The Effect of Discourse Markers on the Speaking Production of EFL Students

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Abstract

The research aimed at investigating the relationship between discourse markers (DMs) and a special type of conversation which was the IELTS speaking test. The following research question was addressed in the study. Are IELTS examinees speaking band pertinent to existence of a greater number of DMs? In order to provide the research question with a reasonable plausible answer, 6 different classes containing 5 to 9 EFL students in upper intermediate level were available, thus selected. All these students were volunteers to participate in IELTS and as a result were taught to perform in ILETS speaking section. 3 of these classes containing 17 students were provided with a greater number of DMs than usual while others were given the same method of teaching and even the same teacher but less DMs whenever possible to be considered as control group. As a result, the research came up with the finding that, the more DMs are used in IELTS speaking test, the higher the average score of EFL students' will be.

Key words: *Discourse Markers, IELTS speaking.*

Introduction

There has been a great amount of contribution to the study of DM in both production and composition of extended discourse. Moreover, it must come into consideration that pragmatics is not the one and only field DMs get into action, dealing with them. Yet, language acquisition and language pedagogy are the other important fields that have received a great deal of effort and contribution.

In this regard, there is almost no doubt about DMs' contribution to the pragmatic meaning of utterances. To clarify, as Crystal (1988) declares, "I tend to think of [pragmatics expressions such as *you know*] as the oil which helps us perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and interaction smoothly and efficiently. Considering language acquisition and more specifically speaking and conversation, this research is up to figuring out the relevance of the number of DMs and proficiency in English speaking.

Written vs. Spoken Discourse

It is believed that spoken and written discourse are closely overlapping, on the ground that there are a good number of examples of people whose speaking has been influenced by writing. Due to the mentioned overlap, differentiating between spoken and written discourse has always been of a great importance. In order to give a short brief distinction of these two categories the table in the appendix can be of a great help.

Conversation and Speaking

In contrast to reading comprehension, there has never been a precise evaluation of speaking and conversation. In addition, since most of the evaluations in this respect have been rough the effect of DMs and other maxims on conversation is still vague. However, authors like Crystal and Svartvik find that DMs smooth spontaneous speech production and interaction (Crystal 1988) and prevent the speaker from being perceived as impolite or "awkward to talk to" (Svartvik 1980). Baring in mind the importance of conversation and its direct effect, one comes to the conclusion that more research and undoubtedly more precise ones are needed in this respect. Before proceeding, we should be wary of the importance of conversation on the one hand and the effect of DMs on that, on the other.

It is believed that the use of DMs facilitates the hearer's task of understanding the speaker's utterances. As Aijmer (1996) puts it, they "function as cues or guides to the hearer's interpretation" (cf. also Ariel 1998). Another important aspect of DMs' function is coherence and relevance Theory. This is one of the angels many great researchers have greatly worked on. Many claim that most approaches to DMs are based on coherence (cf. for example Schiffrin 1985; Holmes 1986; Redeker 1990). The relevance theory has come into

consideration regarding DMs. According to which the hearer encounters a number of interpretations and now it is their task to pick the right one up.

Theoretical Framework

There have been many different approaches toward the classification of DMs. What we do here is concentrating and using Chaudron's and Richards', According to which (1986), discourse markers are divided in two groups. Now we will have a closer look at their classification; Macro DMs and Micro DMs. Macro DMs indicate the overall organization of lectures through highlighting major information and sequencing or importance of that information. To clarify, they are the signals or metastatements about the major propositions. On the contrary, micro – markers such as 'well', 'so', 'now', 'yknow' are those which indicate link between sentences within the lecture or which function as filler. Micro – markers signal lower level of information in the text. They are principally used to fill pauses giving listeners more time to process pieces of discourse (Sadri 2010). On the basis of the above remarks, and the purpose of this study, DMs were adopted as what Chaudron and Richards had provided (micro and macro discourse markers).

Purpose and research question

The major effort of this study is questioning the relation between the number of DMs on coherence and understandability of a piece of conversation or lecture. Baring in mind that evaluation of such important an issue has always been rough, this study was up to give a precise statistical result of the above mentioned topic. To this, IELTS speaking section seemed to be appropriate to put into test since the examinees were evaluated with native speakers of the language and as a result the coherence of the saying would correctly be measured and reported with numbers. Thus, answering this question would greatly contribute to the aim:

1. Are IELTS examinees' speaking band pertinent to existence of a greater number of DMs?

As a result of the above mentioned question, a null hypothesis was also designed that comes as follows:

1. IELTS examinees' speaking band is not significantly related to existence of a greater number of DMs.

Method

To the aim of this research, a series of efforts were done with great help of its participants in order to come to a reliable acceptable conclusion. This methodology will be explained here in detail.

Participants

As an IELTS tutor I had the opportunity **to** have 6 different classes containing 5 to 9 EFL students in upper intermediate level who were available, thus selected. All these students were volunteers to participate in IELTS and as a result were taught to perform in ILETS speaking section. 3 of these classes containing 17 male and female students were provided with a greater number of DMs than usual while others (17 students of the other 3 classes) were used as the control group.

Procedure

In order to come to a reasonable reliable answer to the question of the research, the test group was provided with a greater amount of teaching on how to use DMs. They were tested during the 15 sessions of the class in order to make sure they have learned them and are able to use them appropriately. Meantime, the other 17 students were not exposed to any special material or plan for DMs. Anyway, were still taught with the same method as the test group.

Results

Before going to the results, it is to be mentioned that one cannot record the voices during the IELTS speaking test. Thus, the only reliable results at hand that show the probable effect of DMs on speaking performance and proficiency of EFL students will be the IELTS speaking band that is provided in the chart below.

Experimental group speaking band	Control group speaking band
7.0	7.0
7.5	5.5
6.5	605
6.0	6.0
7.0	6.0

7.5	6.0
8.0	6.5
7.0	7.0
7.5	6.5
7.5	6.0
7.0	6.5
7.0	7.0
6.5	7.0
6.5	6.0
7.0	5.5
7.5	6.5
7.0	6.0

In order to analyze the findings of the research, a T test was conducted. By means of the results provided in here, it seems being obvious that the null hypothesis must be rejected. Therefore, we come to this conclusion that IELTS examinees' speaking band is significantly related to the existence of a greater number of DMs.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Score 1	6.3235	17	.49816	.12082
	Score 2	7.0588	17	.49631	.12037

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences							
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Score 1 - Score 2	-.73529	.50366	.12216	-.99425	-.47633	-6.019	16	.000

Conclusion

In this paper the question that why EFL students can just improve their speaking performance up to a point and not higher was investigated, I tried to investigate the case with respect to their IELTS speaking band. To this two different groups were set, as experiment and control. After providing the experiment group with a greater number of DMs, the groups IELTS speaking bands were compared and the findings were all in contrast with the null hypothesis and as a result we came to this conclusion that the higher the number of DMs and the better the one uses them, the higher their proficiency will be. It needs being mentioned that we evaluated students' proficiency with IELTS speaking test for two reasons. Firstly, in this way we are having a numeric set of data which is more reliable that the other forms of data. Secondly, in IELTS the evaluators are native speakers of English which makes the measurements more valuable.

All in all, we came to the conclusion that DMs in a higher scale and in a correct form of usage, can be great help to a better English speaking and in contrast to the previous studies in this respect , here the statistics help us come up with these findings.

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Appendix 1

Spoken vs. Written Discourse; compiled from (Brown & Yule 1983, Nunan 1993; Georgakopoulou and Goustos 1997 as cited in Muniandy 2002)

	Spoken	**Written**
Manner of production	- Less forethought - Time bound - Transient - Dynamic - No specific lag between production and reception - Addresser and addressee are both present - Lots of prosody such as tempo, pause, rhythm…	- More forethought - Space bound - Permanent - Static - Specific time lag between production and reception - Addresser is present - Lots of some other features such as lines, paragraph, capitalization, punctuation.
Contextual features	- Participant usually have face to face interaction - They need to rely much more on facial expressions	Written texts are autonomous ; they cannot depend on paralinguistic cues

	and gestures(paralinguistic cues) to convey and comprehend	
Linguistic features	• Syntax is less structured • Chunks are related by *and* , *but*, *then* and more rarely *if*	• Syntax is more structured • More metalingual markers such as *that complementisers, when/ while* temporal markers, logical connectors like *besides, moreover, however, in spite of*, etc

Macro DMs (taken from Chaudron and Richards, 1986)

Macro
- What I'm going talk about today is sth you probably know sth about already
- What happened / then/ after that/ was / that
- We'll see that
That / this is why
- To begin with
The problem / here / was that
This / that was how
The next thing was
- This meant that
- One of the problems was
- here was a big problem
- What we've come to by now was that
- Another interesting development was
- You probably know that

- The surprising thing is
- As you may have heard
- Now where are we
- This is how it came about
- You can imagine what happened next
- in this way
- It is really very interesting that
- This is not the end of the story
- our story doesn't finish there
- And that's all we'll talk about today

Micro DMs (taken from Chaudron and Richards, 1986)

Micro

Segmentation	*Temporal*	*Causal*
Well	Of that time	So
Ok	And	Then
Now	After this	Because
And	For the moment	
All Right	eventually	
Wright		

Contrast	*Emphasis*
Both	Of course
But	You can see
Only	You see
On the other hand	Actually
	Obviously
	Unbelievable
	As you know
	In fact naturally