An Analytical Study Of Discourse Markers In Interactions-2 Reading Textbook

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Abstract :The study in this paper relates to analyze the discourse markers specifically in English reading texts. It is a fact that various differences and disparities are associated with the terminology, function, meaning, and definition of the discourse markers, but certain similarities do play an inevitable role in setting these expressions as a coherent linguistic group. It aims at identifying the discourse markers used in various comprehension passages of textbook-Interactions-2 syllabized by the Department of English Language & Translations, Qassim University for its Saudi EFL learners designed for level two students in the English Language Programme. This study was carried out on twenty students of level two of English Language Program at Buraydah Community College, Qassim University. They were given two tests of reading comprehension one with discourse markers and the other without discourse markers. The information for these tests was squeezed out from twenty short comprehension paragraphs from the reading textbook, Interactions-2. All the data was scrutinized quantitatively and qualitatively in light of the number of discourse markers and their different kinds used in these comprehension passages by three different assessors. It has been found that mostly Causative: accordingly, because, consequently, for, since, so, therefore, thus, to conclude; Adversative: although, despite, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, though, yet, but, and in spite of; Additive: as well as, besides, moreover, similarly, and, furthermore, in addition; and Temporal: afterwards, as soon as, at first, finally, first, then, and until; are some of the discourse markers used in these comprehension passages. From the results of these tests it came to lime light that such connectors or discourse markers help students to improve the understanding of what they've read. The presence and absence of discourse markers in reading comprehension passages were clearly displayed by the straight connection of tests' grades. It was observed that there were several reasons which lead to non-understanding of these discourse connectors. Resultantly, it came to limelight that in order to improve students 'capability of reading fluency and comprehension, they should understand discourse markers. The current research study proposes that in-depth investigation may be carried in order to know the reasons for ignoring discourse markers in several language skills of English major.

KEY WORDS: *comprehension passages, discourse markers, Saudi EFL learners*

1. Introduction

The students of level two in English Language Programme (ELP) of Buraydah Community College (BCC), Qassim University (QU) put more efforts in learning English as Foreign Language (EFL). They are undergrads students mostly coming from an Arabic language background. As they move forward in their studies their focus is more on learning various skills of English language such as writing, speaking, listening and grammar etc. but they rarely pay much attention to reading skills being considered as unimportant by the ELP learners. They don't take it as serious threat to their learning of English language whereas it is the other way around. Reading comprehension is the result of an integrated data coherently present in the text units for smooth comprehension of the text and its relationship among other units (Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Jalilifar (2008) remarks that English being an international language with its

enormous use the worldwide, has increased its learners in in EFL and ESL. These learners are now busy in various academic pursuits which engaged them to read well. But it's significant to comprehend discourse markers for improving the reading skills

The definitions of discourse markers vary as deemed different among various researchers. To say it the other way, various researchers have thought and devised the meaning or definitions according to their own perception. Bednarek (2006) has quoted that not a single description of this linguistic group is found to be unchanged by other practitioners, since it is important to bring into the notice that the differentiation is mainly caused due to the adopted linguistic devices as well as the methods of perceiving the discourse markers. To quote Brandt (n.d.) who said that various researchers and studies have taken and practiced multifarious methods of investigating and focusing different elements, shown in various grammatical classes. Fowler (2013), discourse markers can be understood as one of those notions, which have been inspected by adopting different types of frameworks, with diverse goals, methods, as well as interests of the research.

It is usually perceived that a function-pragmatic group has been comprised by the discourse markers, instead of a morpho-syntactic and formal group. Analysis of the research, which was carried out by Carlson et al (2003) has revealed the fact that discourse markers are usually demonstrated in the context of their function. It is due to the fact that it is quite impractical to set the limits or restricts such items, which are acquired from different classes of the word. Matsumoto (2011) has realized that demonstration of the discourse markers, through their functions, is one of the most problematic features. It is because; it requires the researcher to be responsible for each type of functions. It is quite evident from the study of Matsumoto (2011) that different illustrations, presented by different researches of discourse markers mainly focuses on divergent functions, which are related to the discourse.

Bednarek (2006) has studied discourse markers, while emphasizing on the global role that these items possess in the notion of discourse. On the contrary, Blakemore (2002) has also studied discourse markers and has claimed that these

features are considerably effectual as coherence markers, on the worldwide level of coherence. However, Carlson et al (2003) has identified discourse markers as locally oriented features. It is a fact that the global functions of the discourse markers have been identified and recognized by Sanders (2005), but the researcher has also described and inspected the markers, in a profound manner. One of the major objectives behind this activity is to understand the methods or ways, in which the contiguous segments of the content or text are linked with one another.

Van Dijk (2013) has described the concept by claiming that one of the major functions of the discourse markers is to carry out pragmatic functions. In contrast, Fuller (2003) has highlighted function of discourse markers, which is associated with restricting or limiting certain processes, like, cognitive processes, which are imperative for effective linguistic communication. Different researches, which have been conducted on the discourse markers, portrayed their functions differently. It is due to the fact each researcher has investigated these items in different perspectives and by adopting different methods and approaches.

For instance, Bednarek (2006) has described discourse as an adequate way of social interaction, instead of a language unit. The researcher has devised and presented a discourse analysis model, which incorporates a number of features. These features include social, cognitive, pragmatic, semantic, and structural factors. Besides that, Blakemore (2002) has also investigated the notion of discourse, according to which, the segments of the discourse efficiently encode two different kinds of information, including pragmatic information and content information. The analysis of different approaches of discourse markers have revealed the fact that each approach present different functions, which are being severed by the markers. Apart from all of these factors, Cuenca (2008) has stated that another most prominent characteristic, which differentiates the functions of the markers, includes the data type. In other words, the type of data, which is selected for the analysis, also plays an indispensable role in altering the functions of the discourse markers.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) commented that cohesion could be divided into four categories such as ellipsis, connectors or conjunctions, anaphora and cataphora links, and lexical phrases. This leads readers to understand information in a text structure in a coherent way. (E.g. Degand & Sanders, 2002; Chung, 2000; Sanders & Noordman, 2000; Degand, Lefèvre & Bestgen, 1999;; Millis & Just, 1994; Graesser, & Haberlandt, 1993; Geva, 1992; Noordman, Vonk, & Kempff, 1992) are of the opinion that there exist great relation between text signals and reading passages i.e. conjunctions, lexical signals and paragraph headings were the topic of several studies. Chung (2000) remarks that these signals may affect the comprehensibility of textual information negatively or positively at different structural levels, for instance, at micro and macro structures, at international and regional, at offline and online (Sanders & Noordman, 2000; Degand & Sanders, 2002), furthermore, (Millis & Just, 1994; Geva, 1992) have shown this relation at the intersentential and intrasentential, discourse and at a pyramid ladder levels. The current paper is trying to show the relationship of reading comprehension passages and discourse markers which enhances intellectual understanding of the text comprehension of the participants at the international level by learning English as a foreign language.

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), connectives are also called conjunctive expressions, discourse connectives (Blakemore, 1987), and lexical signals in comprehension. Due to the use of different names for this particular linguistic form, the term discourse markers are to be used in the current study. Blakemore, 2002; Schifrin, 2005; Taboada, 2006; have observed that discourse markers, in latest research studies appear as prototype term to include any lexical form that have the functions of connecting segments of text.

1.1. Coherence at international and local level

Many research investigations have dug out the significance of discourse makers in making a coherent discourse representation, however, it's still not clear as to whether discourse markers could be facilitators in reading comprehensions.

Chung (2000) investigated to display the role of discourse markers at macro and micro levels of understanding. He organized three groups of various reading comprehension capabilities and assigned them some reading assignment versions among which one was without discourse markers. By this investigation he displayed that discourse markers increases the understanding of overall representation of the data in a given text e.g. at macro level but it doesn't have significant impact at the micro level between bit of reading texts.

In a similar way, Geva (1992) has argued in favour of positive effects of connectives such as discourse markers on comprehension and coherence internationally and locally. She devised a fill in the blank match a task to assess the signaling of discourse markers at three different stages: "intrasentential, intersentential and discourse, and to know everyone support each other at various levels. Furthermore, she has also stated this in her findings: "the connection between texts segments are scaffolding each other starting with the relation within the sentence to the relation between the sentences that finally lead to coherent representation to the overall discourse. Being able to infer the logical relationships within intrasentential or intersentential constrains is positively related to better information processing in the extended discourse."

To further this study, Millis & Just (1994) investigated the presence of a discourse marker – 'because' in order to know the intersentential relationship between the two sentences connected by 'because'. In the study the participants were assigned a number of statement pairs among which some carried discourse markers and some didn't. The participants were asked to read all these statements over a computer screen. The participants were asked to judge and answer the true-false comprehension questions at the end of their reading. Its outcome showed that discourse markers facilitated the reactivation of the contents of the first two readings and led to faster understanding of the whole information in the study.

1.2. Difference between online and offline coherence

Inferences are aided by the discourse markers which could be extracted from the text that may serve to connect segments of the text for integration of information of the given text (Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Sanders and Noordman (2000) studied that how discourse markers build coherence relativity in processing of the text and the implicit or explicit inferences of these relations; i.e. whether coherence relations have cognitive relevance or not. The participants were given varied reading texts, some of them were with discourse markers and others didn't, some expressed listed relations and other explained the causal connections. Some of the recall tasks gave the participants to verify their reading activities; in order to display their (markers) effect during online processing. It will clearly be showed that its influence decreases overtime in various segments. Discourse markers showed that their presence in two text reading segments facilitated faster processing of the subsequent segment.

Noordman et al (1992) examined the text coherence by the mode of physical text scripts. They further investigated comprehension level of 'because' in the context of sentences. They also investigated the effect of information representation during the inference process. To follow it, the participants were given short reading texts with and without discourse marker of 'because" for experiment. Noordman et al were testing whether readers make inferences of the causality relation implicitly or explicitly.

Does the existence of DMs affect compression of reading in texts? It is still to be investigated whether discourse markers have any positive or negative or entirely no effects on the understanding of comprehension passages in reading texts. The current investigation of this paper will determine the effects or no effects of discourse markers on the comprehension of text information.

2. Problem of the Research and its Significance

The Saudi Public Schools began teaching English to the students from level 6 of elementary stage in these schools. At each grade level, the students need to learn reading in English. The reading activities show a gradual progress from memorizing basic words and using them in their spoken and written English to understanding of comprehension paragraphs. Similarly, no attention has generally been given to the improvement of discourse competence while learning various skills of English language especially reading. The participants of this research study at BCC are not an exception to this phenomenon. Students at ELP receive three hours for reading skill instruction from Interactions Series by Interactions-2 Diamond Edition (Elaine Kirn & Pamela Hartmann, 2012) a week.

The current researchers have eight years of teaching experience in the English Language Programme (ELP) at Buraydah Community College (BCC), who have noticed that reading skill is mostly neglected which could be the fact of not giving any attention towards discourse markers (DMs) which create cohesion and coherence in spoken and written English language. So, it has also been observed by the researchers that DMs are not given much importance even in the improvement of language skills such as writing, vocabulary and grammar. The careful review of randomly chosen comprehension paragraphs from the textbook of Interactions-2 revealed that the incapability of understanding of logical organization of ideas in these paragraphs were the result of inadequate use of DMs and their proper recognition. The researchers at BCC found that the most of the students here are ignorant of the use of discourse markers and or even fully unaware of the linguistic form.

A number of research studies were dug out and investigated in this case such as of Al Hamada et al (2013); Assad, Modhish, & Kalajahi, (2012); Rahimi, (2011); Dergisi, (2010); Martinez, (2002); Inuzuka, (2001); Takahara, (2000) who on their part studied the use of discourse markers by EFL & ESL students in various contexts. It was, however, found that the students of BCC knew very little about the discourse markers in comprehension paragraphs of interactions-2 reading textbook. It has also been found by the researchers that the use and recognition of DMs by the non-native readers of

English as foreign language is an interesting area of research.

To sum it up, the current research strives to bridge the gap via a thorough investigation where the use of such DMs in reading text by BCC participants of the study, all students in general and teachers of BCC by teaching discourse markers in order to diagnose this specific problem in teaching and learning of reading.

2.1. Questions of the Research

This study tries to answer the questions below:

A. What discourse markers most frequently appeared in reading passages of Interactions 2 textbook of Saudi EFL learners?

B. What is the relationship between understanding these discourse markers and test results?

C. What are the basic reasons for not using and understanding the discourse markers in reading passages?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were twenty EFL Saudi students in level two of English major. They all studied English, in level two ELP at BCC, Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. All participants were in the level two of the English program where they were placed after they had completed their level-1. This group was chosen to control for proficiency variability has the participation been also open to other learners with different proficiency levels in the program and to have a homogeneous group to a larger extent.

3.2. Mode

To investigate the hypothesis that discourse markers make reading comprehension easier, a control group design was employed to test the hypothesis. In this study the dependent variable was reading comprehension whereas discourse markers were the independent variables. The participants were allocated in match groups on the basis of their general test results. These participants were put in the matching group because of certain criteria e.g. their English proficiency, Level background, and total number of years of study in English language etc. So, English proficiency has been adopted as main criterion for this study based on the scores of general test i.e. if two of the participants scored 8 out of 10 on the general test, they formed a pair and one of them was placed into the control group and the other was assigned to the experiment group randomly. This process resulted in ten pairs and they were divided into two groups. Half of the participants, therefore, (N = 10) were assigned to the control group and the other half of the subjects (N = 10) were placed into the experiment group. Moreover, the matching procedure resulted in uneven distribution of participants by L-1 background. On the other hand, the same experimental test was administered into two different versions, one comprising of discourse markers taken by the control group, and the other without discourse markers was taken by the experimental group.

3.3 Tools

A. Reading General Test

The reading General test consisted of one expository text of approximately 100 words followed by 6 comprehension questions. The text will be chosen from level two academic reading skill textbook – Interactions-2 Diamond Edition (Elaine Kirn & Pamela Hartmann, 2012). The book is designed for students who want to improve their reading skill ability for academic purposes, hence the text was chosen from this book as to avoid the difficulty that might arise from the difference between the level of the students and the level of the placement test.

B. Experimental Reading Test

The experimental reading test was chosen from Cambridge Preparation for the IELTS Test design and was constructed by expert EFL teachers working in the field. The test text, which is an actual text used in the standardized internationally administered IELTS exam, is of approximately 200 words followed by 10

comprehension questions. In order to stop any leakage of prior information the heading of the text was changed with a topic which may be unfamiliar to the participants. This text was changed into two different versions i.e. one version as original text while the second version as discourse markers missing. It was followed by a 10 MCQs as comprehension questions regarding the relevant text information. However, questions in general and experimental reading passages were used as it is and wasn't changed and no other questions were added in order to maintain the validity of the reading passages questions.

3.4 Procedure

This research will investigate during a period of 10 days. On the first day the participants will be given a 30 minutes placement test in their regular scheduled classes. On the basis of placement test scores the participants will be divided into two matching groups. After eight days, an experiment test will be conducted in their reading class. In order to avoid any ill feelings, the two different texts will be organized into two relevant groups in the class; they will also write their names on the exam papers as usual. Both the groups will be handed over the test inside the class for a period of 30 minutes. These participants will be asked to underline any word, phrase, sentence or group of sentences appearing strange and difficult to them. After it they will answer the 10 multiple choice questions whereafter the participants will hand over their tests to the concerned invigilators.

4. Results

In order to administer the test, the participants of this research study were given two different paragraphs with and without discourse markers, having comprehension type of questions at the end of these paragraphs. The first test was conducted to place the participants in two different matching groups on the basis of their capability of understanding these paragraphs in general. But the second test of this study was aiming at to conduct the experiment.

4.1 General Test

The general test was carrying 10 grades where the participants of this research study were paired and placed into two different groups: the control group and the experimental group. The result of the general test is shown in Table 1. The experiment group *Mdn* was 10.00 whereas the *Mdn* of the control group score was 9.00. As far as the difference between the *IQR* is concerned it's almost the same. (Control Group = 2.00; Experiment Group = 2.75).

TABLE 1

GENERAL TEST SCORES BY BOTH GROUPS

Groups	Median	IQR	z	P
Control Group (*n* = 10)	9.00	2.00	-.106-[a]	.915
Experimental Group (*n* = 10)	10.00	2.75		

The participants numbers were equally divided into 10 in each group as (n=10). There isn't much difference in the variability of both the groups as is displayed in table 1 above. We used the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (WSRT) in order to compare the participants' scores. The result between two groups is displayed as (z = -.106-[a], $p >$ .915) which shows that there wasn't significant difference with regard to the understanding of the entire reading comprehension in the general test.

4.2 Experimental Test

10 grades were fixed for the experimental test too. It is vivid in table 2 below that the *Mdn* grades of the control group whom were given original text to read and they scored 8.00, the experiment group *Mdn* grades were 7.50 as they read they read the modified version of the text i.e. without discourse markers. It clearly showed that a minor variation between the two medians of both the groups have solved the problem of this study. After the experimental test a significant difference of performance appeared in the reading of comprehension questions' grades of both groups. Wilcoxon Test Results (z = -1.065-a, p > .287) indicated the result difference.

TABLE 2

EXPERIMENTAL TEST SCORES BY BOTH GROUPS

Groups	Median	IQR	z	P
Control Group (*n* = 10)	8.00	1.25	-1.065-[a]	.287
Experimental	7.50	2.75		

Group (n = 10)					

5. Discussion

It has been found from the test results General Test (.915) with DMs and Experimental Test (.287) without DMs, proved that there is a significant relationship between participants' reading comprehension and an understanding of the discourse markers in reading paragraphs. The participants' understanding of the DMs in the experimental test reveals their nominal knowledge of discourse markers where the hypothesis that discourse markers make reading comprehension easier came to limelight. Because of the presence and or absence of theses DMs indicated the relationship between participants' understanding of the entire comprehension reading texts. It showed some of the participants' good command of the DMs which lead them (participants) to a better comprehension of the texts. So, it can be said that one of the factors of overall understanding of reading text is the understanding of DMs.

Nunan (1999) has indicated that "background knowledge was a more important factor than grammatical complexity in the ability of the readers to comprehend the cohesive relations in the texts" (p. 260). The participants had the background knowledge of level-1 and proficiency of English language. The current study and its results, thus, suggests that for a better international comprehension of reading texts, foreign language readers need to comprehend and recognize meanings and functions of discourse markers, that is, they require to have a good command of DMs.

6. Suggestions for Future Research Investigation

In the current study the researchers have identified that there is a deep relation between understanding of comprehension text and having knowledge of discourse markers by the users and or learners. It has been found that the participants of the present study were faced with difficulty comprehending parts of text due to lack of knowledge about discourse makers' functions and meaning. When the teacher provided the relevant information about DMs, the participants quickly and easily understood the texts. Here the investigators began their research regarding the relationship between the reading abilities of the participants and comprehension of discourse markers. Resultantly, the current research found a high correlation between the reading ability and knowledge of discourse markers. So, it proposes that as a whole the participants who had better knowledge of discourse markers could comprehend the texts far better than those who had a poor understanding of these linguistic forms.

7. Conclusion

It is concluded that the effect of discourse markers on the entire representation of coherent information for comprehension readings require further studies and, based on the results of the current study, discourse markers were treated as units in the comprehension text may have an impact on other vocabulary in the text. It has been found that the participants in this study might be looking at discourse markers from the point of view of meaning and not function. However, future research can investigate the issue of reconsidering the relationship between discourse markers and text processing.

The outcome of the present study is limited as it couldn't investigated other possible factors involved in the study e.g. Level-1 impact, gender, previous years of English language study and proficiency of English language. As its obvious that just level-2 students were taken in consideration as the proficiency level of English, therefore, the level of proficiency was to be controlled, though the level of proficiency wasn't achieved in the current study and could be concentrated in future.

It is observed that the issues, such as relationship between comprehension and recognition of DMs and reading comprehension, different DMs affect reading comprehension differently and the relationship between reading comprehension and different types of DMs separately, need future research

investigations. Furthermore, the interested researchers can also investigate the relation between recognition of DMs and reading comprehension on various levels of language ability. It is hoped that more research on this topic will solve more problems in the field of English reading of foreign language.

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