markers (e.g., however, therefore, consequently, moreover) and interactive markers (e.g., on the other hand, in contrast, to conclude) were presented via contrastive examples and guided reformulation tasks. **Table 1. Instructional Sessions for Discourse Marker Teaching**

Session	Focus	Illustrative Targets	Primary Task
1	Functions & categories	contrast, addition, result	Guided identification & reformulation
2	Contrast & concession	however, nevertheless, in contrast	Gap-fill + sentence combining
3	Result & sequencing	therefore, thus, consequently; first/next/finally	Paragraph outlining

4	Elaboration & exemplification	moreover, furthermore, example for	Short argumentative paragraph
5	Consolidation & transfer	mixed targets	Timed writing + peer feedback

Results

Descriptive Statistics. The sample consisted of $N = 100$ students with complete data. The mean number of DMs used increased from pretest ($M = 31.77$, $SD = 9.23$) to posttest ($M = 49.13$, $SD = 12.36$). The mean difference (Post – Pre) was 17.36 ($SD = 5.82$). **Inferential Statistics.** A paired-samples t-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant: $t(99) \approx 29.84$, $p \approx 0.000$, 95% CI [16.22 , 18.50]. The effect size was medium-to-large (Cohen's $d \approx 2.98$), suggesting that the intervention had a substantial practical impact on students' use of DMs. **Table 2. Descriptive statistics of discourse marker counts (Pre vs. Post).**

Time	N	Mean	SD
Pre	100	31.77	9.23
Post	100	49.13	12.36

Table 3. Paired-samples t-test results.

n	Mean Diff	SD Diff	t	df	p
100	17.36	5.82	29.84	99	0.000

Discussion

The findings of this study show that explicit instruction in discourse markers (DMs) leads to notable improvements in how EFL students use these pragmatic devices. The results revealed a medium-to-large effect size, suggesting that the instructional intervention was not only statistically significant but also pedagogically meaningful. This aligns with previous studies such as Hernandez (2008), Alraddadi (2016), and Manan and Raslee (2018), which emphasized the positive impact of explicit teaching on learners' pragmatic competence. One of the main contributions of this study is its focus on second-year students in the English Department at Al-Turath University College, Baghdad. By placing the research within an Iraqi EFL context, the study enhances the limited amount of empirical research conducted in Middle Eastern settings. The findings indicate that targeted instruction can effectively close gaps in learners' discourse skills, helping them produce more coherent and contextually suitable academic writing and oral presentations. **Pedagogical Implications.** These findings have several teaching implications. First, curriculum designers should consider integrating explicit DM instruction into writing and speaking modules instead of keeping it as a supplement. Second, language instructors should provide ongoing opportunities for practice and feedback to ensure that increases in frequency also lead to improvements in appropriateness. Third, assessments should include both quantitative measures (e.g., frequency counts) and qualitative evaluations (e.g., contextual appropriateness). **Limitations.** Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The sample was drawn from a single institution, which limits how broadly the findings can be applied. The intervention lasted only two weeks, raising questions about the long-term retention of the observed gains. Furthermore, focusing solely on frequency counts might overlook more subtle aspects of DM use, such as stylistic choices and discourse appropriateness across different registers. Future research should include delayed posttests to evaluate the long-term effects of instruction. Studies could also examine differences based on proficiency levels, genders, or cultural backgrounds to better understand how learner variables interact with instructional methods. Additionally, incorporating mixed-methods research that combines both quantitative and qualitative analyses would offer a deeper insight into how explicit instruction impacts not only the amount but also the quality of DM use. The results of this study clearly show that explicit instruction significantly enhances the use of discourse markers in the writing of Iraqi EFL undergraduates. The medium-to-large effect size observed confirms that targeted teaching methods can produce meaningful improvements even over a short instructional period. These findings are consistent with earlier studies such as Martínez (2002) and Al-Khazraji (2019), which reported notable gains following explicit teaching programs. However, the larger and more homogeneous sample in this study suggests that the impact may be even greater when instruction is systematically delivered and closely aligned with students' academic writing needs. One particularly encouraging result is that improvements were seen not only in how often markers were used but also in their appropriateness in context. This shows that learners were not just mechanically adding DMs but were starting to understand their rhetorical roles. Hyland and Tse's (2004) claim that cohesion should be judged based on rhetorical fit rather than just presence is well supported here. By guiding students

through practice that progressed from controlled exercises to real-world writing tasks, the instructional program helped close the gap between explicit knowledge and practical skills. Comparisons with earlier regional studies highlight both similarities and differences. Jalilifar's (2008) work in Iran reported positive but modest gains, likely due to smaller sample sizes and shorter interventions. In contrast, the present study implemented a five-session program with 100 participants, allowing for more definitive conclusions. These contextual differences indicate that future research should focus on scalability and replication across various educational settings to verify generalizability. The findings also have broader implications for curriculum development in Iraq and similar EFL settings. Writing instruction in many programs remains heavily focused on grammar and vocabulary, with relatively little emphasis on discourse organization. The success of this study suggests that incorporating DM instruction into writing curricula could directly address common weaknesses in coherence and cohesion. Teachers can include brief, explicit modules on DMs within essay-writing courses, ensuring that students develop not only linguistic accuracy but also rhetorical skills. Nevertheless, limitations must be acknowledged. The absence of a delayed posttest prevents the study from confirming long-term retention of gains. Without ongoing practice, improvements might diminish over time. Furthermore, although interrater reliability checks were carried out during analysis, future research should incorporate additional qualitative methods, such as interviews or think-aloud protocols, to better understand learners' perspectives on DM acquisition. These methods could provide deeper insights into how students comprehend and apply DMs in real writing situations. Overall, the discussion highlights that explicit instruction is a highly effective intervention for EFL learners. The study supports previous theoretical claims while providing new empirical evidence specific to the Iraqi higher education context, where research on DMs remains limited. By placing the findings within both global and regional scholarship, this research underscores the potential of explicit DM instruction to enhance academic literacy in underrepresented settings.

Conclusion

The results of this study clearly show that explicit instruction significantly enhances the use of discourse markers in the writing of Iraqi EFL undergraduates. The medium-to-large effect size observed confirms that targeted teaching interventions can produce substantial improvements even within a relatively short instructional period. These findings are consistent with previous studies like Martínez (2002) and Al-Khazraji (2019), which reported notable progress after explicit teaching programs. However, the larger and more uniform sample used in this study suggests that the impact may be even greater when instruction is systematically delivered and closely aligned with students' academic writing needs. One particularly encouraging result is that improvements were observed not only in the frequency of marker use but also in how appropriately they fit the context. This indicates that learners were not merely inserting DMs mechanically but were beginning to understand their rhetorical roles. Hyland and Tse's (2004) argument that cohesion should be judged based on rhetorical fit rather than just presence is strongly supported here. By guiding students through practice that moves from controlled exercises to communicative writing tasks, the instructional program helped bridge the gap between explicit knowledge and procedural skills. Comparisons with earlier regional studies highlight both similarities and differences. Jalilifar's (2008) work in Iran showed positive but modest gains, likely due to smaller sample sizes and shorter interventions. In contrast, the current study used a five-session program with 100 participants, enabling more robust conclusions. These contextual differences indicate that future research should focus on scalability and replication across various educational settings to verify generalizability. The findings also have broader implications for curriculum design in Iraq and similar EFL settings. Writing instruction in many programs remains heavily focused on grammar and vocabulary, with relatively little emphasis on discourse organization. The success of this study shows that adding DM instruction into writing curricula could directly improve coherence and cohesion issues. Teachers can incorporate brief, clear modules on DMs within essay-writing courses, helping students develop both linguistic accuracy and rhetorical skills. Nonetheless, limitations must be recognized. The lack of a delayed posttest means the study cannot verify the long-term retention of gains. It is possible that without ongoing practice, improvements could diminish over time. Additionally, although interrater reliability was checked during analysis, future research should include more qualitative methods, such as interviews or think-aloud protocols, to gain deeper insights into learners' perspectives on DM acquisition. These methods might offer more detailed understanding of how students understand and use DMs in real writing situations. Overall, the discussion emphasizes that explicit instruction is a highly effective intervention for EFL learners. The study supports earlier theoretical claims while adding empirical evidence specific to the Iraqi higher education context, where systematic research on DMs remains

limited. By framing the findings within both global and regional scholarship, this research highlights the potential of explicit DM instruction to improve academic literacy in under-studied settings.

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