

Discourse Markers Used in EFL Teacher Talk: A Pragmatic Perspective

Endang Susilowati¹⁾, Zaenul Wafa²⁾

ABSTRACT

Discourse markers (DMs) play a pivotal role in teacher talk since they not only maintain the classroom interaction but also promote the learning efficiency. This article reports on a study aimed at investigating and examining features and functions of discourse markers used by an EFL teacher. This is a descriptive qualitative study within the frame of pragmatics. The data were derived from audio-video recordings gathered through direct observation. The audio-video recordings were transcribed and analyzed afterwards. In analyzing the data, Brinton's (2008) framework of DM features was employed to figure out the DM features and the taxonomy of pragmatic functions of DMs proposed by Fung and Carter (2007) was used to examine the functions of DMs. This study spotlights two major findings. Firstly, the discourse markers found are in the form of adverbs, conjunctions, lexical phrases, and fillers, with the five most frequent DMs used are 'OK', 'so', 'and then', 'now', 'and' and 'and'. Secondly, the discourse markers perform pragmatic functions, namely interpersonal function (checking progress, partitioning information, replaying to elicitors, seeking affirmation, and signifying acknowledgement), referential function (marking results or consequences), structural function (opening the topic/subject or adjusting the lecture mode, maintaining the students' attention, and smoothing shifts between activities), and cognitive function (denoting the thinking process). In short, the findings of this study might help to boost awareness of the pragmatic discourse markers for EFL teachers and learners.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, discourse markers, teacher talk*

Correspondent Authors;

- 1) Lecturer of Universitas An Nuur, endangsusilowati@unan.ac.id
- 2) Lecturer of Universitas An Nuur, zaenulwafa@unan.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

This study was carried out due to the significance of discourse markers in communication, as well as their pragmatic functions. Discourse markers, abbreviated as DMs, have become a fundamental issue in pragmatics, referring to the components of a discourse that represent procedural information. Previous studies indicate that DMs have functions in the classroom interaction. For example, Khurtina (2015) concludes that DMs can initiate students' talk by starting conversations, responding, ending conversations, changing a topic, showing

surprise, sharing knowledge, and managing explanations. Setiawan and Lestari (2017) also sum up that teachers utilized DMs to demonstrate comprehension, reinforce information, and encourage students to turn to argue. Hence, Karlina et al. (2015) suggest that English teachers be more conscious of the use of DMs in teacher talk.

As communication maintenance, DMs can occur at any point in an utterance. Yang (2011) states that DMs can be inserted wherever in the utterance that makes sense. Somehow, DMs are found in turn-initial positions to signal upcoming information. In line with that, Biber (2000, in Qianbo, 2016)

asserts that DMs are inserts that often appear at the beginning of a turn or speech, such as ‘okay’, ‘so’, ‘now’, ‘right’, and ‘well’. People regularly use these terms in their speech to keep communication flowing smoothly.

In pedagogical discourse, DMs are an important interactional aspect of classroom teacher-student conversations. Examining DMs in teacher talk is particularly beneficial since teacher talk is a crucial component of classroom interaction that serves two purposes: as linguistic input and as a tool for classroom control. Thus, teacher talk must be arranged appropriately to ensure coherence and cohesiveness. The use and functions of DMs as a key interactional feature in teacher talk can promote not only student engagement but also learning efficiency (Othman, 2010).

Furthermore, Muller (2005) claims that discourse markers contribute to the pragmatic meaning of utterances and hence play an important role in the speaker’s pragmatic competence. Thus, by understanding DMs pragmatically, we may learn about some of their intended uses, since they fulfil various discursive purposes, particularly in classroom interaction. They not only act as attention-getters (e.g. ‘okay’, ‘oh’, ‘so’, ‘now’) but also turn-taking signals (e.g. ‘okay’, ‘now’, ‘so’). Moreover, they mark the students’ agreement or response, such as ‘yes’, ‘right’, ‘yeah’, and ‘okay’

(Rongrong & Lixun, 2015).

However, in a pedagogical setting, studies on DMs in a classroom context generally focus on second language (L2) learners’ acquisition rather than teacher talk. The studies on DMs in teacher talk are under-documented (Rongrong & Lixun, 2015). The use and functions of DMs in classroom interactions have received little consideration. Hence, this study attempts to investigate and examine the occurrence and the functions of DMs employed by EFL teachers in teaching English. Following that, the researcher formulates two research problems: 1) How are discourse markers realized in EFL teacher talk? and 2) What are the pragmatic functions of the DMs used by the teacher?

Studies on Discourse Markers

There have been a number of scholars that conducted studies concerning on types and functions of discourse markers, such as Kanakri and Harahsheh (2013), Zhao (2014), Rabab’ah (2015), and Vickov and Jakupcevic (2017). The study by Kanakri and Harahsheh (2013) sought to explore the discourse function of the discourse markers in Jordanian-spoken Arabic. The data were gathered from 20 video-typed dyadic conversations in Jordanian Arabic. The conversations were transcribed and then converted into English. The study concludes that the adjective “?a: di” serves discursive functions, that its pragmatic meaning

depends on the situation's context, and that its translatability is culturally distinctive.

Moreover, in terms of textual function, in his study, Qianbo (2014) concludes that the use of DMs in speech communication might facilitate the hearer's search for optimal relevance of utterances and increase discourse coherence. They can be utilized by the speaker to assist the speaker in organizing information and triggering communicative situations. In addition, the textual role of DMs in conversation is to confine the hearer's interpretation of the utterances such that the hearer expends the least amount of processing work to obtain optimal relevance. Thus, DMs assist the listener in searching for optimal relevance and making the discourse a cohesive whole.

Related to the classroom talk, Rabab'ah (2015) investigated the use of three primary kinds of DMs in the classroom of 40 male Saudi EFL teachers in their classroom: additive, causative, and adversative DMs. The findings reveal that the three primary DM types were employed by the teachers; however, the additive DMs predominated. The findings also suggest that DMs served a variety of pragmatic functions, including deploying to represent a cause, demonstrating and the inclusion of new information, and expressing contrast, denial, and cancellation. Rabab'ah then concludes that the teachers should adapt their curricula so that DMs receive special attention.

The last, Vickov and Jakupcevic (2017) examined the use of discourse markers (DMs) in conversations between non-native (Croatian) EFL teachers' talks with primary and secondary school students. The study focused on the presence and frequency of DMs, but it also described the function distribution of the three most commonly realized DMs (OK, so, and). The study discovers no substantial variations in the patterns of DMs used in primary and secondary school students. The DMs reveal structural and interpersonal functions such as supporting coherence and encouraging classroom interaction.

Definitions, Features, and functions of Discourse Markers

Fraser (1999) defines discourse markers (DMs) as a sort of lexical expression signalling the link between the interpretations of the segment they introduce (S2) and the preceding segment (S1). Furthermore, Schiffrin (1987, as cited in Alami 2015) claims that DMs are consecutively dependent components that bracket units of talk. Moreover, Brinton (2008) describes DMs as phonologically short elements that have no referential meaning, but serve pragmatic or procedural functions. In short, discourse markers (DMs) are words and phrases with no referential meaning used to signpost discourse in speaking and writing.

Brinton (1996) postulates that DMs are

lexical items that are optional, difficult to translate, marginal in relation to word class, syntactically relatively free, devoid of lexical meanings, and lack of proportionate meanings or grammatical functions. Furthermore, he states that DMs are distinguished by their frequent usage in oral speech, the prevalence of initial clause position, high frequency of recurrence, and optional use. Brinton (2008) lists adverbs (frankly, well, okay), lexical phrases (you know, I mean), conjunctions (but, since, and), and filler words (oh, eum, hm) as common features of DMs.

A variety of experts have classified the roles of discourse markers. Croucher (2004) classifies DM functions into formal and informal functions. Brinton (2008), on the other hand, categorizes the functions of DMs into interpersonal functions and textual functions. Interpersonally, DMs are used subjectively to communicate attitude and interactively to develop closeness between speaker and addressee. Meanwhile, Textually, DMs are employed to indicate various types of boundaries (to commence or terminate a conversation or to induce a topic change) and to assist in turn-taking in oral discourse or chunking in written discourse. He highlights the importance of discourse markers in starting and ending a talk, indicating topic transitions, indicating new and old information, and constraining the relevance of adjacent utterances.

Moreover, the present study applies the DM functions taxonomy proposed by Fung and Carter (2007) since it deals with classroom discourse. The multifunctional framework of DMs developed by Fung and Carter is helpful because it supplies a descriptive model for analyzing DMs from a functional standpoint in classroom discourse. This model may thus be used to explore the use of DMs not only in non-native EFL students' spoken discourse but also in teacher talk. DMs are classified into four categories in this taxonomy: (1) *interpersonal* – indicating response, marking speaker's attitude; (2) *referential* – marking textual connections between verbal activities surrounding the DM; (3) *structural* – opening and closing of the topics, formulating, elaborating; and (4) *cognitive* – indicating the thinking process, reformulating, elaborating.

In short, Fung and Carter's (2007) defining criteria are consistent with the findings of two of the most widely referenced scholars in DM studies, including Croucher (2004), Muller (2005), and Brinton (2008).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method since it attempts to investigate and examine the features and functions of discourse markers used by an EFL teacher. The participant of this study was an English teacher teaching senior high

school students in one of the state senior high schools in Central Java. The data were gathered from audio-video recordings made during direct observation. The audio-video recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions were analyzed. In analyzing the data, Brinton's (2008) theory of DM features was applied to figure out the DM features and the taxonomy of pragmatic functions of DMs proposed by Fung and Carter (2007) was used to examine the functions of DMs. The data were analyzed in several steps: 1) reading the transcript of the classroom talk, 2) identifying the DMs 3) tabulating the DMs 4) examining the functions of discourse markers, and 6) interpreting the result.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study highlights two major findings based on the formulated research problems. Firstly, the discourse markers found in the teacher talk are in the form of adverbs, conjunctions, lexical phrases, and fillers, with the five most frequent DMs used are 'OK', 'so', 'and then', 'now', and 'and'. Secondly, the discourse markers perform pragmatic functions, namely interpersonal function (checking progress, partitioning information, replaying to elicitors, seeking affirmation, and signifying acknowledgement), referential function (marking results or consequences), structural function (starting and ending the topics or

adjusting the lecture mode, maintaining the students' attention, and smoothing shifts between activities), and cognitive function (denoting the thinking process).

1. Discourse markers and the features found in the teacher talk.

The employment of discourse markers found in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Discourse marker features used in the teacher talk

No	DMs	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Features
1.	OK	37	37	Adv./ Fill.
2.	So	18	18	Conj.
3.	And then	10	10	Conj.
4.	Now	9	9	Adv.
5.	And	3	3	Conj.
6.	eee	9	9	Fill.
7.	Also	2	2	Conj.
8.	For example	2	2	Lex. Phr.
9.	What is it	2	2	Lex. Phr.
10.	I know	2	2	Lex. Phr.
11.	Good	1	1	Adv.
12.	Very good	1	1	Adv.
13.	Hello	1	1	Adv.
14.	Because	1	1	Conj.
15.	But	1	1	Conj.
16.	First	1	1	Conj.
Total		100	100	

As displayed in Table 1, there are 100 discourse markers consisting of 16 types of words classified into adverbs, conjunctions, lexical phrases, and fillers. Moreover, the five most frequent DMs used are 'OK', 'so',

and ‘then’, ‘now’, and ‘and’. The discourse marker ‘OK’ appears most frequently with the number of occurrences 37 times (37%), followed by ‘so’ with 18 occurrences (18%), ‘and then’ with 10 occurrences (10%), ‘now’ with 9 occurrences (9%), and ‘and’ occurs 3 times (3%). This finding is almost similar with Vickov & Jakupcevic’s (2017) findings. In their study, they found that the four most dominant discourse markers used by teachers are ‘ok’, ‘so’, ‘and’, and ‘mhm/aha’. The two most dominant DMs of their study are in line with this current study; they are ‘OK’ and ‘so’. Furthermore, this study also supports Fung and Carter’s (2007) claim that such markers are typical of the classroom setting. Furthermore, the most often used discourse markers have functions as detailed in the subsequent section.

2. The pragmatic functions of the discourse markers

This present study includes the qualitative analysis of the five dominant markers ‘OK’, ‘so’, ‘and then’, ‘now’, and ‘and’ in order to answer the second research question about the pragmatic roles of the most often used DMs. Fung and Carter (2007) were used to analyze the functions. The outcomes are explained as follows.

1) OK

The DM ‘OK’ is the most common marker employed in the teacher talk. It appears 37 times in total. Marker ‘OK’ serves both structural and interpersonal roles. It

looked to offer the teacher with useful classroom management. Structurally, it is the most commonly used in this study as a sentence-initial position, starting the topic or adjusting the lecture mode, retaining the students’ attention, and smoothing transitions between activities. Excerpts E1 to E8 show the examples of discourse marker ‘OK’ used in the teacher talk. The letters T and Ss stand for ‘teacher’ and ‘students’ respectively.

[E1] T : “Ok, last week we discussed about?”

[E2] T : “Ok, I want to ask you about some parts or the structures of this letter”

[E3] T : “Ok, look at this slide.”

[E4] T : “any questions?”

Ss : “No.”

T : “Ok, you can write your application letter based on the example I’ve given to you.”

In example E1, pragmatically, the DM ‘OK’ functions as a sentence-initial position to start a topic or adjust a lecture mode as well as in E2. ‘OK’ is used to open a topic. Contextually, it happened at the beginning of the lesson, in which the teacher asked the students what materials they learned in the previous meeting. Then, in E3, the DM ‘OK’ is used to hold the students’ attention. The teacher uttered it in her talk when she wanted to have the student’s attention to look at the provided slide. Moreover, in E4, it is clearly shown that the DM ‘OK’ functions as a transition marker between activities. When

the teacher asked the students whether they had questions or not, and they answered “no”, she directly moved to the next activity (writing a letter). Thus, here, the DM ‘OK’ performs structural functions well.

Another finding related to the DM ‘OK’ is that it is commonly realized when combined with other DMs. To emphasize the topic shift/opening function, the DM ‘OK’ was usually followed by DM ‘now’ in this study.

[E5] T : “*OK, now* you can be with your friends beside and in front of you.”

[E6] T : “*OK, now* in pairs, you must arrange the application letter.”

Moreover, interpersonally, DM ‘OK’ is more widespread in this study. Using DM ‘OK’ in the sentence-final position with rising intonation serves to check progress or seek affirmation. The teacher uttered the DM not to expect an answer, but to ensure that they have the student’s attention and the students understand what the teacher intended to say.

[E7] T : “You can write in your paper, *ok?*”

In this case, the sentence-final position was employed almost like a fixed formulaic utterance, repeated after she gave instructions. This might be due to the teacher’s language tendencies, or it could be because the students are teenagers whose attention to be maintained.

Furthermore, ‘OK’ is also used to

indicate that students have spoken something. Here, ‘OK’ functions as a response marker, especially when the students are responding to questions. In this study, the teacher frequently repeated the students’ statements after hearing an answer, which is generally followed by an ‘OK’ response (see E8).

[E8] T : “Do you want to eat something?”

Ss : “Yes...”

T : “Yes? *Ok*, after you go home, you can eat something.”

To wrap up, ‘OK’ was the most repeated marker with occurrence 37 times (37%). This DM performs two pragmatic functions: structural and interpersonal. Structurally, ‘OK’ functions as a sentence-initial position, to open the topic, adjust the lecture mode, retain the students’ attention, move between activities smoothly, and highlight the topic shift/opening. Interpersonally, the DM ‘OK’ serves to check progress or seek affirmation and acknowledgement of the student’s responses. Finally, the use of ‘OK’ is significantly impacted by a variety of circumstances, including individual teaching styles and kind of classroom activity.

2) So

There are 18 occurrences (18%) of the DM ‘so’ out of the total number 100. This is consistent with Fung and Carter’s (2007) pedagogical sub-corpus of CANCODE, where ‘so’ is also the second most common

DM. This study reveals that pragmatically DM 'so' has referential and structural roles. Firstly, DM 'so' was employed as a referential marker to indicate a result or consequence (as in excerpt E9).

[E9] T : "I'll give you the worksheet, *so* you just need to complete."

Pragmatically, the example indicates that the teacher provided referential information as a reference to her prior utterances. Although it is the primary role of DM 'so', it did not frequently occur in the teacher talk.

Secondly, 'so' frequently happens as a structural function in many ways such as to help the discourse structure and specific moves, for instance, to open the topic/subject or to indicate the topic shift (as in E10 and E11).

[E10] T : "*So*, today we're going to study application letters."

[E11] T : "*So*, after this, I will give the example."

Another frequent function of 'so' is to preface a summary (as in E12 and E13)

[E12] T : "*So*, the vacancy is for teachers."

[E13] T : "*So*, we will sum up our today's materials."

Both examples above show that the teacher used DM 'so' to summarize or conclude the materials or information that she had given previously.

Furthermore, DM 'so' is also used to preface a question or an instruction. For

examples:

[E14] T : "*So*, there are lots of circles, what is it in the middle?"

[E15] T : "*So*, you analyze the parts of the letter."

In addition, DM 'so' is sometimes combined with other DMs, such as 'OK' and now as found in this study. The examples taken from the data are as follows.

[E16] T : "OK, *so*, there are lots of jobs."

[E17] T : "*So*, now we're talking about?"

To summarize, DM 'so' is frequently realized the structural function, in which it is used to help the organization of the discourse and specific moves, such as to open a new topic or to indicate a topic shift. Furthermore, 'so' also reflects the referential functions used to mark a result or consequence.

3) And then

The third most frequent DM found in this study is 'and then' with occurrence 10 times (10%). Pragmatically, DM 'and then' reveals referential, structural, and cognitive functions. As a referential function, 'and then' mark a result or consequence that the teacher gave a reference of her previous utterance (see E18).

[E18] T : "I will give you papers, *and then* you must make groups"

Structurally, 'and then' is used to indicate continuity (see E19) and to elaborate information (coordinating devices) (as in E20). This use is widespread as it helps the

teachers to maintain the turn when required.

[E19] T : We discussed about offering help, right? *And then* today we're going to study application letters."

[E20] T : "You can see an engineer there, and then you also see a librarian."

In a similar sense, the teacher also used DM 'and then' to address questions, indicating that further information on a topic is needed. Furthermore, it was also used to elaborate a topic from students, making it beneficial in conversational aspects of lessons. For example:

[E21] T : "*And then*, the right side is..."

In this situation, the teacher expected the student's answer by stating an incomplete sentence. Pragmatically, it is a question that should be answered by the students.

Finally, as a cognitive DM, the speaker can employ 'and then' to indicate the thinking process, such as in E22.

[E22] T : "And then... the right side?"

In the real situation, the teacher uttered the DM and then with a short pause, meaning that she was thinking about what to utter next.

In conclusion, pragmatic DM 'and then' reveals to signify consequence or referential mark (referential function), to denote continuity or to add new information, to preface questions, and to seek information (structural function), and to denote thinking process (cognitive function).

4) Now

'Now' is the fourth most common discourse marker identified in this study. It was mentioned 9 times (9%) in the teacher talk. DM 'OK' serves both structural and interpersonal purposes. The teacher's utterances of 'now' are almost similar to the DM 'OK'. It looked to be an effective classroom control tool for the teacher. Structurally, it is most typically utilized as a sentence-initial position, to open a topic or to adjust the lecture mode (see E23), to retain the students' attention (as in E24), and to move one activity to another more smoothly.

[E23] T : "*Now* in pairs, you must arrange the application letter."

[E24] T : "*Now*, you can come back to your seat."

[E25] T : "*Now*, I will give you papers anymore."

Literally, the word 'now' means present time. However, pragmatically, it has various interpretations as mentioned earlier; attention-getter, transition, shifting, etc. Another finding related to the DM, as mentioned earlier, 'now' is that it is commonly combined with other DMs. In this study, contrarily with DM 'OK', the DM 'now' commonly followed 'OK' to highlight the topic shift/opening (see example E26) or 'so' to denote summary (as in E27).

[E26] T : "OK, *now* the third bubble."

[E27] T : "So, *now* we're talking about?"

5) And

The fifth frequently discourse marker or as the last DM discussed here is DM ‘and’ with the occurrence 3 (3%). In this study, the findings show that DM ‘and’ performed structural function. Structurally, and is used to indicate continuity (as in E28 and E29) and to add new information as a coordinating device (see E30).

[E28] T : “*And* next number, you.”

[E29] T : “*And* I give you about ten minutes.”

[E30] T : “So, today we’re going to study about application letters, *and* you have done this.”

After all, although lacking the variety of functions presented by ‘OK’, ‘so’, ‘now’, ‘and’ and, ‘and then’, the DMs were implemented diversely by the teacher, proving that it is a highly helpful classroom management tool.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

In this present study, an attempt was made to shed additional light on the pragmatic use of discourse markers used by an EFL teacher. This study found 16 types of words implied as discourse markers, classified into adverbs, conjunctions, lexical phrases, and fillers. Moreover, the five most frequent DMs used are ‘OK’, ‘so’, ‘and then’, ‘now’, and ‘and’. The discourse marker ‘OK’ appears as frequently used, followed by ‘so’, ‘and then’, ‘now’, and ‘and’.

Furthermore, the discourse markers

serve structural, interpersonal, referential, and cognitive functions. Structurally, the five most frequently used discourse markers serve to open a topic/subject or to adjust the lecture mode, to retain the students’ attention, and to shift between activities smoothly. Referentially, the DMs function to mark a result or consequence. Interpersonally, the DMs serve to check the progress, to split information, to respond to elicitors, to seek affirmation, and to signify acknowledgement. The last, cognitively, the DMs function to denote the thinking process.

In summary, the findings of this study might help to boost awareness of the pragmatic functions of DMs, which may facilitate non-native EFL teachers in their overall lesson organization and structuring of specific teaching segments.

REFERENCES

- Alami, M. (2015). Pragmatic functions of discourse markers: A review of related literature. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 3(3), 1-10.
- Brinton, L. (2008). *The comment clause in English syntactic origins and pragmatic developments (Studies in English Language)*. CUP.
- Croucher, S.M. (2004). Like, you know, what I'm saying: A study of discourse marker frequency in extemporaneous and impromptu speaking. *National*

- Forensic Journal*, 22(2-3), 38-47.
- Fraser, B. (1999). What are discourse markers? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31(7), 931-952.
- Fung, L., & Carter, R. (2007) 'Discourse markers and spoken English: native and learner use in pedagogical settings', *Applied Linguistics*, 28(3) pp.410-439
- Kanakri, M. A., & Al-Harashsheh, A. M. (2013). The discourse analysis and pragmatics of? a: di in Jordanian spoken Arabic. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 3(6), 59.
- Müller, S. (2005). *Discourse markers in native and non-native English discourse*.
- Othman, Z. (2010). The use of okay, right and yeah in academic lectures. *Discourse Studies*, 12, 665-681
- Qianbo. L. (2016). A case study on the pragmatic use of discourse markers. *Canadian Social Science*, 12 (1). Pp. 106-113.
- Rabab'ah, G. (2015). An analysis of conjunctive discourse markers in the EFL classroom: a case study of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. *Int. J. Innovation and Learning*, 17 (3), pp. 307-325.
- Rongrong, D., & Lixun, W. (2015). Discourse markers in local and native English teachers' talk in Hong Kong EFL classroom interaction: A corpus-based study. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 2(5), 65-75.
- Setiyawan, R., & Lestari, S. (2017). Engaging students' attention by using discourse makers: study of lecturer-students interaction in English class discussion. In *Proceedings Education and Language International Conference* (Vol. 1, No. 1). 665-681.
- Vickov, G. & Jakupcevic, E. (2017). Discourse markers in non-native EFL teacher talk. *SSLT*, 7(4), pp. 649-671
- Yang, S. (2011). Investigating discourse markers in pedagogical settings: literature review. *ARECLS*, 8, 95-108.
- Zhao, H. (2014). The textual function of discourse markers under the framework of relevance theory. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4 (10), pp. 2105-2113.