The significance of Discourse Markers in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract:

The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate the interrelationship between the foreign language students' proficiency in English and the mastery of discourse markers. We aspire to identify and analyse the significant role played by discourse markers within the foreign language classroom and, eventually; utilize the outcomes in improving teaching effectiveness. In light of the various scientific studies and investigations put forward by eminent specialists in teaching English as a foreign language, with regard to discourse markers; the research work advocates the adaptation of a quite original and efficient method in teaching these primordial discursive components. As a matter of fact, the individual disciplinary approaches to the teaching of discourse markers are being combined into a unified holistic systems approach which incorporates discourse markers instruction in the four skills. The organization of the work obeys to a precise schema which consists of a careful analysis of discourse markers in the first place and, secondly; the presentation of useful applications within the context of classroom activities.

الملخّـــــص:

يتمحور هذا البحث في إبراز أهمية تدريس علامات الخطاب في اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية و مدى تمكن الطلاب من توظيف هذه الأخيرة. حيث تم من خلال هذه الدراسة تعريف و تحليل الدور المهم والأساسي الذي تجسده هذه العلامات الخطابية في تلقين اللغة الانجليزية و مدى انعكاسها على تحسين و تطوير فعالية التعليم. انتهج هذا العمل طريقة جديدة و فعالة لتدريس أساسيات العناصر الخطابية اذ ارتأى الباحث انه لابد ان تدرس هذه العلامات في كل مهارات التعلم على عكس ما جاءت به مختلف الدراسات العلمية و البحوث التي قام بها مختصون بارزون في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية و التي اقتصرت على النحو و الكتابة فقط. نظم هذا العمل بداية بتحليل دقيق لعلامات الخطاب كمرحلة أولى و من ثمة تقديم تطبيقات ناجعة و بصفة فعالة.

1.The Significance of Discourse Markers and Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Introduction.

It is obviously impossible to achieve a global and detailed study of 'Discourse Markers' within the limited scope of this article. Nevertheless, we will try, as objectively as possible, to give an explicit and clear explanation of this term through a careful examination of some points of view which are put forward by linguists when dealing with this point. Then, we will attempt to show the influence of 'Discourse Markers' on foreign language teaching, and how they can be used in language learning. Lastly, we intend to demonstrate the significance of 'Discourse Markers' in teaching the four language skills.

Definitions and Types of Discourse Markers.

At the beginning, we think that it is necessary to find an appropriate definition of 'Discourse Markers'. Usually, what is meant by the term 'Discourse Markers' is a thread of expressions (lexical, grammatical and also intonational), which help in creating a cohesive text. As Carl James (1980: 103) suggests, there are some devices which make a text well-ordered and explicit: "A text is not just a random sequence of content-related sentences: the sentences appear in a fixed order and, over and above this, there are formal devices which signal the exact nature of the relationship holding between successive sentences." Those devices may be grammatical, lexical, or in speech intonational. Therefore, it is clear that 'Discourse Markers' or 'formal devices' have an important influence on one's speech and writing, and we think, that is why linguists have been trying for many years to investigate and categorize 'Discourse Markers' in order to find out how they work and also the mechanisms which govern them.

For instance, Carl James (1980) divides 'Discourse Markers' into two broad categories: lexical devices and grammatical devices. He suggests that among lexical devices there are the relations of

synonymy and hyponymy into which lexical items in the various sentences enter. In other words, within the same text, one can find several words which are near-synonyms (for example: paediatrician, children's specialist, doctor for children) on the one hand, and on the other there is a super-ordinate term (or hyperonym) which is linked to its hyponyms (for instance: doctor, physician, specialist, paediatrician).

The second category is grammatical devices. This type of devices usually comprises four components which are reference, ellipsis, comparison and parallel structure.

First, reference means the possibility to refer by language, to another piece of language within a given text; this sort of reference is called endophoric reference. There are other types of reference, but we prefer not to deal with them at length because they require a detailed discussion which is not actually the prior objective of this article. In order to have a clear idea about reference, we propose to study the following example: 'Keith read this book. He did not find it interesting.' Here, the pronouns 'he' and 'it' refer respectively to 'Keith' and 'book', and we can note that these pronouns are used in order to avoid repetition; furthermore, they are entirely related to the nouns they replace.

Moreover, Randolph Quirk (1968) goes further beyond this and suggests that reference should comprise the principles of assumption, abbreviation and abstraction. He supports his argument by the following example: 'When I asked if John would play a tune for me, he did.' In the last two words, the pronoun 'he' replaces 'John' while 'did' is an abbreviation not of a clause that has already occurred but of the one we can assume at this point 'played a tune for me'. Now if we replace 'a tune' by 'the tune', we illustrate the assumptive process in language, since the use of 'the' indicates the speaker's assumption that his hearer knows the tune to which he is referring. Finally, the principle of abstraction is equally obvious in the example, because 'John' is an abstraction of: human being, male, plays an instrument etc....

Second, the notion of ellipsis can be defined as pro-forms which are used to represent fuller forms occurring elsewhere; a degree of reduction is achieved by their use. Ellipsis brings about the total elimination of a segment of text. In other words, we tend to omit certain words, usually in our speech but also in writing, which we do not regard as necessary, and consequently their omission cannot alter our message. We can illustrate the concept of ellipsis by this example: 'Have you been to Moscow?' A possible answer could be: '(I have) Never (been to Moscow).' It appears that 'I have' and 'been to Moscow' do not add any information, and therefore, they can be eliminated.

Third, we may possibly consider comparison as a grammatical device which cannot only be manifested at the surface structure of the utterance or sentence, but may also be achieved across sentence-boundaries. In addition, we propose the analysis of these two examples: 'Mary is more beautiful than Jane.' Here, comparison is located in one sentence and manifested through the use of comparative morphemes 'more' and 'than'. Whereas in 'My father is over 70. My mother is only 60.' there is no statement of comparison, no use of a comparative morpheme and yet the comparison is implied; the reader or listener has to 'analyse' in order to relate the two sentences together.

Fourth, this component is called parallel structure because sometimes the experienced writer reverses the maxim of variety (i.e. not to use similar structures) and strings together two or three sentences with parallel structures. The effect of this construction is to tie the sentences together conceptually so that they are read as one cohesive entity of text. The following sentences give an interesting representation of parallel structures: 'My paintings the visitors admired. My sculptures they disliked.' It is noticeable that in these sentences the writer deliberately uses a parallel structure. As a matter of fact, we can point out that the writer did not use the usual English word order (i.e. subject-verb-object) but employed another pattern (i.e. object-subject-verb), in order to make the reader or listener understand

the two sentences as contrastive without the presence of a contrastive conjunction such as 'but' or 'however'.

There is another point of view provided by Halliday and Hasan (1976). As a matter of fact, they categorize 'Discourse Markers' or elements of cohesion into three types: reference, substitution or ellipsis, and conjunction. They differ from Carl James' (1980) classification in that they introduce a new element (i.e. conjunction), and they use the terms substitution or ellipsis in a different sense.

Firstly, Halliday et al (1976) make a distinction between substitution and reference. They points out that with substitution there is no implication of specificity. The substitution relation has no connection with specifying a particular referent; it is quite neutral in this regard. In reference there is typically identity of referent. Substitution is used where there is no such identity. It is possible to make this point explicit through these examples of Substitution: 'Are they selling the contents? Yes, they are (selling). No, they are not (selling). Does she paint for profit? No, she does it for pleasure.'

Secondly, the authors suggest that conjunction is based on the assumption that there are in the linguistic system forms of systematic relationships between sentences. The logical relations are embodied in the linguistic structure, in the form of coordination, apposition, modification etc....   For example 'and, yet, subsequently, after' and many others represent semantic links between the elements that are constitutive of text. In fact, we think it is worth pointing out that these connections depend on the meanings which sentences express. These meanings are essentially of two types: experiential that represents the linguistic interpretation and; interpersonal which indicates the participation in the speech situation.

The idea that these 'links' are rather semantic and not grammatical is also supported by van Dijk. He starts from the point that 'Discourse Markers' not only create connection in a text but they are largely related to its meaning not grammar as well. In order to illustrate the notion of connection, we propose the study of the following cases: 'John is a bachelor, so he is not married.' Despite the

fact that the second part of the sentence can be easily omitted ('ellipsis' is used by Carl James whereas 'substitution' is preferred by Halliday and Hasan), because 'bachelor' implies 'not married', yet the example represents the semantic characteristic of 'Discourse Markers' in this case. The reason is that the following sentence can be grammatically perfect, but from a semantic perspective it is not meaningful: 'John is a bachelor, so Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands.' van Dijk (1977) argues that in the first place it should be observed that these constraints are indeed semantic and not syntactic. Therefore, if we produce a sentence like this: 'Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands, I hereby declare this meeting opened.' Obviously, as we have indicated above, this type of sentences is grammatically well-formed but it is ambiguous because it does not convey a meaning.

On the whole, it is evident that the discussion of 'Discourse Markers' in accordance with different linguistics and opinions requires a much more complete and technical analysis. However, we have tried to present an overall and simplified explanation with the prior objective of making the notion of 'Discourse Markers' much more accessible to students newly enrolled in the 'Discourse Analysis Course' at university level.

2.Discourse Markers and Learners' Proficiency in the Four Language Skills.

In the second part of the present work we will try to indicate the significance of 'Discourse Markers in foreign language teaching. Nowadays, it has become quite axiomatic that teaching any particular aspect of a foreign language necessitates its connection to the context in which the discourse occurs. It is commonly recognized that the ultimate aim of foreign language learning is the mastery of both the linguistic and communicative competence. Indeed, Widdowson (1978) stresses this particular point. He puts forward the apparently simple fact that learning a foreign language involves acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences! That is one aspect of the matter. But it

also involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or parts of sentences, are appropriate in a particular context.

Consequently, in view of the importance of 'Discourse Markers' in language, it is unwise to teach them in isolated sentences, because the foreign language students will be more concentrated on the construction of 'grammatical sentences' without probably noticing the significant role of 'Discourse Markers in the consolidation of the cohesion, appropriateness and the general comprehension of the discourse. In fact, Widdowson (1978) suggests that teaching 'Discourse Markers' has to be in a way that utterances would be such as to ensure that each proposition fitted in with the others. That is what was meant by sentences which were contextually appropriate. For further clarification, we prefer to use the example suggested by the author and try to discuss it thoroughly:

    C: Well, did you talk to her?
    B: Yes, I did (talk to her).
    C: When did she say the parcel would be returned?
    B: (she said that the parcel would be returned) Tomorrow.
    C: Good, I'll meet her at the shop.
    B: She said that her husband would return it.

Here C's questions take a form which indicates what he needs to know and B's replies organize the information he has to impart in such a way as to satisfy C's needs. Thus the propositions expressed by C are linked up with those expressed by B to form a continuous propositional development. We can say that the forms of utterances of B and C are contextually appropriate and to ensure that their exchange is cohesive. Therefore, it is very important to present the language learner with a cohesive text or speech, because not only his understanding of a speech or text in the target language will be easier, but he will probably be able to detect the role of 'Discourse Markers' in creating cohesion within a text or speech as well. Here the term cohesion is used in accordance with Widdowson's definition. The notion of cohesion then, refers to the way sentences and parts of

sentences combine so as to ensure that there is propositional development.

Consequently, we can observe that 'Discourse Markers' are extremely important in improving the four skills (i.e. speaking, listening, writing and reading) in teaching English as a foreign language. As a matter of fact, we suggest that in order to improve the skill of writing by using 'Discourse Markers', it might be fruitful to give the student a series of disconnected sentences and ask him to produce a cohesive text, as in the sample proposed by Widdowson in the form of the sentences below:

1. Rocks are composed of a number of different substances.
2. The different substances of which rocks are composed are called minerals.
3. It is according to their chemical composition that minerals are classified.
4. Some minerals are oxides.
5. Some minerals are sulphides.
6. Some minerals are silicates.
7. Ores are minerals from which we extract metals.
8. What gold is, it is an ore.

A cohesive text for example will be:
Rocks are composed of a number of different substances. Some are oxides, some are sulphides and some are silicates. These substances are called minerals. Minerals are also classified according to their chemical composition. Those from which we extract metals are called ores. Gold, for example, is an ore. (Widdowson: 1978)

As far as the skill of reading is concerned, it is interesting to observe that a cohesive text should be presented by means of a procedure which is called gradual approximation (the expression is used in Widdowson's interpretation). This involves the development of a series of simple accounts of increasing complexity by reference to two sources: a linguistic source in the form of a set of sentences, and a

non-linguistic source in the form of a diagrammatic representation of information.

A study of 'Discourse Markers' can also be used in improving the skill of speaking in order to enable the learner in a TEFL situation to produce cohesive speech; eventually, his ability to listen and understand will be to a large extend facilitated by 'Discourse Markers'.

Conclusion.

The simple conclusion one can draw from this humble discussion is that 'Discourse Markers' not only play a significant role in creating cohesive speech and text, but they are also of a great importance in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, the language teacher must be aware of their crucial function, formal or socio-cultural, in the elaboration of a cohesive English language discourse. This awareness on the part of the language teacher will undoubtedly contribute in the achievement of his noble task which is to teach the target language in the most efficient way.

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