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Use of Discourse Markers in English Conversations: A Case Study of EFL Students at Faculty of Social Sciences, Kuwait University

Abbas H. Al-Shammari *

Associate Professor- Kuwait University, State of Kuwait- Faculty of Graduate studies
E-mail: **dr_abbas_7_@hotmail.com**

Reem M. Al Qenai*

Assistant Professor - Kuwait Technical College, State of Kuwait- English & General Studies Department
E-mail: **reemalqenai@gmail.com**

Abstract:

Discourse markers play an important role in the coherence of discourse and facilitate communication. It has been also argued that EFL students need not only the grammatical competence but also discourse knowledge to be able to effectively maintain a conversation. Therefore, the present study investigates the use and functions of discourse markers as used by EFL students at Faculty of Social Sciences in Kuwait. It also aims to investigate the differences between high and low proficient learners in using such discourse markers. The study adopts the Fung and Carter's (2007) model in which the discourse markers are classified into four categories, namely, interpersonal, structural, inferential and cognitive. It also employs a mixed-method design in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches are adopted for data collection and analysis. The population of the study includes the intermediate level students studying English as a foreign language at Faculty of Social Sciences, Kuwait University. The sample of the study includes 32 high and low proficient students. The students

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were selected from the whole population based on their scores in the presentation component which is considered a speaking test. Then, only the conversations performed by the sample were analyzed in terms of the use of discourse markers. An informal interview was also conducted with five students after the quantitative data had been obtained. The findings revealed that the most frequently used discourse markers are the interpersonal discourse markers while the least frequent ones are the referential discourse markers. It is also found that the structural and cognitive discourse markers registered the second and the third, respectively. It is also found that the high proficient learners outperformed the low proficient learners in terms of the use of discourse markers. This suggests that there could be an association between the use of discourse markers and proficiency in speaking. Furthermore, it is shown that discourse markers are used to perform different functions, and this contributes to the coherent and pragmatic flow of conversations. However, the use of discourse markers by the participants was very limited. Therefore, the study recommends that discourse markers should be incorporated in the curricula of speaking and should be also considered by teachers during the process of teaching the speaking skill to EFL university students.

Keywords: Discourse markers; English conversations; EFL students; speaking proficiency

1. Introduction

Language learners usually argue that they have an interest to develop their language ability in speaking and to speak a language like native speakers (Sadegh & Yarandi, 2014). Speaking an L2 fluently has become a must especially for the learners who wish to pursue their study in some particular fields of business and education. Moreover, fluency in L2 speaking is considered to be one of the aims that L2 teachers want to achieve with language students using different methods of teaching to make their students fluent in the L2 communication.

Brown (2003) proposed that communicative language strategies could assist learners in communicating fluently with whatever proficiency they happen to have, in many situations among which the ability to use hesitations, pauses, speed, and discourse markers efficiently. In fact, the use of discourse marker represents one of the significant dimensions of natural spoken discourse and both L2 teachers and discourse analysts can hardly afford to disregard its importance in spoken language (Sadegh & Yarandi, 2014). In the last two decades, studying discourse markers has become significant in linguistics and much research has been conducted and consequently several approaches to this concept have been offered.

One of the scholars who brought up the significance of discourse markers is Schiffrin (1987) who defined discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk", units that include such entities as tone units, speech acts, sentences propositions, and the exact nature of which she intentionally leaves vague. Schiffrin named them 'discourse markers' and proposed that, conversely, they themselves might define "some yet undiscovered units of talk".

Moreover, Schiffrin defined "discourse markers at a more theoretical level as members of a functional class of verbal and nonverbal devices which provide contextual coordinates for ongoing talk". She argued that discourse markers include a broad class of discourse markers lexicalized phrases (you know, I mean), adverbs (now, then), interjections (oh, uh, um, huh) and conjunctions (e.g. and, but, or). Furthermore, she proposed that discourse markers do not simply fit into a linguistic class claiming that non-verbal gestures as well as paralinguistic features are possible discourse markers.

Moreover, Brown and Yule (1983) defined discourse markers as "metalingual comments in which the speaker specifically comments on how what he is saying is to be taken". They

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contended that the thematized metalingual comments are not combined with the content representation that the recipients are building. They added that discourse markers just give them directions about the structure and kind of mental representation they should be developing."

Bright (1992) also maintained that discourse markers like uh, um, err and you know could be considered as a set of linguistic items which function in the textual, expressive, social and cognitive domains. Besides, Fraser (1999) viewed discourse markers as "a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from a class of conjunctions, adverbs and prepositional phrases and with certain exceptions they signal a relationship between the interpretations of the segment they introduce S1 and the prior segment S2."

It is commonly acknowledged that discourse markers as multifunctional linguistic units which support interaction, serve to join an utterance with its context and/or co-text (Romero-Trillo, 2013). Discourse markers are also important elements of language in speech, or in any kind of interactive non-face-to-face spoken or face-to-face exchange. They are used in naturally occurring conversation such as phone conversation or classroom talk, not only to develop coherence, but also to serve other significant functions like regulating turns as well as signaling utterances with actions related to those in prior units (Nookam, 2010). They could also assist L2 learners not only to sound more natural, but also to deal with the challenges encountered while speaking a foreign language (Kovač & Jakupčević, 2020).

Discourse markers establish the interactive bonds among interlocutors, provide guidance for the speakers and listeners in communication and help them reach conclusions about the direction the communication is heading in through signaling the communicative intention of speakers (Moreno, 2008). This makes discourse markers significant elements of spontaneous and unplanned communication (Tree, 2010). In this connection, Hartmann and Stork (1976) argued that an individual could be considered as fluent in speaking a language if s/he is able to precisely utilize its structures while focusing on content rather than form, employing the patterns and units automatically at normal conversational speed when they are required.

More importantly, both L1 and L2 language learners are required to have knowledge of such discourse markers as part of their pragmatic competence (Nookam, 2010). If teaching conversations to language learners aims at making learners capable to utilize the language to

express themselves appropriately and fluently in conversations, then successful use of discourse markers is what language teachers are required to develop in their students.

Although many studies have investigated discourse markers in the second and foreign language acquisition area, it remains of vital significance to obtain as much insight as possible into the production of L2 learners from various language backgrounds, with various proficiency levels and in various language contexts so as to develop a more complete picture that might assist in facilitating second and foreign learning practices (Kovač & Jakupčević, 2020). Therefore, the present study investigates the use and functions of discourse markers among EFL university students in a less researched EFL context as well as the differences between high and low proficient learners in using such discourse markers. It is expected that the present study helps language teachers in developing lessons which contribute to raising the students᾽ awareness of the significant roles of discourse markers in conversations and to offer opportunities for them to practice the proper utilization of discourse markers in speech.

2. Problem Statement

It has been proposed that all languages have discourse markers, that allow the display of utterance relations, though the repertoire of devices and their different functions differ from one language to another (Nookam, 2010). Because discourse markers play an important role in coherence of discourse and facilitate communication, it seems reasonable to propose that incongruous employment of discourse markers in the first or second language could, to a certain degree, lead to a misunderstanding from time to time or hinder successful communication.

Literature revealed that native speakers primarily use discourse markers for different discourse functions like marking noncompliance with the previous action, speaker-return and marking speaker continuation (Fung & Carter, 2007). Nevertheless, it has been revealed that foreign and second language learners tend to utilize discourse markers less frequently than native speakers, with a narrower range or for diverse functions (Nookam, 2010).

Given that discourse markers have a significant role in conversation, successful EFL learners are supposed to have a large repertoire of them and be taught their appropriate use. Moreover, because many second and foreign language learners are involved in interactive discourse, they are required to signal the relations of certain utterances with those that follow

and precede (Nookam, 2010). Thus, language learners must understand and can use the discourse markers of their target language for interactional and communicative competence. Besides, it is reasonable that those nonnative speakers who proficiently utilize discourse markers of the foreign and second language will be more successful in talk-in-interaction than those who do not.

More significantly, it has been argued that EFL students need not only the grammatical competence (i.e. the knowledge of syntax and morphology) but also discourse knowledge (i.e. the ability to utilize discourse markers which help hold the conversation together and make it meaningful) to be able to effectively maintain a conversation (Arya, 2022). Using such discourse markers in conversations poses challenges to EFL students if compared to the more formal spoken discourse like presentations which are more structured and could be recited or planned previously. However, conversations could be produced under processing and cognitive constraints and often unplanned or recited (Aijmer, 2004).

Tam (1997 cited in Sadeghi and Yarandi, 2014) argued that the fluent speakers' speech is usually filled with reduced forms like reduction, assimilation, elision and contraction. Such forms often have a positive impact on speeding up an individual's speech rate due to the fact that they usually lead to: 1. Substitutions of elements within words 2. Omission of end consonants and vowels, and 3. Disappearance of word boundaries. Besides, fluent speakers create sentences which appear in elliptical forms. Consequently, when the context is clear, pronouns, verbs, articles, subjects, etc., are recurrently deleted. Similarly, Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995) claimed that the absence or presence of lower level discourse markers, "words that speakers use to mark relationships between chunks of discourse such as so, well, OK, and now" aids comprehension (p.449).

Moreno (2007) pointed out that foreign and second learners hardly utilize discourse markers in their conversation, making it characteristically nonnative, and that classroom discourse might be a defining factor in the poor use of discourse markers by L2 learners. The absence or inappropriate utilization of discourse markers might negatively influence the face of language learners and, more seriously, offend their interlocutors' face as well. The absence of or incorrect discourse marker utilization might be due to the lack of procedural or declarative knowledge of discourse markers on the part of L2 learners. Consequently, it is vitally

significant to examine the extent to which the EFL learners employ the discourse markers in conversations.

Regardless of their significance for successful communication in a foreign and second language, discourse markers have been revealed to be neglected or taken for granted especially in EFL contexts. For instance, it is revealed that EFL textbooks lack pragmatic content in general as well as discourse markers in particular (Ren, 2016). More importantly, if found in EFL textbooks, discourse markers usually seem to be ineffectively presented to EFL students, with insufficient information about the necessary contextual information or the range of their potential roles (Lam, 2009). It has also been revealed that research which investigated the English discourse marker use by EFL/ESL learners is devoid (Shim, 2014).

Because of the vital significance of such linguistic elements in foreign and second language conversations, more information is required about how EFL students in various contexts and from various linguistic backgrounds employ discourse markers in conversations (Kovač & Jakupčević, 2020). Nevertheless, in the Arab EFL contexts, there have been relatively some studies (Rabab'ah, 2015; Ali & Mahadin, 2015) which examined the utilization of discourse markers by the EFL learners. Thus, the current study will investigate the use and functions of discourse markers as used by foreign language learners in their conversations.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study is intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the most frequent discourse markers among the ……..EFL students in….

2. To examine the relationship between speaking proficiency and the use of discourse markers.

3. To identify the prevailing functions of discourse markers used by the participants.

4. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts the Fung and Carter's (2007) model in which the discourse markers are classified into four categories.

Table (1) The Fung and Carter's (2007) model of discourse markers

Category	Discourse functions and markers used
Interpersonal Denoting affective and social functions.	a- Marking shared knowledge: "see, you see, you know". b- Showing responses (acknowledgement confirmation and agreement): "OK/okay, oh, right/alright, yeah, yes, I see,

	great, oh, great, sure". c- Indicating attitudes: "well, really, obviously, absolutely, basically, actually, exactly, to be frank, etc." d- Indicating a stance towards propositional meanings: "really, exactly, obviously, absolutely"
Referential "Marking relationships between verbal activities preceding and following a discourse marker".	a- Mostly conjunctions, comparison, digression, disjunction, coordination, marking cause, contrast and consequence: because/cos, so, but, and, yet, however, nevertheless, and, or, anyway, likewise, similarly"
Structural "Working in two levels: textual and interactional. Indicating discourse in progress and affecting the subject under discussion, returning to a previous topic or moving ahead to a new topic, or affecting even the distribution of turn taking".	a- Opening and closing of topics: now, OK/okay, right/alright, well, let's start, let's discuss, let me conclude b- Sequencing: "first, firstly, second, next, then, finally c- Marking topic shifts: "so, now, and what about, how about" d- Marking continuation of the current topic: "yeah, and, cos, so e- Regain control over the talk or to hold the floor: "and, cos Summarizing opinions: so"
Cognitive "Marking the cognitive state of speakers, particularly in unplanned speech, when there are unsignalled shifts in topics or when inferential procedures are required to understand"	a- "Indicating the thinking process: "well, I think, I see" b- Reformulation/self-correction: "I mean, that is, in other words, what I mean is" c- Elaboration: like, I mean Hesitation: well, sort of d- Assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances: "you know"

This model is adopted in the present study for many reasons; for example, it is more recent and detailed than other models of discourse markers. It also presents a framework for categorizing the discourse markers and their functions and thus it facilitates the data analysis and thus helps achieve the objectives of the study. Moreover, this model is common in the academic setting in that it has been employed for data analysis of many studies such as Kovač and Jakupčević (2020).

5. Similar works

This section highlights the studies which investigated the use of discourse markers by EFL learners. In fact, topic of discourse markers attracted the researchers' attention in many EFL contexts. For instance, Castro (2009) investigated the use and functions of discourse markers in EFL classroom interaction, claiming that the EFL students used discourse markers to achieve a number of intertextual and interpersonal functions. According to him, the discourse markers which were employed by the participants of his study contributed to the coherent and pragmatic flow of the discourse produced in EFL classroom interaction.

Moreover, Nookam (2010) studied the use of discourse markers by Thai EFL learners in English conversations. However, Nookam only focused on the most frequent discourse markers, namely, "and", "but", "so", "oh", and "well", aiming to examine the extent to which the Thai students use such discourse markers and how the participants use them. The findings of Nookam's (2010) study revealed that "and" was most frequently employed to preface a turn or a turn construction unit (TCU) by the participating students in conversation, followed by "oh", "but", and "so" respectively. Nevertheless, it was found that "well" was not used by the learners. In the same EFL context, Arya (2022) explored the use of discourse markers in the conversations of Thai university students as well as non-Thai speakers of English. The findings of the study revealed that Thai university students used less discourse markers than the non-Thai speakers of English; the study attributed such deficiency in the overall use of discourse marker among Thai EFL students to a pedagogical urgency to develop learner awareness of how using such discourse markers could significantly influence the relationship between interlocutors and most importantly the quality of conversations.

Furthermore, Sadeghi and Yarandi (2014) examined the relationship between speaking fluency and the use of discourse markers among Iranian EFL students. The findings showed that applying discourse markers intrinsically requires more time and that there is a relationship between the use of discourse markers and speaking fluency. Besides, Khameneh and Faruji (2020) examined the impact of teaching discourse markers to Iranian EFL students' achievement. The findings of their study showed that there is no effect of teaching discourse markers on the students' achievement. In addition, Shim (2014) examined the use of discourse markers in the English speaking tests among EFL students. The results revealed that discourse

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markers that were least or never employed was the substitution, and that only one ellipsis was employed by the participants.

Kovač and Jakupčević (2020) investigated the use of discourse markers by Croatian Engineering students. The results showed a poor performance in terms of use of discourse markers as the participants utilized very few discourse markers to achieve coherence in the narratives. Their study attributed the poor use of discourse markers by the students to the unnatural input that the students are exposed to in classrooms as well as to the lack of attention on such discourse markers in L2 education.

In terms of the use of discourse markers by Arab EFL learners, Rabab'ah (2015) investigated the conjunctive discourse markers in the EFL classroom. Four types of conjunctive discourse markers were examined, namely, adversative, causative and additive. The findings showed that the Saudi EFL teachers employed the three major categories of discourse markers; nevertheless, the additive discourse markers registered the highest mean scores. Besides, the results revealed that discourse markers were used to achieve many pragmatic functions; for instance, such discourse markers were utilized to express a cause, to show addition and continuity of new information, and to express cancellation, denial and contrast. Moreover, Ali and Mahadin (2015) analyzed the use of interpersonal discourse markers among advanced EFL Jordanian students, using a functional approach. The findings of the study revealed that the advanced EFL Jordanian students had a slightly higher percentage of such markers than the English native speakers. Nevertheless, because of the impact of L1, cultural preferences and formal education, the advanced EFL Jordanian students employed more restricted set of interpersonal discourse markers than their native speakers of English.

It is noticed that although some studies investigated the use of discourse markers in many EFL context, there is still a lack of studies in the Arab EFL context. It is also noticed that the studies carried out in the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and Jordon, only focused on some discourse markers, conjunctive discourse markers and interpersonal discourse markers, respectively. Therefore, the present study investigate the different types of discourse markers used by Arab EFL students adopting the Fung and Carter's (2007) model.

6. Methodology

This section presents the methodology adopted in the current study. It highlights the study design, the population and sampling, data collection instruments, methods of data analysis and procedures of the study.

6.1 Study Design

The present study employs a mixed-method design in which both qualitative and qualitative approaches are adopted for data collection and analysis. In fact, it is one of the most common research designs in educational research. This design consists of gathering quantitative data and subsequently collecting qualitative data which assists to elucidate and elaborate on the results obtained through quantitative analysis (Creswell, 2012).

6.2 Population and Sampling

The population of the study include all intermediate level students, studying English as a foreign language at the English Unit at Faculty of Social Sciences, Kuwait University. All students are homogenous as they are native speakers of Arabic and they speak English as a foreign language. Their age ranges from 22 to 26 years old. The students' scores of the speaking test, which will be highlighted in the next section, were collected and then calculated. The scores of all students were ordered from the highest to the lowest. Then, the first sixteen students were considered to be high proficient learners while the last sixteen were considered low proficient learners. This step yielded the selection of the sample of the study i.e. 32 high and low proficient learners.

6.3 Data Collection Instruments

Two data collection instruments were used by the researcher, namely, the speaking test as well as questionnaire. In terms of the speaking test, all participants were asked to discuss five topics in pairs. The selected topics of conversations included five topics, namely, the benefits of sports, the significance of computers nowadays, the importance of English, the impact of Covid-19 on economy, and online learning. Each pair of participants were asked to select two topics randomly after these topics were written in pieces of paper and such pieces of paper were closed and offered to the participants to select from. Then, the scores of all students were calculated and the students were divided into two types, high and low proficient learners. The students who got more than 75 were considered high proficient learners while those who

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obtained less than 75 scores were considered low proficient learners. Then, the first fifteen students and the last fifteen students were selected as the sample of the study. Therefore, only the conversations performed by these 32 students were considered for the analysis in terms of the use of discourse markers. Thus, the total conversations were 32 as the students worked on pairs.

Before conducting the speaking test, the researcher conducted a brainstorming session and the participants were allowed to write some notes that they might need when they carry out the conversations. The conversations between each pair of participants were recorded and the students were previously informed that the recordings would be kept secret and would be only used for research purposed only. After conducted the speaking tests and the conversation recordings were obtained, interviews were also made with five participants who were selected based on their willingness to participate. The interviews were conducted to get some explanations for some findings which were obtained through quantitative data analysis.

6.4 Methods of Data Analysis

As explained earlier, two types of data were collected in the present study, namely, quantitative and qualitative. The data obtained from the test (i.e. speaking test) was recorded and transcribed and then analyzed quantitatively through counting the number of discourses markers by the participants. Then, discourse markers and pauses were codified and appropriate statistical procedures were utilized in a way which achieves the objectives of the present study. For example, the discourse markers were ordered from the most to the least frequently occurred in the conversations of the participants. Then, the functions of these discourse markers were also identified. In the identification of discourse markers, a list of discourse offered by Fung and Carter (2007) was employed. The analysis of discourse markers was manually conducted, as the status and meaning of such units relies on the context. The analysis also highlights the extent to which the discourse markers were employed appropriately. However, the qualitative data (i.e. interviews) was coded and analyzed qualitatively so as to elucidate the findings obtained through the quantitative data.

In line with Fuller (2003), the following features were employed as the criteria for identifying the status of a phrase or word as a discourse marker: 1) discourse markers do not change the truth conditions of the propositions in the utterances they frame, 2) discourse

markers are grammatically optional, and 3) discourse markers are employed to signal the relationship among discourse units (Schourup, 1999, as cited in Fuller, 2003) (Kovač & Jakupčević, 2020).

6.5 Establishing criteria for the choice of discourse markers

The present study is concerned with investigating the use of discourse markers by the intermediate level students studying English as a foreign language at……..In particular, it examines how EFL learners utilize discourse markers as they are involved in conversation. The criteria employed for a linguistic expression or item to qualify as a discourse marker will, thus, take a functional perspective based on the framework of Fung and Carter (2007).

While analyzing the data of the study, special attention was provided to four essential elements: how participants (a) connect with their interlocutors utilizing discourse markers for interpersonal functions to express attitude, hedge to be polite, check or express understanding, confirm shared knowledge and mark shared knowledge (Interpersonal); b) indicate their thinking process and reformulate, employing discourse markers for cognitive functions (Cognitive); c) manage the conversation, as reflected through their utilization of discourse markers for textual functions, taking and giving turns, marking topic shifts, and framing the end and start of topics (Structural); and d) engage in or contribute to the conversation as reflected through their utilization of discourse markers, again for textual functions, to offer new information and perhaps refer to old information within the text (Referential) (Fung & Carter, 2007).

Moreover, a number of criteria employed to classify an expression or a lexical item as a discourse marker: they are single words or formulaic expressions taken from a number of grammatical classes. The discourse markers are not restricted to the turn-initial position of an utterance, occurring at the start or end of a topic; nevertheless, they are also found in the middle of an utterance to mark repair or also keep the turn. Besides, they could be also found in the final position of a turn.

7. Data Analysis

This section provides the data analysis of the current study; it presents the most frequent discourse markers among the EFL students in……., the differences between high and low proficient learners in using discourse markers and the prevailing functions of discourse markers

used by the participants. The four categories of discourse markers are presented in four separate tables below in which the frequency of the discourse markers are provided based on their function within each category. Then, the total number of frequency for the overall categories are given so that such categories are ordered based on their frequency, i.e. from the most to least frequent discourse markers as used by the participants.

7.1 Frequency of Discourse Markers as used by the participants

This section presents the frequencies of four categories of discourse markers as used by the participants.

1- Interpersonal

The category of discourse markers 'interpersonal' as named by the Fung and Carter (2007) includes four types of discourse markers based on their functions as follows: discourse markers which are used to mark shared knowledge, show responses, indicate attitudes, and indicate a stance towards propositional meanings.

Table (2) Interpersonal discourse markers used by the participants

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	High Proficient	Low Proficient	Overall Frequency
Interpersonal	"you see, you know"	12	8	20
	"well, really, actually, exactly"	10	5	15
	"OK, oh, right, yeah, yes, I see, oh, sure"	14	10	24
	"really, exactly"	4	6	10
Total		**40**	**29**	**69**

As shown in table (2), it is noticed that the participants used 69 interpersonal discourse markers while they were engaged in 32 conversations. It is revealed that "you see" and "you know" were used 20 times during the performed conversations. It is also noticed that "well, really, actually, exactly" were employed 15 times while "OK, oh, right, yeah, yes, I see, oh, sure" were employed 24 times. However, "really, exactly" were used 10 times and the analysis showed they are the least frequent interpersonal discourse markers among the participants. Moreover, the findings revealed that "OK, oh, right, yeah, yes, I see, oh, sure" were employed 24 times by the participants. In addition, the findings revealed that the high proficient students outperformed the low proficient learners in terms of the use of interpersonal discourse markers in that they employed 40 interpersonal discourse markers in the performed conversations. This

suggests an association between the use of interpersonal discourse markers and speaking proficiency in favor of high proficient learners.

2- Referential

The category of discourse markers 'referential' as called by the Fung and Carter (2007) includes one type of discourse markers based on their functions, namely, discourse markers which are used to mark relationships between verbal activities preceding and following a discourse marker.

Table (3) Referential discourse markers used by the participants

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	High Proficient	Low Proficient	Frequency
Referential	"Because, so, but, and, yet, however, and, or, anyway, similarly"	6	8	14
Total		6	8	14

As revealed in table (3), it is noticed that the participants used 14 referential discourse markers while they were engaged in 32 conversations. Precisely, the referential discourse markers used by the participants in 32 conversations include the following "Because, so, but, and, yet, however, and, or, anyway, similarly". Moreover, the data analysis showed that the low proficient students used more referential discourse markers than the high proficient learners since they employed 8 referential discourse markers in the performed conversations. This suggests an association between the use of referential discourse markers and speaking proficiency in favor of low proficient learners.

3- Structural

The category of discourse markers 'structural' as named by the Fung and Carter (2007) includes five types of discourse markers based on their functions as follows: discourse markers which are used to open and close topics, to show sequencing, marking topic shifts, marking continuation of the current topic and regain control over the talk.

Table (4) Structural discourse markers used by the participants

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	High Proficient	Low Proficient	Frequency
Structural	"now, OK, right, well"	5	4	9
	"first, second, next, then, finally"	5	5	10
	"so, now, how about"	3	3	6
	"yeah, and, because, so"	7	5	12
	"and, so"	13	9	22
Total		**33**	**26**	**59**

As shown in table (4), it is shown that the participants employed 59 structural discourse markers while they were involved in 32 conversations. It is noticed that "now, OK, right, well" were utilized 9 times during the performed conversations. Besides, it is shown that "first, second, next, then, finally" were used 7 times while "so, now, how about" were used 6 times and the analysis revealed they are the least frequent structural discourse markers among the participants. Nevertheless, "yeah, and, because, so" were utilized 12 times. Moreover, the findings revealed that "and, so" were employed 22 times by the participants and were the most frequent structural discourse markers among the sample of the study. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the high proficient students outperformed the low proficient learners in terms of the use of some structural discourse markers as well as the overall structural discourse markers in that they employed 33 structural discourse markers in the performed conversations. This suggests an association between the overall use of structural discourse markers and speaking proficiency in favor of high proficient learners. It is shown that high and proficient learners used the same number of the second and third types of structural discourse markers as revealed in the table above.

4- Cognitive

The category of discourse markers 'cognitive as named by the Fung and Carter (2007) includes four types of discourse markers based on their functions as follows: discourse markers which are used to indicate the thinking process, make reformulation/self-correction, elaborate on something and assess the listener's knowledge about the utterances.

Table (5) Cognitive discourse markers used by the participants

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	High Proficient	Low Proficient	Frequency
Cognitive	"well, I think, I see"	14	11	25
	"I mean, that is, in other words, what I mean is"	4	3	7
	"like, I mean, well, sort of"	4	4	8
	"you know"	1	3	4
Total		**23**	**19**	**44**

As revealed in table (5), it is found that the sample of the study used 44 cognitive discourse markers while they were engaged in32 conversations. It is shown that "well, I think, I see" were utilized 25 times and were the most frequent cognitive discourse markers used by the subjects of the study. Furthermore, it is noticed that "I mean, that is, in other words, what I mean is" were used 7 times while "like, I mean, well, sort of'" were used 8 times. Nevertheless, "you know" were utilized 4 times and the analysis revealed they are the least frequent cognitive discourse markers among the participants. Besides, the findings of the present study showed that the high proficient students outperformed the low proficient learners in terms of the use of cognitive discourse markers as they employed 23 cognitive discourse markers in the performed conversations. This shows that there is a relationship between the use of cognitive discourse markers and speaking proficiency in favor of high proficient learners.

7.2 Order of Categories of Discourse Markers among low and high proficient learners

Based on the above findings, the categories of discourse markers could be ordered from the most to the least frequent as shown in the following table:

Table (5) Order of categories of discourse markers

Categories	High Proficient	Low Proficient	Frequency	Order
Interpersonal	40	29	69	1
Referential	8	6	14	4

Structural	33	26	59	2
Cognitive	23	19	42	3
Total	**104**	**80**	**184**	

Table (5) above shows that the most frequent discourse markers are the interpersonal discourse markers as they were used 69 times while performing 32 conversations by the participants. However, the least frequent ones are the referential discourse markers since they were used 14 times. The structural and cognitive discourse markers were registered the second and the third respectively among the four categories in terms of frequency. It is also revealed that the overall frequency of discourse markers by the high proficient learners (104) is higher than that of low proficient learners (80). Besides, it is noticed that high proficient learners outperformed better in terms of the use of the four individual categories of discourse markers as revealed in table (5) above. Therefore, it could be said that there must be an association between the speaking fluency as well as the use of discourse markers.

7.3   Functions of Discourse Markers

This section provides the functions of discourse markers as used by the participants.

1- Interpersonal

The participants used the interpersonal discourse markers for the following functions:

Table (6) The functions of interpersonal discourse markers

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	Functions
Interpersonal	"you see, you know"	Marking shared knowledge
	"well, really, actually, exactly"	Showing responses (acknowledgement confirmation)
	"OK, oh, right, yeah, yes, I see, oh, sure"	Indicating attitudes
	"really, exactly"	Indicating a stance towards propositional meanings

Table (6) above shows that the participants used the interpersonal discourse markers for various functions; such functions include the following: marking shared knowledge, showing

responses, indicating attitudes and indicating a stance towards propositional meanings. Such functions are presented in the model of the Fung and Carter (2007). However, it is noticed that the participants used only some interpersonal discourse markers offered in the Fung and Carter's (2007) model.

2- Referential

The participants employed the referential discourse markers for the following functions:

Table (7) The functions of referential discourse markers

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	Functions
Referential	Because, so, but, and, yet, however, and, or, anyway, similarly"	Mostly conjunctions, comparison, marking cause, contrast and consequence

Table (7) above reveals that the subjects of the study employed the referential discourse markers for various functions; such functions include the following: conjunctions, comparison, marking cause, contrast and consequence. Such functions are presented in the model of the Fung and Carter (2007). However, it is noticed that the participants used only some referential discourse markers offered in the Fung and Carter's (2007) model and such discourse markers are utilized for few functions as revealed in the table (7).

3- Structural

The sample of the present study used the structural discourse markers for the following functions:

Table (8) The functions of structural discourse markers

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	Functions
Structural	"now, OK, right, well"	Opening and closing of topics
	"first, second, next, then, finally	Sequencing
	"so, now, how about"	Marking topic shifts

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	"yeah, and, because, cos, so	Marking continuation of the current topic
	"and, so"	Regaining control over the talk or to hold the floor

Table (8) above demonstrates that the participants of the study utilized the structural discourse markers for different functions; such functions include the following: opening and closing topics, sequencing, marking topics shifts, marking continuation of the current topic and regaining control over the talk or hold the floor. Such functions are also offered in the model of the Fung and Carter (2007). However, it is shown that the participants used only some structural discourse markers provided in the Fung and Carter's (2007) model and such discourse markers are also employed for some functions as seen in the table (8).

4- Cognitive

The sample of the present study used the structural discourse markers for the following functions:

Table (9) The functions of cognitive discourse markers

Category	Discourse markers used by the participants	Frequency
Cognitive	"well, I think, I see"	"Indicating the thinking process"
	"I mean, that is, in other words, what I mean is"	"Reformulation/self-correction"
	like, I mean Hesitation: well, sort of	"Elaboration"
	"you know"	"Assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances"

Table (9) above shows that the participants used the cognitive discourse markers for different functions among which indicating the thinking process, reformulations/self-correction, elaboration and assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances. Such functions are

presented in the model of the Fung and Carter (2007). However, it is noticed that the participants used only some cognitive discourse markers provided in the Fung and Carter's (2007) model.

7.4   Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the present study reveal that that the most frequent discourse markers are the interpersonal discourse markers while the least frequent ones are the referential discourse markers. It is also found that the structural and cognitive discourse markers were registered the second and the third respectively among the four categories in terms of frequency.

It is also revealed that the high proficient learners used more discourse markers than the low proficient learners, either in terms of the individual categories or the overall discourse markers and thus it could be concluded that there must be a relationship between the speaking proficiency as well as the use of discourse markers. This conclusion is in line with the study conducted by Sadeghi and Yarandi (2014) who found that there is an association between speaking fluency and the use of discourse markers.

The data analysis also shows that the participants employed the discourse markers for different functions; for instance, the interpersonal discourse markers are used for the following functions: marking shared knowledge, showing responses, indicating attitudes and indicating a stance towards propositional meanings. Moreover, the referential discourse markers are also used to do various functions; such as conjunctions, comparison, marking cause, contrast and consequence.

Moreover, it is found that the participants of the study utilized the structural discourse markers for different functions, such as opening and closing topics, sequencing, marking topics shifts, marking continuation of the current topic and regaining control over the talk or hold the floor. It is also shown that the participants employed the cognitive discourse markers for different functions among which indicating the thinking process, reformulations/self-correction, elaboration and assessment of the listener's knowledge about the utterances.

It could, thus, be stated that the participants of the present study employed the discourse markers to aid comprehension of their conversations. This finding is congruent with that found in the literature (e.g. Castro, 2009). However, it is noticed that the EFL learners used very limited number of discourse markers in each category of discourse markers. This result is in

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agreement with the findings of Kovač and Jakupčević (2020) and Arya (2022). Informal interviews with five students showed that the EFL teachers do not pay much attention to teaching discourse markers in the classroom. The interviewees also claimed that the curricula of speaking do not incorporate teaching discourse markers. This finding is similar to that of Kovač and Jakupčević (2020). The participants argued that they use some of these discourse markers because they study them in other courses such as grammar and writing. Therefore, the interviewees requested that teachers of speaking should incorporate teaching discourse markers in their teaching plans and that speaking curricula should also incorporate teaching discourse markers due to their significance for successful communication. This finding is not in agreement with the finding of Kovač and Jakupčević (2020) who claimed that teaching discourse markers does not have any influence to the use of the discourse markers. Other experimental studies should, be thus, conducted to investigate such an impact on students' fluency in speaking.

Finally, the study recommends that other studies should be carried out to investigate the use of discourse markers in other skills such as writing. A correlational study should be also conducted to investigate the relationship between the use of discourse markers and students' achievement. Besides, future studies should enlarge the sample of the study and select the sample from different levels of study. The differences between male and female students in using discourse markers should be also investigated and most importantly the factors affecting the use of discourse markers should be also examined in all EFL contexts

المستخلص

استخدام روابط الخطاب في المحادثة باللغة الانجليزية: دراسة حالة لطلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في كلية العلوم الاجتماعية، جامعة الكويت

عباس هبر الشمري

ريم القناعي

تلعب روابط الخطاب دوراً مهماً في ربط الخطاب و تسهّل عملية التواصل. كما يبدو ايضا ان روابط الخطاب تحتاج الى اتقان القواعد النحوية للغة الاجنبية بالاضافة الى معرفة اصول الخطاب التي تمكن الطالب من التحدث بشكل فعال. تركز هذه الدراسة على استخدام و وظيفة روابط الخطاب المستخدمة من قبل طلاب الجامعة الذين يدرسون اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في كلية العلوم الاجتماعية، جامعة الكويت. كما تركز الدراسة ايضاً على الاختلافات بين المتعلمين ذوي الكفاءة اللغوية العالية و المتعلمين ذوي الكفاءة اللغوية المتدنية في استخدام روابط الخطاب. تتبنى الدراسة نموذج فانغ و كارتر (Fung and Carter (2007) و الذي يصنّف روابط الخطاب الى اربع فئات و هي الشخصي و البنيوي و المتقطّع و الادراكي. كما تتبنى الدراسة تصميم الطريقة المختلطة و التي تجمع بين النهج الكمي و النوعي لجمع البيانات و تحليلها. تشمل عينة الدراسة طلاب المستوى المتوسط الذين يدرسون اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في كلية العلوم الاجتماعية، جامعة الكويت. تم اختيار عينة الدراسة المكونة من 32 طالب استناداً على ادائهم في العرض التقديمي و الذي يمثل امتحان القدرة اللغوية في مهارة التحدّث. تم بعد ذلك تحليل ما قدمه الطلاب استناداً على استخدام الطلاب لروابط الخطاب. كما تم اجراء مقابلة شخصية مع خمسة طلاب بعد جمع البيانات النوعية. اظهرت النتائج ان روابط الخطاب الاكثر استخداماً هي روابط الخطاب الشخصية و اقل روابط الخطاب استخداماً هي روابط الخطاب المتقطعة بينما حلت روابط الخطاب البنيوية و الادراكية على المرتبتين الثالثة و الرابعة على التوالي. كما اظهرت النتائج ايضاً أن أداء الطلاب ذوي الكفاءة العالية تجاوز اداء الطلاب ذوي الكفاءة المتدنية فيما يتعلق باستخدام روابط الخطاب. تشير هذه النتيجة على احتمالية وجود رابط بين استخدام روابط الخطاب و الكفاءة اللغوية في مهارة التحدث. كما تبين أن استخدام روابط الخطاب يدل على استخدام وظائف مختلفة لروابط الخطاب و هذا بدوره يؤدي الى سلاسة الحوار و ترابطه. و من جهة اخرى، اظهرت النتائج ان الطلاب استخدموا روابط الخطاب بشكل محدود. و لذلك توصي الدراسة بان يتم دمج روابط الخطاب في المنهج الدراسي و ان يهتم المدرسون بروابط الخطاب اثناء العملية التعليمية المتعلقة بمهارة التحدّث لطلاب الجامعة الذين يدرسون اللغة الانجليزية كلغة ثانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: روابط الخطاب، المحادثة باللغة الانجليزية، طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية، الكفاءة اللغوية في المحادثة.

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