

Pragmatic Analysis of Discourse Markers in Spoken English by Chinese EFL College Learners

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Abstract: In this study, the discourse markers spoken by the Chinese EFL college learners are examined on the basis of a corpus of discourse of spoken test in classroom in China. The results show that the college students tend to use discourse markers to convey their thoughts on such different levels as interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive. They are inclined to use interpersonal and referential discourse markers than the other to achieve the pragmatic function. Besides, the study also relates the implications on language teaching for improving learner's proficiency in discourse markers.

Keywords: Discourse markers ; Chinese EFL college learners ; Pragmatic functions

1. Introduction

The use of discourse markers is crucial in interactive communication. It functions as a marker denotes the relationship among sentences in terms of spoken and written interaction, which make the meaning of the sentence easily conveyed and understood by the hearer. Discourse markers are conventionally deemed as “fillers”^[1]. The definitions of discourse markers do not look the same one another. Schiffrin^[2] treats discourse markers as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” without explaining what “unit of talk” is. Discourse markers serve as instructions from the speaker to the hearer on how to incorporate the host unit into a cohesive mental picture of the discourse^[3]. The definition by Hansen is comprehensive by getting rid of the localization of discourse markers. So, the present study will use Hansen's definition when distinguishing discourse markers.

Multiple researchers conduct studies of discourse markers from different angles: semantic and pragmatic, discourse coherence, pragmatic-cognitive angles and so forth. Schiffrin^[2] And Redeker^[4] carried out the studies from angle. Schiffrin put more attention on the way the discourse markers to be added in term of discourse coherence. From the discourse and coherence angle, Lenk's conducted the studies on the relationship between discourse markers and coherence^[5]. In terms of the pragmatic-cognitive, in order to conduct the studies on how the constraints realized by discourse markers, Blakemore^[6] used the term “context” in her theory at the level of cognitive context, then She further argued that discourse markers enable the speaker and the addressee to have constrain in the cognitive context, which trigger the interpretation of the text and the fulfillment of the coherence.

Within different contextual situations, the use of discourse markers varies. Therefore, research on the discourse markers employed by Chinese EFL college students is required. The aim of the study is to find out how the Chinese EFL College students use the discourse markers to complete the utterances in the situation of English oral test and what the functions in relation to the pragmatic use of the discourse markers employed by the students.

The present study is to answers the following questions:

- (1) What are the discourse markers used by Chinese EFL learners?
- (2) What functions can be seen from the discourse markers?
- (3) What are the potential causes influences the use of discourse markers?

2. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The present study conducts a research on the use of discourse markers by Chinese EFL college students from four perspectives which include the interpersonal category, referential category, structural category, and cognitive category based on the theory put forward by Fung and Carter^[7] in terms of the macro level of discourse markers, which derives from the concept of multi-level model

of coherence by Schiffrin's^[2], interpersonal theory by Aijmer's^[8].

The data are collected from the oral test in the context of classroom at the end of the term. 61 Chinese college EFL students are required to choose one of the 100 topics at the day they take the test. The students will give three minutes to prepare what they will discuss and five minutes to present their oral content. In the meantime, the researcher will record the speaking content. After that, the raw audio material will be transcribed and annotated with markers and analyzed through Antconc. Each selected word is retrieved for the frequencies of the selected items, through the concordances of the annotated data. Secondly, the frequency testing of the data is conducted to find out the general distribution of the discourse markers and the functions of discourse markers used by the students. Last, the potential causes influence the use of discourse markers is studied based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

3. Results

Based on the findings of the present study, two aspects will be related. First, the general distribution of the discourse markers will be presented. Second, each category of the discourse markers is analyzed in terms of linguistic functions.

3.1 General Distribution of Discourse Markers in Students Data

Based on the transcribed text analyzed by AntConc from the EFL college students, the results show that there are 1,739 types and 18,360 tokens in the students spoken corpus. And among them, the most frequently used discourse marker is *eh* with frequency of 711 among the top ten discourse markers, which are *and*, *so*, *I think*, *but*, *because*, *or*, *now*, *first* and *just*.

Table 1
Top ten discourse markers used by EFL college students

Discourse Markers	Frequency	Rank
Eh	711	1
And	542	2
So	199	3
I think	161	4
But	129	5
Because	92	6
Or	65	7
Now	50	8
First	45	9
Just	38	10

From Table 1, it can be seen that *just* is used the least among the top ten discourse markers and which is far less than *I think*. In the meantime, the above ten discourse markers are employed in different situations which can be categorized into four functions based on Fung and Carter's^[7] framework: interpersonal (*I think*), referential (*and*, *so*, *but*, *because*, *or*), structural (*now*, *first*), and cognitive (*eh*).

On top of that, other discourse markers such as *you know*, *well*, *really* are also used by the students, which will be discussed in the following sections.

3.2 Interpersonal

3.2.1 Marking Shared Knowledge

In terms of the analysis of the corpus of college EFL students, compared with other discourse markers, they tend to use more *you know* to share the information with the audience.

- (1) You know, Smoking and drinking are the common phenomena topic in all the countries.
- (2) At that time, I think my father is, is very great, you know. And, but I thought, it wasn't my day, really.

In (1), *you know* is a discourse marker starting the utterance which attracts the students' attention to the following speaking content. *You know* here is a marker indicating that the explanation will be followed. The student is discussing about his reaction to smoking and drinking, he hopes that what he said could be accepted. The same is true of the *you know* in (2).

3.2.2 Indicating Attitudes

On the basis of the student corpus, it is found that the students intend to use *obviously* and *really* to state their thoughts in the context of the topic they produced.

- (3) At that time, I think my father is, is very great, you know. And, but I thought, it wasn't my day, really.
- (4) There are some questions "did you marry?" "do you have a child?" Of course not! Obviously, eh, obviously, I am a girl. eh,

According to Fuang and Carter^[7], the commonly used discourse markers *really* and *obviously* help the speakers convey assurance to the meaning of the utterance. However, it is found that there exists low frequency of using these two markers by the EFL college

students. The total hits of them are 9 and 2 respectively. In Line (3), really is used at the final part of the sentence in order to soften the tone of the speaker. Obviously, in (4), is used to save the speaker's face, avoiding being face-threatened by the interlocutor's act. She doesn't want to be regarded as a married woman.

3.3 Referential

From Table 1, the referential markers account for fifty percent of the top ten discourse markers, which indicate that the EFL colleges student are inclined to use the use them in the spoken test. Among them, the marker and enjoy the highest frequency by 542 followed by markers so, but, because, or. According to Fuang and Carter^[7], the referential markers are frequently used as a signal to imply the relationship of the utterance between the preceding one. These discourse markers can be utilized to express cause, contrast, coordination, disjunction and consequence, which can be seen as follows:

3.3.1 Coordination

In relation to the coordination markers, it is fairly remarkable that the Chinese EFL students tend to use and to connect the semantic meaning of the sentence which can be seen as follows:

(5) Okay, and I think drinking also damage our health.

(6) In the past, I, eh, I just focused on the beautiful scenes and I didn't know how to arrange a traveling.

In (5), the participant list two aspects of the same context by using the word and which indicate the negative response to smoking and drinking. For (6), the marker and is utilized to relate what the participant's situation concerning the knowledge of travelling.

3.4 Structural

According to Fuang and Carter^[7], the structural discourse markers indicate the ways of linking the utterance with function conveyed by verbal activities such as beginning, closing transition, and the continuing of the topics.

3.4.1 Topical Beginning and Ending

In the student corpus, it is found that college students tend to use now (50 hits), well (25 hits), okay (3 hits) or OK (12 hits) to carry out the opening of the conversation, which is also mentioned by Sinclair and Coulthard^[9] that these words have frequent recurrence in their classroom discourse.

(7) I like to see something funny on the blog .Eh, now, everybody, do you know eh, what people like to see in the 80s? What people like to sing in the 80s? Now, I will give you an example.

(8) Well, when I was young, I think I was pessimistic.

(9) What kind of photos you like? Okay, I want to talk about the photos I like first. Ok, my reasons are as follows.

From the above excerpts, now in (7), is employed to make the coherence and start to mention the topic which he is to discuss. Besides, well in (8), is the opening of the topic the speaker will discuss and give the audience time to think about what the speaker is trying to convey based on the topic. It is also the same case with okay or OK in (9).

3.4.2 Sequence

In terms of the sequential markers Chinese college students used in the context of spoken test, most of them are inclined to list or specify the reasons of an argument with the marker first, second, third rather than to begin with, furthermore, foremost and so on. It is quite typical to the college students. Besides, then is usually used as the second item or thing to be mentioned. And it is less used by the college students by frequency of 16.

(10) So I think the reasons they go to the other county eh have three reasons, first, their pursue to a higher eh life conditions. The second reason was they want to find a good job to got a many money. And the third reason they want their children have a eh a good conditions to learn many things

(11) eh, that's something about New Year. Then I want to tell you about my plans for, eh, Chinese New Year.

From the above excerpts, the speakers make his utterance be coherent and easy to be grasped by the sequential markers, which can be seen as a conclusion of the content in a systematical way. They are also the markers that establish the relationship between the speakers and audience in the process of thinking, facilitating the speakers' argument to be coherent with the process of thinking of the audience.

3.5 Cognitive

3.5.1 Indicating the thinking Process

Based on the analysis of the student corpus, college students are inclined to underuse the marker well which account for 2 of the 18360 tokens. In the meantime, I think account for high frequency by 812.

(12) eh Yes well I am going to talk about leader today I think eh we all familiar with leaders because we touch with various leaders in our life.

The well is a delaying marker which denotes the process of thinking. It happens when the speakers cannot arrive at the proper

answers and time for looking for the words or completing the sentence. Besides, it can also function as linker for coherence^[10]. In (12), well is a connector for the speakers to hold the turn of the following content in order to have more time to process what is to be discussed. Altenberg^[11] also argue that well can be employed as device for hesitation offering time for the speaker to keep a turn. On top of that, I think links the utterance, and the speaker can have time to think of what the next is.

3.5.2 Elaborating

The scope of using elaborating markers in the discourse in the student corpus is fairly narrow. The students underuse the marker like by 5 of the 18360 tokens. And it is often used as illustration.

(13) first, we should know the disadvantage of the high technology. And then to take measure to avoid the disadvantage, and we also to put the view, such like the protect environment in ours eh daily life.

(14) That day I'm very excited, and have many things to waited about, uh, something like beautiful gift, and many things like surprise.

Fuang and Carter^[7] argue that like is employed to detail and modify the meaning of the utterance in a clear way. And Jucker and Smith^[12] treat like as a marker centers on presenting the information. Besides, Muller^[13] deems like can function as a marker introducing an explanation, searching for the proper expression. In (13) and (14), like is used as a connector to exemplify what the information the speaker intends to present, and qualify the statement he made.

4. Conclusions

By analyzing the data from the student corpus of the Chinese EFL college students, the present study shows the overuse, underuse and misuse of the discourse markers in a quantitative and qualitative way. It can be seen that the Chinese college students tend to use 'I think', 'uh', 'and' and so forth, which is related to the influence of L1. In the meantime, some less common markers are founded in the corpus which is quite specific to the Chinese college students.

Among these particular markers, there exists misuse of the markers which demonstrate the process of internalization by the students. Besides, it can be seen that students tend to use these markers to establish the relationship of the audience, and even to use the self-created discourse markers to facilitate the interaction. It shows that in the context of the spoken English test, the students are inclined to interact more than they prepared which is also the reason why they would misuse the discourse markers. During the process of thinking what they should say, they center more on the content of their speaking rather than the form of the words.

To sum up, the discourse markers use by Chinese college students in the spoken test demonstrate the contextualized process of students' marker choice which can shed light on the pedagogical research on different usage of discourse marker in different countries. Therefore, a comprehensive comparison between students is to be beneficial to the language teaching. And if an international corpus orientated to discourse markers could be established, it would be beneficial to the Spoken English teaching.

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