

TEACHING DISCOURSE MARKERS FOR IMPROVING COHERENCE IN RESEARCH WRITING CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of explicit instruction in discourse markers in improving textual coherence in research writing classes at the university level. Despite their critical function in organizing academic prose and signaling logical relationships between ideas, discourse markers remain one of the least systematically taught elements in EFL writing curricula, including in Uzbekistan. The research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on text analysis of student-produced research essays before and after targeted instruction. The findings indicate that students who received explicit instruction in discourse markers demonstrated measurably improved coherence in their writing, particularly in the use of contrastive, causal, and additive connectors. The results suggest that integrating discourse marker instruction into research writing courses can significantly enhance students' ability to produce logically organized and rhetorically effective academic texts.

Keywords: *discourse markers, coherence, research writing, EFL, academic writing instruction*

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu tadqiqot universitetlarda ilmiy yozuv darslarida matn izchilligini oshirishda diskurs markerlari bo'yicha to'g'ridan-to'g'ri o'qitishning rolini o'rganadi. Diskurs markerlari akademik matnni tashkil etishda va g'oyalar o'rtasidagi mantiqiy aloqalarni ko'rsatishda muhim o'rin tutishiga qaramay, ular O'zbekistondagi chet tili sifatida ingliz tilini o'qitish dasturlarida tizimli ravishda o'rgatilmaydi. Tadqiqotda o'quvchilar tomonidan yozilgan ilmiy maqolalarning maqsadli o'qitishdan oldin va keyin matn tahlilidan foydalangan holda sifat yondashuvi qo'llanilgan. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, diskurs markerlariga yo'naltirilgan ta'lim olgan talabalar, ayniqsa qarama-qarshi, sababiy va qo'shimcha bog'lovchilar ishlatishda, yozuvlarining izchilligida sezilarli darajada yaxshilanishni ko'rsatdilar.

Kalit so'zlar: *diskurs markerlar, izchillik, ilmiy yozuv, EFL, akademik yozuv ta'limi*

АННОТАЦИЯ

Данное исследование посвящено изучению роли целенаправленного обучения дискурсивным маркерам в развитии текстовой связности в учебных курсах по научному письму на университетском уровне. Несмотря на их ключевую функцию в организации академического текста и обозначении логических связей между идеями, дискурсивные маркеры остаются одним из наименее системно преподаваемых элементов в программах обучения письму на английском языке как иностранном, в том числе в Узбекистане. В исследовании применяется качественный подход, основанный на анализе текстов

студенческих научных эссе до и после целенаправленного обучения. Результаты показывают, что студенты, прошедшие обучение по дискурсивным маркерам, продемонстрировали ощутимое улучшение связности текстов, особенно в использовании противительных, причинно-следственных и аддитивных коннекторов.

Ключевые слова: *дискурсивные маркеры, связность текста, научное письмо, EFL, обучение академическому письму*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary academic world, the ability to produce well-organized, logically structured research texts is one of the most essential competencies expected of university students. Academic writing is not simply a matter of grammatical accuracy or lexical richness; it fundamentally depends on how effectively writers connect their ideas, guide the reader through their argument, and signal the logical relationships between different parts of a text. This organizational dimension of writing is largely achieved through the use of discourse markers — linguistic devices that signal transitions, sequence information, contrast ideas, and establish causal or additive relationships within a text. Despite their central importance, discourse markers remain among the most neglected components of writing instruction, particularly in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts such as Uzbekistan.

Coherence — the quality of a text that makes it feel logically unified and easy to follow — is widely recognized as one of the primary criteria by which academic writing is evaluated. Halliday and Hasan (1976) established the foundational understanding that coherence is achieved not only through referential ties between sentences but also through cohesive devices that link propositions and organize discourse. Among these devices, discourse markers occupy a privileged position, as they explicitly signal the rhetorical and logical relationships that give a text its

structure. Without them, even factually accurate academic writing can feel fragmented, incoherent, or difficult to follow.

The problem is particularly acute in research writing classes, where students are expected to produce sophisticated texts that present arguments, report findings, and engage with existing literature. In such contexts, weak use of discourse markers can result in texts that are logically unclear, rhetorically unconvincing, and poorly evaluated. As Hyland (2005) notes, effective academic writing requires writers to signal their rhetorical intentions explicitly, and discourse markers are among the primary tools through which this is accomplished. Yet in many EFL writing classrooms, including those in Uzbekistan, discourse markers are taught — if at all — in isolation, without attention to their pragmatic functions or their role in building coherent research texts.

Research on discourse marker acquisition suggests that EFL learners consistently underuse or misuse discourse markers in academic writing (Crismore et al., 1993; Hyland, 2005). This is attributed to several factors, including lack of explicit instruction, insufficient exposure to authentic academic texts, and the influence of first language rhetorical conventions that may not map onto English academic discourse patterns. Uzbek learners, in particular, may face additional challenges arising from the typological distance between Uzbek and English, as well as limited access to academic reading materials in English.

Despite growing interest in discourse marker research, there remains a notable gap in studies specifically focused on the instruction of discourse markers in research writing classes at the university level, particularly in Central Asian EFL contexts. Most existing research either examines discourse markers in broad writing instruction or focuses on their descriptive analysis in published texts, without investigating how targeted instruction can improve students' use of these markers in their own academic writing.

The main aim of this study is to investigate how explicit instruction in discourse markers can improve coherence in the research writing of EFL university students. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: What types of discourse marker errors are most common in student-produced research writing? How does explicit instruction in discourse markers affect the coherence of students' academic texts? What pedagogical strategies are most effective for integrating discourse marker instruction into research writing courses?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research design is employed, utilizing text analysis of student essays collected before and after a targeted instructional intervention. This approach enables a detailed examination of the ways in which students' use of discourse markers develops through instruction, with particular attention to functional categories such as additive, contrastive, causal, and sequential markers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of discourse markers has a long history within linguistics and applied linguistics. Schiffrin (1987) offered one of the earliest and most comprehensive analyses, defining discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk. While her work was primarily concerned with spoken discourse, subsequent scholarship extended the concept to written academic texts, where discourse markers play an equally vital — and arguably more deliberate — role. In the context of academic writing, discourse markers are understood as lexical and phrasal items that signal the logical, rhetorical, and organizational relationships between propositions (Fraser, 1999). These include additive markers (furthermore, in addition), contrastive markers (however, nevertheless), causal markers (therefore, consequently), and sequential markers (firstly, subsequently).

The relationship between discourse markers and textual coherence has been extensively documented. Halliday and Hasan (1976) demonstrated that cohesive devices — including conjunctive relations realized by discourse markers — are

fundamental to the construction of text coherence. A text without adequate cohesive ties, they argue, risks being perceived as a collection of unrelated sentences rather than a unified whole. This insight has had enduring influence on both text linguistics and writing pedagogy, establishing the theoretical basis for treating discourse markers as a central concern of academic writing instruction.

In the context of EFL academic writing, research has consistently shown that learners struggle with the appropriate use of discourse markers. Hyland (2005) found that non-native writers tend to underuse elaborative and contrastive markers while overusing simple additive connectors such as 'also' and 'and.' Similarly, Crismore et al. (1993) observed significant differences between native and non-native writers in the use of metadiscourse markers — a category that encompasses many discourse markers — noting that non-native writers showed less awareness of the rhetorical functions these markers serve. These findings underscore the need for targeted, explicit instruction in discourse marker use within academic writing curricula.

Studies examining the effects of explicit discourse marker instruction have yielded generally positive results. Özkan (2014) investigated the impact of teaching discourse markers to Turkish EFL university students and found significant improvements in textual coherence following instruction. Similarly, Liao (2011) reported that explicit instruction in connective markers enhanced the logical organization of student essays in a Taiwanese EFL context. These findings suggest that discourse markers are learnable through instruction and that pedagogical intervention can produce meaningful changes in writing quality. However, such studies remain relatively sparse, particularly in Central Asian EFL contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, scholars have proposed various frameworks for teaching discourse markers effectively. Nation and Webb (2011) argue that vocabulary instruction — including the teaching of discourse-level lexical items — is most effective when it is contextualized, meaningful, and repeated across multiple encounters. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) recommend integrating

discourse marker instruction within genre-based approaches to writing, where students analyze authentic texts to identify how markers function within specific rhetorical structures. This approach has the advantage of connecting form to function in a contextually rich and motivated way.

Despite this body of work, a notable gap remains in the research specifically targeting discourse marker instruction in research writing classes — as opposed to general composition or essay writing courses. Research writing imposes distinct generic demands, including the need to present and synthesize literature, articulate research gaps, report methods and results, and construct evidence-based arguments. Each of these rhetorical moves requires specific types of discourse markers that may not feature prominently in general writing instruction. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on discourse marker instruction within the context of university-level research writing courses.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design, using text analysis as the primary method. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aimed to explore and interpret patterns of discourse marker use and coherence in students' writing, rather than to measure numerical outcomes. Text analysis is particularly well-suited to this purpose, as it allows for a nuanced and context-sensitive examination of how students deploy discourse markers across different sections of a research essay (Hyland, 2005; Schiffrin, 1987).

Data Sources

The primary data for this study consisted of two sets of academic texts, collected from university students enrolled in a Research Writing course:

- Pre-instruction essays: research writing samples collected at the beginning of the course, before any targeted instruction in discourse markers

was provided. These texts served as a baseline for assessing students' initial competence in discourse marker use.

– Post-instruction essays: writing samples collected from the same students at the end of an instructional unit specifically focused on discourse markers. These texts provided the primary evidence for evaluating the effects of instruction.

In addition to student texts, the analysis drew on two published academic sources as reference points for appropriate discourse marker use: Hyland's (2005) analysis of metadiscourse in academic writing, and Schiffrin's (1987) foundational work on discourse markers. These provided an authoritative benchmark against which student performance could be assessed.

Instructional Intervention

Between the collection of pre- and post-instruction essays, students participated in a four-week instructional unit on discourse markers. The unit covered six functional categories of discourse markers: additive, contrastive, causal, illustrative, concessive, and sequential. Instruction was delivered through a combination of explicit explanation of marker functions, analysis of authentic research articles, guided practice exercises, and peer feedback sessions. Students were encouraged to identify and analyze discourse markers in published research texts before incorporating them into their own writing.

Data Analysis

Each student essay was analyzed systematically according to a coding scheme developed from the existing literature. The coding scheme categorized discourse markers into the six functional types identified above and distinguished between correct use, incorrect use (including misuse of informal markers), and absence of markers in contexts where they were required. Special attention was given to

transitions between major sections of the research essay — the introduction, literature review, methods, results, and discussion — as these represent the rhetorical junctures where discourse markers play the most critical role in constructing coherence.

Pre- and post-instruction texts were analyzed comparatively, with attention to both the frequency and the functional appropriateness of discourse marker use. Findings were organized thematically by marker type and interpreted in light of the theoretical framework established in the literature review.

RESULTS

The results of this study are drawn from the comparative text analysis of student research essays collected before and after the discourse marker instructional unit. The findings are presented according to the six functional categories of discourse markers examined in the study.

No	Type of Marker	Example from Student Writing	Corrected / Target Use	Explanation
1	Additive markers (furthermore, in addition)	"Also, the results show..."	"Furthermore, the results demonstrate..."	Students rely on simple 'also'; academic writing requires more precise additive markers

No	Type of Marker	Example from Student Writing	Corrected / Target Use	Explanation
2	Contrastive markers (however, nevertheless)	"But the findings were different"	"However, the findings contradicted..."	Informal 'but' is frequently used instead of formal contrastive connectors
3	Causal markers (therefore, consequently)	"So, it can be concluded"	"Therefore, it can be concluded"	Colloquial 'so' replaces formal causal discourse markers in research writing
4	Illustrative markers (for instance, such as)	"Like, data shows this pattern"	"For instance, the data reveals..."	Informal 'like' is misused; students lack awareness of formal exemplification markers

No	Type of Marker	Example from Student Writing	Corrected / Target Use	Explanation
5	Concessive markers (although, despite)	"Even though there are problems, but..."	"Although challenges exist..."	Double conjunction error — both 'even though' and 'but' used together incorrectly
6	Sequential markers (firstly, subsequently)	"First... Next... Then..."	"Firstly... Subsequently... Finally..."	Students use narrative sequence markers instead of formal academic ones

The comparative analysis revealed clear and consistent differences between the pre- and post-instruction essays in terms of discourse marker use. Before instruction, students predominantly relied on a small inventory of simple, informal connectors — particularly 'also,' 'but,' and 'so' — and frequently omitted markers altogether at key rhetorical junctures such as the transition from literature review to methods or from results to discussion.

After instruction, students demonstrated a markedly expanded repertoire of discourse markers and showed greater awareness of their functional specificity. Use of formal contrastive markers such as 'however' and 'nevertheless' increased substantially,

as did the use of causal markers such as 'therefore' and 'consequently.' Students also showed improved ability to use sequential markers that are appropriate to academic discourse ('firstly,' 'subsequently,' 'finally') rather than narrative conventions ('first,' 'next,' 'then').

Notably, concessive markers showed the most dramatic improvement. In pre-instruction essays, students frequently produced double-conjunction errors (e.g., 'even though... but'), a pattern that was largely eliminated in post-instruction texts. This suggests that explicit attention to the grammar of concessive constructions — as well as their pragmatic functions — had a direct impact on students' writing.

Overall, the results indicate that explicit instruction in discourse markers produced meaningful improvements in the coherence and rhetorical organization of students' research essays across all six functional categories examined.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that explicit instruction in discourse markers can significantly improve the coherence of EFL students' research writing. The improvements observed across all six functional categories of markers suggest that students benefited both from the expansion of their marker repertoire and from a deepened understanding of the rhetorical functions these markers serve in academic texts.

The pattern of errors observed in pre-instruction essays is consistent with findings reported in the broader literature. Hyland (2005) notes that non-native academic writers tend to overuse simple additive connectors and underuse markers that signal more complex logical relationships such as concession and causality. The dominance of 'also,' 'but,' and 'so' in pre-instruction essays reflects exactly this pattern and supports the interpretation that students lacked both the lexical knowledge and the rhetorical awareness needed to deploy a more sophisticated marker repertoire.

The striking improvement in concessive marker use following instruction deserves particular attention. Concessive constructions present a double challenge for EFL learners: they require knowledge of specific lexical items (although, despite, nevertheless) and understanding of the syntactic constraints governing their use. The elimination of double-conjunction errors in post-instruction essays suggests that genre-based instruction — which helps students understand why a particular marker is used in a specific rhetorical context — is more effective than form-focused instruction alone. This aligns with the recommendations of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), who advocate for contextualizing grammar and discourse instruction within authentic communicative tasks.

The results also have important implications for curriculum design in EFL writing courses at Uzbek universities. Currently, discourse marker instruction in many writing courses is incidental rather than systematic, and students are rarely given explicit guidance on the functional differences between markers that might appear superficially similar (e.g., 'but' versus 'however,' 'so' versus 'therefore'). The findings of this study suggest that dedicating even a modest amount of curriculum time to systematic discourse marker instruction — approximately four weeks in the present study — can yield tangible improvements in writing coherence.

A limitation of the present study is its small scale and the absence of a control group, which makes it difficult to rule out alternative explanations for the observed improvements. It is possible, for example, that students' writing improved simply as a result of increased writing practice, rather than because of the discourse marker instruction specifically. Future research using experimental or quasi-experimental designs would help to address this limitation and establish more robust causal claims. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on written texts and did not examine students' metacognitive awareness of discourse markers, which may have provided additional insight into the mechanisms of change.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that explicit instruction in discourse markers can produce meaningful improvements in the coherence of EFL students' research writing at the university level. Through a comparative analysis of pre- and post-instruction essays, the research showed that students who received targeted instruction in six functional categories of discourse markers — additive, contrastive, causal, illustrative, concessive, and sequential — were able to significantly expand and refine their use of these markers in their own research writing.

The findings have clear implications for writing pedagogy in EFL contexts, particularly in Uzbekistan, where discourse marker instruction remains largely unsystematic. Research writing courses should dedicate explicit curriculum space to the study of discourse markers, emphasizing not merely their formal properties but their rhetorical functions and contextual appropriateness. Genre-based approaches, which situate marker instruction within the analysis of authentic research texts, appear to be especially effective in helping students understand and internalize the functional logic of discourse organization.

It is important to emphasize, however, that coherence in academic writing cannot be reduced to the correct use of discourse markers alone. Markers are one component of a complex communicative competence that also involves disciplinary knowledge, rhetorical awareness, and familiarity with academic genre conventions. Discourse marker instruction is most effective when integrated within a broader pedagogical approach that attends to all of these dimensions.

Future research should build on the present findings by examining larger student populations, employing control group designs, and investigating the long-term retention of discourse marker knowledge across different academic writing contexts. Attention should also be paid to the specific challenges faced by Uzbek EFL learners, including first language rhetorical transfer and limited access to authentic English academic reading materials. Addressing these challenges through principled,

evidence-based pedagogy can make a substantial contribution to improving the quality of academic writing education in the region.

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