

Discourse markers in academic writing

Los conectores discursivos en la escritura académica

*Lic. Ana María Martínez-Sánchez, anmartinez@uo.edu.cu,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2551-9875>;*

*MSc. Clara Alina Escalona-Falcón, claraa@uo.edu.cu,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2860-3108>;*

*Lic. Adriana Quijala-Taquechel, taquechel@uo.edu.cu,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4199-9071>*

Universidad de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba

Abstract

The complex process of writing academic documents has presented serious challenges to students of the English Language Major. The analysis of subjects like Academic Writing revealed this problematic situation finds its root in the insufficient treatment of discourse connectors in the syllabus implemented in the English Language Major. This information serves to the purpose of designing a proposal of a typology of exercises that supports the teaching-learning process of discourse connectors and enhances the students' competence while using them in Academic Writing. To accomplish the mentioned tasks, several scientific methods are used, such as Analysis-Synthesis, Historical-Logical and Hermeneutic. Furthermore, the statistical technique serves to a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the results of the application and relevance of this contribution.

Key words: discourse markers, Academic Writing, students' linguistic competence, typology of exercises.

Resumen

El complejo proceso de escribir documentos académicos ha presentado grandes desafíos a los estudiantes de la carrera de Lengua Inglesa. Al realizar un análisis del programa de asignaturas como Escritura Académica, de acuerdo al plan de estudio implementado, se constató que estas insuficiencias encuentran su génesis en el inadecuado tratamiento de los conectores discursivos. Con este propósito, se propone el diseño de una tipología de ejercicios que complemente el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de los conectores discursivos y eleve la competencia lingüística de los estudiantes al usar estas partículas en la Escritura Académica. Para llevar a cabo estas tareas se emplean métodos científicos como el Análisis-Síntesis, Histórico-Lógico y Hermenéutico. Esta propuesta es además validada mediante el empleo de técnicas estadísticas que permiten una valoración cualitativa y cuantitativa de los resultados de su aplicación, que demuestran la relevancia de esta contribución.

Palabras clave: conectores discursivos, Escritura Académica, competencia lingüística de los estudiantes, tipología de ejercicios.

Introduction

In Linguistics, a discourse marker has been referred to as a word or phrase that is relatively syntax-independent and does not change the meaning of the sentence; a set of linguistic items and properties (e.g. semantic and pragmatic meanings, source, functions) that operates in discourses of various styles or registers and which show us the organization of social interactions and situations in which they are used. They have also been identified as devices “used to relate sentences, clauses and paragraphs to each other” and expressions that “signal the way the writer wants the reader to relate what is about to be said to what has been said before” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

Discourse connectors have been studied in a variety of languages and analyzed in different genres and interactive contexts. Still, many specialists do not coincide in the term. Kapranov (2020) regards them as lexical items which are employed by the writer to signal a sequential relationship between the sentences. For Swan (2005), a discourse marker is a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context, something that connects a sentence to what comes before or after and that indicates the speaker’s attitude to what he is saying. Tadayyon & Vasheghani (2017), on the other hand, refer to discourse markers as a subcategory of grammatical cohesion which join clauses and sentences together to form longer discourse.

Academic Writing is often the process or method and outcome of a student’s time in higher education and yet many students would agree that it can be the most difficult part of learning and studying. Since Academic Writing presents serious challenges, especially in a foreign language, the use of discourse connectors becomes a key factor in attaining cohesive, coherent and unified pieces of written texts. A research paper, for instance, would illustrate the use of discourse markers, especially where the students discuss their major ideas and substantiate them with supporting evidence.

One of the features of academic texts is the objectiveness and accuracy in the transmission of ideas, since their main aim is to communicate for the first time, the results of studies, research, etc. To this aim, discourse markers play a very important role, since they serve to achieve cohesiveness and coherence by linking ideas in a logical way. Having a discourse on a paper calls for means for showing the relationships within the discourse and connecting its different parts. That is to say, a well-developed written discourse, and discourse markers are fundamental requirements for each other.

Although authors like Halliday and Hasan (1976) have recognized, in their studies, the need to treat discourse markers as a highlight in the teaching-learning process of Academic Writing, and their analyses are a very important point of departure for this research; there is little approach as to how discourse markers are introduced and treated in Academic Writing courses.

Therefore, it is necessary to search for ways to enhance Academic Writing competence through developing the usage of discourse markers. In order to achieve improvement in Academic Writing quality, students need to learn how to express their ideas effectively. To that end, effective usage of discourse markers is an indispensable part of attaining cohesive, coherent and unified pieces of written texts.

According to the syllabus for the subject Writing, second-year students of the English Language Major at Universidad de Oriente should develop the first stage of a research work, in most cases to ease a specific problem of the major. But the elaboration of such “term papers” implies the writing of a precise, coherent written report.

However, despite the excellent research quality achieved and the theoretical and practical contributions offered, many of these research works are affected by the inadequate elaboration of written reports; caused, in most cases, by the incorrect use of discourse markers, which has been revealed in the revision of students’ written reports.

As a matter of fact, a survey applied to 14 students of second year revealed that although most of them did know what discourse markers are, they found it very difficult to use them correctly; on the one hand because they were not fully aware of the relationships such connectors established among the clauses and, on the other hand, because their learning background on the topic was limited or insufficient.

This aspect demanded a deep analysis of the syllabus implemented in the major, which constitutes the official document that guides the teaching-learning process. After having analysed the syllabus of the subject Academic Writing (second year), it was confirmed that the content related to discourse markers was not thoroughly addressed in the writing courses.

Therefore, the limitations of second-year students to use discourse markers correctly while writing their research papers was considered as the scientific need of this research work. Consequently, this research aims at designing a proposal of a typology of exercises

as part of a supplementary material on the teaching of discourse connectors for Academic Writing, which constitutes the long-term goal of the research work.

The starting point is the idea that if students were able to use discourse connectors correctly, the quality of their written reports would increase considerably and the ideas exposed in their research works would be more contextualized to Academic and Scientific Writing.

Materials and methods

Diagnostic Exercise

The analysis of the Writing syllabus led to the application of a diagnostic test with 14 students of the second year of the major; since, as stated before, one of the academic requirements of the year is to conduct the first stage of a research work that is to be developed along several years of the major. In order to complete the former task, students should master writing skills, which includes an appropriate and coherent use of discourse connectors.

The text was authentic and with a low level of complexity. Its main objective was to evaluate the students' general knowledge of discourse markers. To that end, they were supposed to fill in several blank spaces with the appropriate connectors, taking into account their learning background about the meaning relationships these connectors established among the ideas of the text.

Task design and participants

The diagnostic task was conducted by a total of 14 participants of the second year of the major. The sample represents the 80 % of all second - year students. Participants were informed about the task some days in advance and they were enthusiastic about completing it and thus contributing with the research project.

The diagnostic test was a fill-in-the-blank exercise, with a total of 22 blank spaces to be completed. The relationships discourse markers established among the ideas of the text were varied: addition, concession, cause, contrast, example, etc. Though students were not given options to complete the respective blank spaces, but their learning background on the subject was required, they found the task easy based on the fact that the text was short in extension and the vocabulary used was in accordance with their language level.

The right answers were considered taking into consideration the right contextualization of connectors, and a variety of possible answers was also accepted.

In the evaluation of the exercise and considering the total of blank spaces to be completed, 15-20 right answers were evaluated as good, 8-15 right answers average, and 0-8 right answers poor.

Furthermore, other aspects were significant in the analysis of the answers provided by the students, such as: ignorance of the meaning- relationships stated in context; and overuse of discourse markers, that is, the excessive repetition of the most common connectors (however, but, and, etc.), which hinders the general comprehension and coherence of the text.

Results of the diagnostic exercise

The diagnostic exercise showed that students presented difficulties when establishing the relations between the meaning of connectors and the contexts in which they had to place them.

Thus, the general results were the following:

	Good	Average	Poor
Total of participants		1	13

The results corroborated the insufficiencies stated in regards to the use of discourse markers in any writing context. They also revealed that the majority of the students that made the diagnostic exercise were unaware, in most cases, of the meaning relationships the connectors established in the context, and, therefore, those few discourse markers they did know were overused to the extent that coherence was affected rather than achieved. Hence, it was confirmed that Academic Writing presented a more serious challenge to them.

Proposal of a typology of exercises for improving the students' competence while using discourse markers academically in Writing

The typology of exercises was designed taking into account the three levels of assimilation in the teaching- learning process proposed by Rosa Antich (1988). Therefore, the exercises were arranged in a growing level of complexity, so that students should be

able to move smoothly from a lower to a higher level. The complexity is not only accomplished through the level crossing, but also within each level. Single exercises also show this phenomenon of increasing difficulty.

In this way, in the first exercises of the typology, for instance, the elements to be completed are given to students, who are just expected to select the correct option among the different alternatives given to them, using non-verbal symbols like True (T) or False (F), circling, underlining or crossing.

Furthermore, more complex exercises are presented so that students should not only select the appropriate discourse markers in context, but also recognize the specific meaning relationships they signal, and thus put into practice what they have learned by means of slight changes or even the exercise of their creative skills while producing new texts. Consequently, the goal is to help students gain confidence and grasp, through an appropriate and logical practice of discourse markers, the basic knowledge that will ensure their success when writing.

Results

Validation of the typology of exercises through a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the results of its application

Six (2 exercises per assimilation level) exercises taken from the typology suggested in a previous stage of the current term paper, were applied to 6 of the 10 second-year students of the English Language Major. This typology of exercises, intended to be a supplementary material in the teaching-learning process of Academic Writing, was arranged according to the levels of assimilation and a balanced quantity of exercises within each level, moving progressively from one exercise to another. With the application of these exercises, the authors of this research paper aim at reaching a definite evaluation of the quality of the exercises.

One of the exercises comprises simple sentences with common topics. It belongs to the recognition level, consisting of 6 items that require students to select the right connector in a possibility of two. Most of them, 4, are connectors that convey contrast. 100% of the students answered correctly leaving clear that students of the advanced-intermediate and advanced levels can recognize when two ideas are contrastive or additional, and what

connector is appropriate regarding context which plays an assisting role and allows students to recognize better the right answers in a possibility of two.

The reproduction level is achieved through fill-in-the-blank exercises in which students must be aware of the meaning relationship each connector conveys to complete the sentences successfully. They comprise fragments taken from the scientific article *Foucault's Notion of the Panopticon*, so that the level of complexity could be higher. Only one student, who represented the 17% of the total, was completely wrong, lacking knowledge of the meaning relationship discourse markers establish among the ideas in the context. The rest, the 83%, made only a mistake in the second item writing *meanwhile* instead of *further*, and, although both words are suitable for this sentence regarding syntax, *further* comes to express a greater adequacy in the context taking into account its semantics.

Also, a student did not answer two items that were generally considered the most difficult ones, showing some remaining troubles identifying the right meaning relationship established in the context. These sentences required connectors that indicated contrast and addition.

This exercise can be regarded as more complex because they were supposed to find the right connector within a list; and they needed to recognize the characteristics of Academic Writing to find coherence and cohesion by the use of them.

So, the answers could be evaluated as follows:

From 7-8 right answers	Good
From 5-6 right answers	Average
Less than 4 right answers	Poor

Thus, the general results were the following:

	Good	Average	Poor
Quantity of students	4		2

It is important to highlight the students' improvement on discourse markers, since the results proved to be better than the ones obtained in the first stage of our paper, in which academic writing and connectors presented a more serious challenge. The ignorance,

overuse and misuse of discourse connectors were huge setbacks in the achievement of coherence and cohesion while writing any discourse, especially academic ones.

The results of the exercises applied, on the other hand, showed that the 60% of the students were aware of the meaning relationship connectors established and used them correctly. One of the main reasons is that the list of discourse markers presented in the first stage of this paper was provided to the students, information undoubtedly useful for attaining cohesion and logical development in any written report. Additionally, the current typology was implemented through the teaching -learning process of Academic Writing in order to help students master the use of connectors while writing.

The production level exercise was about writing an imaginary abstract for the first stage of their term paper. 76 % of the students used connectors correctly, however a 24 %, 2 students, made mistakes concerning position and meaning. The majority used connectors commonly known. It is important to mention that most of the students were unaware of the characteristics of Academic Writing: a kind of writing that is analytical and organized; a formal tone - through which slang words, jargon, abbreviations, or clichés are avoided - indispensable in this form of prose.

These results proved the efficiency of the exercises and, most important, they left an open way for a greater understanding of what students master about discourse markers and to what extent they need to be practiced. The typology of exercises proposed is intended to help student put into practice and test their knowledge and achieve a higher level in writing skills by the use of discourse markers.

Besides these exercises applied to validate the efficiency of the typology proposed, students had to answer a questionnaire. Certain factors such as clarity, variety and complexity were appraised in this questionnaire in order to prove the quality of the exercises. Results were really encouraging.

The majority of the students found the commands clear enough, and they were familiar with the words choice. This general criterion was the result of a careful selection of terms in order to achieve a complete understanding. Even though results showed a common mistake in the reproduction level exercise -what could be caused by a wrong elaboration of the command- the fact that 60 % of students answered properly, proved the deficiency of knowledge on the correct use of discourse connectors of those students who did not answer correctly.

The variety of the exercises was considered fair by the 50 % of students, while the other 50 % considered it excellent. This aspect was achieved through the fusion of Academic Writing with other language skills, which made the typology more entertaining, appealing to the students and effective to professors, leaving behind the tiresome trend of the act of writing.

Regarding complexity, only the 17 % found no difficulty in the exercises, while 83 % found one of the reproduction level exercises complex. This difficulty can be appraised taking into account two criteria; first, students must enhance their knowledge on connectors and, second, they should get familiar with the style of academic writing. This exercise was taken from the scientific article *Foucault's Notion of the Panopticon* which required a greater degree of comprehension.

Through the questionnaire applied, the authors of this research recognized how important the process of elaborating these exercises was. They considered it rewarding, great opportunity for practicing the knowledge acquired on discourse connectors and improving their writing skills. The scientific context, challenging and encouraging, demanded a greater mastery on the use of discourse markers, fact that students realized and quoted in the questionnaire. Moreover, they showed interest in some other connectors that are not covered in the sample, what made evident their concern on such important content.

Therefore, research on the appropriate use of discourse analysis in academic written reports is a necessary research pathway, because, despite the characterization and assessment of discourse markers in Academic Writing and the typology of exercises presented on this paper, it would be suitable to delve more into these matters in order to increase the variety and complexity of the typology of exercises. So, students could attain a greater mastery over of the use of connectors while using this typology of exercises, and thus improve their writing competence.

Discussion

Theoretical Overview of Discourse Markers

The study of discourse markers has been addressed by many linguists and scholars who have written dozens of articles, papers, theses and dissertations about discourse markers. Hence, the term has acquired several names such as: discourse operators, phatic

connectives, pragmatic operators, semantic conjuncts, sentence connectives, discourse signaling devices, pragmatic expressions, discourse particles, pragmatic particles, or pragmatic connectives.

Fraser (1999), for instance, proposes that discourse markers are conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases that connect two sentences or clauses together. Redeker (1991), on the other hand, suggests that discourse markers link not only contiguous sentences, but the current sentence or utterance with its immediate context. For Alami (2015), discourse markers serve as vehicles in establishing relationships between speaker and listener. Other authors like Eslami & Rasekh (2007) declare that discourse markers signal the information structure of discourse by emphasizing directions and relations within discourse.

According to Guo (2015), a discourse marker is a complex phenomenon, involving among other things, textual, pragmatic and cognitive factors that interact with each other. More specifically, exploring discourse markers within a much wider context can reflect how discourse is constructed and maintained.

As a matter of fact, it is evident that all these authors share the belief that discourse markers are elements used to relate different ideas in order to develop a progressive and logical discourse.

Meaning Relationships of Discourse Connectors

Discourse connectors do not tend to have a specific semantic meaning. That is why, the issue of the “core meaning” for each connector rises many problems since each element is able to take part in a wide variety of functional contexts with multiple meanings, so that it becomes almost impossible to provide a core meaning for each of them. Nevertheless, they do can be organized in groups according to the degrees of semantic meaning (addition, result, contrast) in their way to signal a discourse relationship or the writer’s attitude.

In addition to the meaning relationships the discourse connectors can establish, they can also be organized according to their communicative and logical function within the discourse. Traditionally, some of the words or phrases that were considered discourse markers were treated as "fillers" or "expletives", that is to say, words or phrases that had no function at all. Now they are assigned functions in different levels of analysis - topic changes, reformulations, discourse planning, stressing, hedging and others.

Critical assessment of the importance of discourse markers in Academic Writing

With the status of English as an international language and the expansion in the use of English, an increasing number of second language learners are engaged in academic pursuits that require them to produce and comprehend great amounts of second language input. Academic Writing, as one type of academic discourse, is an important part of most university fields worldwide.

Academic Writing is also used for articles and research reports that are read by teachers and researchers or presented at conferences. A very broad definition of Academic Writing could include any Writing assignment given in an academic setting. The most goals of academic writing will be persuasive; to persuade an evaluation in a review, to accept a knowledge claim in a research paper and to acknowledge a schema in a text book (Ghanbari, Dehghani, & Reza, 2016).

Accordingly, Academic Writing can be more accurately defined as the forms of expository and argumentative prose used by university students and researchers to convey a body of information about a particular subject. It serves some main purposes. Sternglass (1977), in summarizing her longitudinal study of 53 college students' writing development, identified four general purposes of writing in university courses: to make knowledge conscious, to help remember facts, to analyze concepts, and to construct new knowledge. Specifically, students used Writing to translate concepts into their own language, move from gathering facts to analyses of them, and adjust themselves to the task demands of specific courses and fields.

Academic Writing moves, always with an imperative - a coherent and cohesive structure. Most of the time, this imperative lies on discourse markers, the strength of which, when referring to coherence and cohesion, is remarkable, since they are the ones in charge of connecting one idea to another; making, thus, the content perfectly comprehensible and linguistically correct. Therefore, a well-written discourse, coherent and cohesive, is essential to prove the high quality of a research.

Since Academic Writing presents serious challenges, especially in a foreign language, the use of discourse connectors becomes a key factor in attaining cohesive, coherent and unified pieces of written texts. A research paper, for instance, would illustrate the uses of

discourse markers, especially where the students discuss their major ideas and substantiate them with supporting evidence.

That is why, the role of discourse connectors in Academic Writing can be described, and assessed, taking into account their significance in the construction of this particular type of text. Coherence relations are often signaled by discourse markers (Das & Taboada, 2017). They are the path to bind and grant logics to a text from beginning to end, ensuring in this way, a better comprehension of it. Discourse connectors tell us not only about the linguistic properties of a set of frequently used expressions, and the organization of social interactions and situations in which they are used, but also about the cognitive, expressive, social, and textual competence of those who use them.

Discourse markers can help the writer to produce affective and well-established writing and also assist him in communicating their ideas effectively. Therefore, any shortcoming or inappropriate usage of discourse markers in writing (specifically with second language learners) can result in breakage of communication (Zhang, 2016).

Other studies have also approached different linguistic units to determine and show how connectors employment in written texts helps achieve cohesion. In fact, Halliday and Hasan (1976) conducted a study on lexical cohesive devices that was supported by other researchers.

According to Muhyidin (2020) the appropriate use of discourse markers enables others to have adequate understanding of what the writings mean. Another researcher, Jonz (1987), concluded that the comprehension level of readers is greatly reduced once cohesive ties are removed from the text. If, as Halliday and Hassan (1976) maintain, cohesion is achieved because certain linguistic units are added to link either two sentences or ideas together, the use of the discourse marker helps facilitate comprehension on the part of the readers and critical thinking on the part of the student-writers. Therefore, it seems logical to try to find the appropriate teaching-learning methods in order to improve writing through the use of discourse connectors, thereby developing good academic writing skills.

State of the art of the teaching-learning process of discourse markers in Academic Writing

The idea of a curriculum -the whole body of courses offered by an educational institution or one of its branches- is widespread and regarded as a useful teaching tool to make

learning planned and guided. That is to say, the goals set up should be identified in advance, as well as the way they are supposed to be achieved. In other words, it is what displays the themes to be discussed, their order, often the required and suggested bibliography and the objectives to be accomplished.

According to the syllabus for the subject Writing, second-year students should develop the first stage of a research work, in most cases to ease a specific problem of the major. But the elaboration of such “term papers” implies the writing of a precise, coherent written report, which presents a serious challenge to them. In this sense, Academic Writing turns out to be a key element to master, given that it would allow second-year students to attain higher writing skills, thereby completing better scientific reports.

However, an analysis of the general objectives, system of knowledge and abilities, specifically for the subject Writing in the second year, showed that the subject under consideration does not thoroughly comprise an essential part of text construction: discourse markers. These words that join ideas are compulsory to make a text cohesive and comprehensible and add a certain reliability and elegance to any written material.

Conclusions

- 1. The paper presented has stated the importance of using discourse connectors accurately in the complicated process of writing scientific papers, especially for second-year students that receive Academic Writing. Hence, a study was conducted to corroborate the students' insufficiency when accomplishing coherence and cohesion. The results suggested that to provide a complementary material on the teaching of discourse markers in second-year students would become necessary in order to achieve the competence required.*
- 2. The complementary material was achieved through a typology of exercises developed, taking into account the acquisition levels proposed by Antich (1988). The typology was applied to some students of second year and the results were encouraging. They represented a great advance in comparison with the results obtained in a first stage of the present research. It proved the efficiency of the exercises at the time of acquiring and developing writing skills, such as coherence and cohesion in the elaboration of academic works. In addition, they paved the way for a better understanding of what students master about discourse markers and to what extent these need to be practiced.*

References

1. Alami, M. (2015). Pragmatic functions of discourse markers: a review of related literature. *Int. J. Stud. Engl. Lang. Lit.* 3(3), 1–10.
2. Antich, R. (1988). *Metodología de la Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras*. La Habana: Pueblo y Educación.
3. Das, D. & Taboada, M. (2018). Signalling of coherence relations in discourse, beyond discourse markers. *Research Gate. Discourse Processes* 55(8), 743-770.
4. Eslami, Z. & Eslami-Rasekh, A. (2007). The use of discourse markers in three academic lectures. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(1), 22-38.
5. Fraser, B. (1990). An approach to discourse markers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, (14), 383-395.
6. Ghanbari, N., Dehghani, T. & Reza, M. (2016). Discourse Markers in Academic and Non-academic Writing of Iranian EFL Learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6(7), 1451-1459.
7. Guo, F. (2015). A Review of Discourse Markers from the Functional Perspective. *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 04(04), 69-75.
8. Halliday, M. A. K. & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
9. Jonz, J. (1987). Textual cohesion and second language comprehension. *Language Learning*, 37(3), 409-431.
10. Kapranov, O. (2020). The Use of Discourse Markers in Academic Writing by In-Service Primary School Teachers of English. *Prague Journal of English Studies* 9(1).
11. Muhyidin, A. (2020). Does the writing exposition text ability correlate to reading habit and discourse markers mastery? *Journal for the Education of Gifted Young Scientists*, 8(2), 885-895.
12. Redeker, G. (1990). Ideational and pragmatic markers of discourse structure. *Journal of Pragmatics* (14), 367-381.
13. Tadayyon, M. & Vasheghani, M. (2017). Exploring Discourse Markers Used in Academic Papers: A Comparative Corpus-based Inquiry of Iranian and English Native Writers. *Iranian EFL Journal* 13(2), 130-150.
14. Zhang, M. (2016). A multidimensional analysis of metadiscourse markers across written registers. *Discourse Studies*, 18(2), 204-222.