

On the Relationship between Discourse Markers and Reading Comprehension

Farhad Sadri Mirdamadi

Abstract

In accordance with Chaudron and Richards' point of view on discourse markers (1986), the present research aimed at investigating the relationship between discourse markers (henceforth DMs) and reading comprehension of EFL students at the University of Khorasgan. The following research question was addressed in this study: Is EFL readers' comprehension of a text pertinent to the existence of various numbers of DMs? To provide plausible answer for the question, two groups of EFL university students were selected to participate in the study. The participants in each group took the same reading comprehension test; by contrast, the DMs were omitted from one of the test while, they were present in the second type of the reading comprehension test. In order to analyze the obtained data an independent T-Test was run. As a result, the study came to this significant finding: The results indicated that the more DMs had been used in a text, the better participants could comprehend it.

Key Terms: Discourse Markers; Reading Comprehension

Introduction

Interest in the study of “discourse markers” has increased commensurately with growing interest in the production and composition of extended discourse, and more generally, in pragmatic and contextual aspects of utterance interpretation. Such items now figure prominently not only in pragmatic and discourse analytic research but also in studies of language acquisition and language pedagogy, and in research on sociolinguistic topics ranging from gender variation to code-switching. Regarding readers, Carpenter and Just (1977) have attempted to go beyond the sentence to look at the way they might relate old information. Carpenter and Just (1977) suggest, for example, that readers are constantly

attempting to integrate new information with the ongoing text, and that such integration is facilitated at points where a linking relation can be made. Thus, one would predict that explicit connections across text—in the form, for example, of marking of rhetorical relationships and other forms of text coherence might aid the reader in its processing. Following the same line of research, discourse markers (hereafter DMs) functioning as such explicit connections seem legitimate entities to be examined. The spotlight of this article is put on the relevance of the number of DMs and reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension

In many parts of the world, a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important in academic studies, professional success, and in personal development. This is particularly true of English as so much professional, technical and scientific literature is published in English today. Yet despite this specific need for the foreign language, it is the common experience, at least of EFL teachers that most students fail to learn to read adequately in the foreign language, let alone to read to learn.

In spite of the wide range of definitions given by the specialists in the field, there is no one agreed-upon definition of reading comprehension. Chastain (1988) refers to reading as a passive receptive skill. But considering the abilities and activities that come into play in reading with comprehension, it will become evident that reading is not passive. As Chastain (1988, p.3) believes, “second language students need to learn to read for communication and to read greater and greater quantities of authentic materials.” Correspondingly, Widdowson (1979) advances a definition: “the process of getting linguistic information via print” (Widdowson, 1979, p.24).

Regardless of taking on a specific approach to reading comprehension, readers are expected to benefit from linguistic marking of text structures, owing to the fact that the markers equip them with extra help in construction of the text representation. One such marking is represented by DMs although there is a debate over what these markers are and how they help readers with their comprehension of texts if they ever do it. DMs as the focal point of this research will be spelled out throughout the following section.

Discourse Markers

To figure out the configurations of a discourse, one is in need of recovering relations across discourse spans formulated by a writers and speakers. They, and

very often do, help the readers and listeners along by providing explicit lexical signals of the intended discourse relations through employing DMs. These discourse connections are given by various labels by different researchers, namely discourse connectives, pragmatic connectives, sentence connectives, cue phrases (Fraser, 1999); discourse particles and discourse operators (Schoroup, 1999).

Schiffrin (1987, p.2) declares DMs to be “sequentially dependent units of discourse.” Following his definition of DMs, Schiffrin suggests that each DM has a core meaning and her primary interest is in the ways in which DMs function to establish coherent relations. Fraser (1990), going into further details, gives a more redundant account of DMs, reporting that the term discourse marker covers a heterogeneous set of words and phrases ranging from those widely accepted as discourse markers like the coordinate conjunctions *and*, *or* and *but* to the less accepted interjections, *well*, *oh*, verbs, *look*, *see*, and phrases like *to repeat*, *what I mean to say*, *overall*. Hansen (1997, p.160), correspondingly, holds that DMs are: “linguistic items of reliable scope, and whose primary function is connective.” Redeker (1990) labels DMs as discourse operators and defines these as “linguistic signals of textual coherence links” (P.1139).

Clearly, no definition seems to win a universal acceptance in view of the unresolved theoretical differences and varying background assumptions that inform these definitions. There is also a wide disagreement about the nature of the connections DMs express, the nature and extent of the elements connected, and the grammatical status of the DM category. An inconvenient result of such disagreement is that the items (and uses of items) designated by the term DM on one definition sometimes overlap only minimally with those designated on another definition. Equally inconvenient is the fact that the referential overlap between the term DM and other similar terms, such as pragmatic marker and pragmatic particle, can in some cases be as great as that between variant definitions of the term DM itself. (Schoroup 1999, p.251)

In any event, despite disagreements and debates over an exact definition of DMs, there is great agreement as to the properties of DMs and it is commonly admitted that connectivity, optionality, non-truth conditionality, initiality and information processing are among the main functions of DMs (Schoroup, 1999, p.230).

Theoretical Framework

Of the different trends and approaches emerging from studies on DMs, According to Chaudron and Richards (1986), discourse markers are divided in

two groups. What is going to be stated here is 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. In fact 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. 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 purpose of this study was to investigate the role of discourse markers (DMs) in reading comprehension of EFL Iranian university students thus, the findings of this effort would mostly contribute to answering the following question:

1. Is EFL readers' comprehension of a text related to the numbers of DMs in a text?

Considering the aforementioned question, one null hypothesis was set forth to be investigated. It is as follows:

1. The EFL readers' comprehension of a text does not significantly relate to the number of DMs in a text.

Participants

The population from which the participants were selected included 60 male and female students from Khorasgan University. They were all senior students majoring in English translation and had already passed a number of courses in reading comprehension and writing. They were in the same class and they had randomly divided into 2 groups of 30, group A and group B. Group A received a text with micro and macro discourse markers, and group B received the same text but with the only difference, that the discourse markers had been omitted

from the text. They were asked to read their own texts, and then answered the questions.

Materials

About 1000 words (15 minutes of voice) were recorded, and then transcribed from one of the lectures of Dr. Afghari, a linguistic professor at the university of Khorasgan, Esfahan, while he was delivering a lecture in one of his MA sociolinguistic classes. 2 samples were made from the text; the first one was exactly his voice transcription with the presence of DMs. In the second text, DMs were omitted. One questionnaire with 20 questions was made. Then it was distributed among group A and B, and they were asked to read the reading comprehension text first, and then answer the questions.

Procedure

As it was noted in the earlier sections the questionnaire consisted of 20 multiple choice questions; in respect of the scoring procedures, each question was assigned a single point and the score obtained on the whole test was out of 20.

Results

Regarding the null hypothesis, an independent T-Test was conducted to compare the means of two sub-test results representing GA's and GB's performances on passages incorporating unequal numbers of DMs.

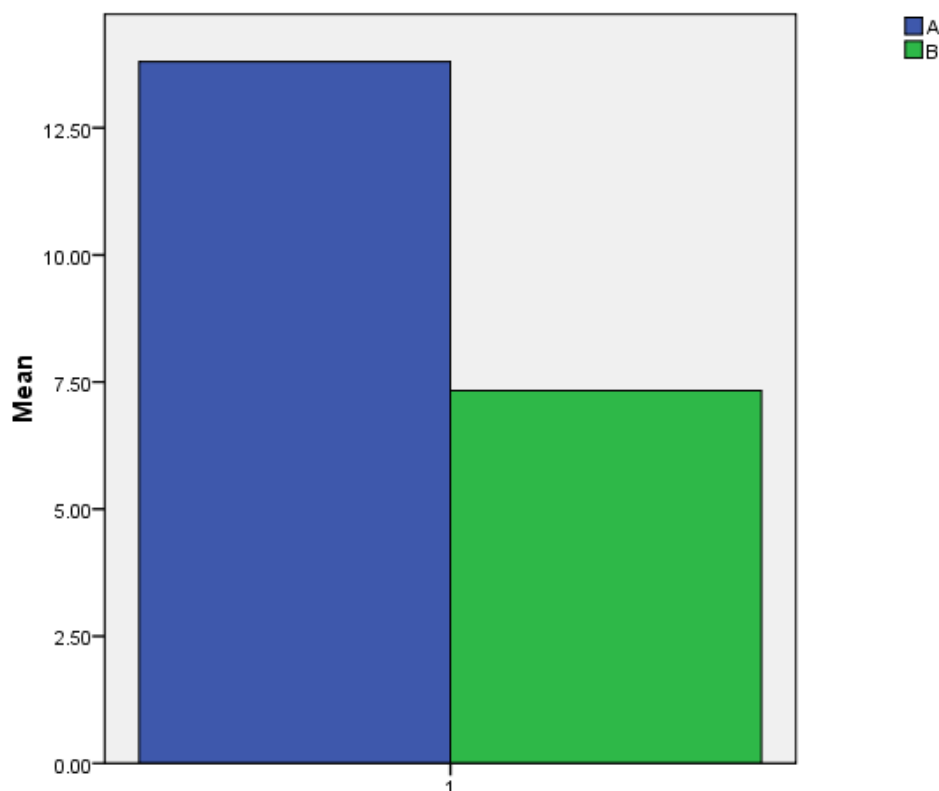
The following tables present the findings from the independent T-Test:

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 A	13.8000	30	3.04450	.55585
B	7.3333	30	2.82029	.51491

Looking at the Table, one can clearly see that the mean scores GA has gained on the passage including a larger number of DMs (13.80) exceeds the one they have obtained on the passage containing a fewer number of DMs (7.33), indicating that GA has been more at ease with the text including a larger number of DMs. Having scanned the statistics of the independent T Test, we need to determine if the difference across the variables is considerable. Thereby, the next table clearly illustrates the significance of the resulting difference.

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 A - B	6.46667	3.88395	.70911	5.01638	7.91696	9.119	29	.000

Generally, provided that confidence interval of difference does not contain zero and significance value be less than the alpha level of test, it can be concluded that the difference between two variables is significant. Accepting that and taking a second look at the T-Test table, one can undoubtedly observe that both of the above-mentioned conditions are met in this test, that is, confidence interval of difference does not contain zero (upper=7.91 and lower= 5.01) and significance value of the test is much less than the alpha level of the test ($0.00 < 0.05$).



All together, the more the number of DMs, the better the learners' performances were. In other words, the reading ability of the learners was significantly in relation with the number of DMs in a text; leading up to rejection of the null hypothesis of the research.

Conclusion

In this inquiry I have made attempts to shed light on the relationships between DMs and the reading ability of EFL university learners. In this respect, a set of theoretically relevant propositions were considered; a set of data were collected and a set of results were obtained. The tie-in between the number of DMs involved in a text and the reading ability of the participants was examined in the light of independent T- Test that had been conducted above. The findings came out to be in favor of a larger number i.e., the participants revealed better performances on the passage containing a larger number of DMs. This paved the way for the rejection of the null hypothesis of the study, as a result, DMs play a facilitating role in the comprehension of a text; consequently, the number of DMs can be effective in further facilitating and smoothing of the reading process. That is to say, a rise in the number of DMs can also increase the revelation of the rhetorical structure of a text and thereby increase the level of facility these markers equip the readers with. In fact, a fewer number of DMs

seems not to hinder the comprehension of a text, but it may hinder expansion of the possibilities for the semantic relationship between the elements they associate.

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Appendix 1

Micro DMs (taken from Chaudron and Richards, 1986)

Macro
- What I'm going to 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

Appendix 2

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