

The Pedagogical Influence of Interpersonal and Cognitive Discourse Markers on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Abstract—This study attempts to determine whether the recognition and interpretation of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers will enhance students' listening comprehension ability in authentic situations. Students were tested to determine their comprehension of content information in audio-taped conversations. After the treatment period of ten weeks, where the experimental group received strategy training in the recognition and interpretation of discourse markers in spoken discourse, both groups were again tested. Their results were statistically compared. The findings have pedagogical implications for material designers, teachers, and teacher trainers.

Index Terms—cognitive discourse markers, interpersonal discourse markers, listening comprehension

I. INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that effective listening comprehension skills are vital for students to achieve success (Benson, 1994; Retief, 1995) while the other language skills often receive direct instructional attention, lecturers or speakers usually expect students to develop their listening capabilities without help. (Mendelsohn, 1998).

Much of the students' ability to make sense of audio text or spoken lecture may be because of the fact that they only listen to the words and concentrate on understanding the grammar of the language used, rather than focusing on the message conveyed by the speaker.

Louwerse and Mitchell (2003) consider discourse markers as “conversational glue that participants effectively use to hold the dialog together at different communicative levels.”

Discourse markers are expressed and shown in italics in the following sentences:

1. A: I like him. B: *So*, you think you'll ask him out then.
2. John can't go. *And* Mary can't go either.
3. Will you go? *Furthermore*, will you represent the class there?
4. Sue left very late. *But* she arrived on time.
5. I think it will fly. *After all*, we built it right.

Discourse markers have been called sentence connectives (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), discourse particles (Goldberg, 1980), utterance particles (Lucke, 1987),

Semantic conjuncts, pragmatic expression (Erman, 1987), discourse operators (Redeker, 1990) continuatives (Romero Trillo, 2002), etc.

Schiffrin (1987) suggests that the markers in her research serve as contextual coordinates for utterances by locating them on one or more planes of talk and maintains that coherence is constructed through relations between adjacent units in discourse by virtue of their semantic and syntactic properties.

Fraser (1999) suggests that discourse markers are conjunctions, adverbs and propositional phrases that connect two sentences or clauses together.

A. Significance of the Study

In contrast to the extensive research on reading, few researches have been carried out to explore the role of teaching discourse markers in second language listening. Discourse markers guide hearer in the recognition of coherence relations. Coherence in discourse can be achieved by different means. Coherence relations are partly responsible for the coherence of the text.

B. Statement of the Problem

The main issue in this paper is whether intermediate EFL learners can benefit from explicit instruction in the recognition and interpretation of discourse markers in spoken lectures or audio texts.

Some researchers have investigated the features of lectures or speeches that might aid L2 learners' comprehension..

C. Research Question

The following question is going to be posed in this study:

- Will students' listening comprehension improve if they are made aware of discourse markers by explicit teaching?

D. Null Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant difference between listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students who learned discourse markers explicitly and those who didn't learn discourse markers.

H₀₂: There is no statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL students' command of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers and their listening comprehension ability.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

A. Discourse Markers and Listening Comprehension

Previous researches have indicated that L2 listeners often have difficulties in following the structure of a text for a gist comprehension. Even though, sometimes they have no lexical obstacle at all.

Identifying and understanding of a certain complicated phenomenon requires the identification and exploration of the components and blocks which constitute it. In order to comprehend spoken language, the listener has a crucial part to play in the process.

In order to achieve a coherent interpretation of speech, the listener needs to grasp the "network of concepts and semantic relations underlying the surface text" (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981, as cited in Thompson 1994).

Listening further calls for evaluation, acceptance, or rejection, internalization and sometimes also appreciation of the ideas expressed and all languages present the listener with difficulties in the form of "acoustic blurring of lexical boundaries in connected speech" (Lynch, 1998, p.3).

Some of the factors which affect the ease or difficulty of tasks for the L2 listener are a fusion of the type of language heard, the content in which listening occurs and the task or purpose of listening (Anderson & Lynch, 1988).

So far the emphasis has been firmly on oral discourse, as reflected in the following dictionary definition. Special attention has been focused on discourse markers-sequentially dependent elements which demarcate units of speech, such as *oh, well, I mean*" (Crystal, 1997). The term is somewhat specialized and not easily defined, but may include not only (a) conjunction (e.g. *and, but, or, because, etc.*) but also (b) words outside the main syntax, such as *oh, well, you see, I mean, etc.* Words and phrases in this second group are sometimes labeled FILLERS or pragmatic particles (Chalker & Weiner, 1994).

It appears that the omnibus term "discourse marker" can be correctly and usefully applied to both spoken and written language although many linguists prefer to reserve "discourse" for the former. Of course, this is beyond denial that different types of discourse markers may be used in oral and written discourse (Schiffrin, 1987).

During the last two decades, analysis of discourse markers has occupied a large space in the pragmatics. Discourse markers have been considered from a variety of approaches, like signaling a "sequential relationship" between utterances (Fraser, 1999) as making discourse coherence (Schiffrin, 1987) and from a relevance- theoretic point of view (Anderson, 2001).

Müller states "there is a general agreement that discourse markers contribute to the pragmatic meaning of utterances and thus play an important role in the pragmatic competence of speaker" (Müller, 2004).

Crystal (1988) tends to think of [pragmatic expressions] as the oil which helps us to perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and interaction smoothly and efficiently.

According to Lenk (1998:2) "studies that investigate pragmatic markers often focus more on the interactional aspects between the participants that are expressed through the use of particles."

To Fraser, discourse markers are a type of commentary pragmatic marker which signals a sequential discourse relationship. In other words, discourse markers "impose a relationship between some aspect of the discourse segment they are a part of, and some aspect of a prior discourse segment" (Fraser, 1999, p. 938). In short, they "signal how the speaker intends the basic message that follows to relate to the prior discourse" (Fraser, 1999, p. 387).

Schiffrin (1987) points out that although markers often precede sentences, they are independent of sentential structure. Removal of a marker from its sentence initial position leaves the sentence structure intact. Furthermore, several markers-*you know, I mean, oh, like* -can quite occur freely within a sentence at locations which are very difficult to define syntactically.

An assumption which plays an important role for this research is that discourse markers are multifunctional and they serve a number of sub-functions.

Thus, the aim of this study is to gain insight on the effects of interpersonal vs. cognitive discourse markers on listening comprehension.

Recall that both Schiffrin and Brinton recognize the two-fold function of discourse markers, in that, there are those which contribute to the textual mode of a language, and those which contribute to the interpersonal mode of language (Brinton, 1996, Schiffrin, 2003).

Neither researcher has *explicitly* claimed that a discourse marker could function in both a textual (connective) and interpersonal (epistemic) function *simultaneously*.

B. Characteristics of Interpersonal Discourse Markers

- Making Shared Knowledge

On the interpersonal dimension, verbs of perception such as *see*, *listen*, *know* are often used as discourse markers for making shared knowledge between the speakers.

Example: *see* that was the problem because I thought yeah just and then sort of the idea will have to be thrown out.

The verb *see* acts as a discourse marker here and starts as an utterance launcher to orientate and draw the attention of the listener to the upcoming utterance. It occurs in turn-initial position and signals that what follows is an explanation of what has preceded.

Schiffrin also showed that the marker *well* (an interpersonal marker because it contributes an attitude toward a proposition) may be multifunctional, since it may “convey the fulfillment of a conversational obligation, for example, an answer to a question [displaying a participation framework], at the same time that it conveys speaker attitude, for example, distance from a proposition [realizing an action]”

(Schiffrin, 1987; Schiffrin, 2003:459).

- Indicating Attitudes

A common discourse marker used to express attitude in many conversational exchanges is *well*.

C. Characteristics of Cognitive Discourse Markers

- Denoting Thinking Process

Discourse markers provide information concerning cognitive processes. For example, *well* is frequently used as a delaying tactic to denote thinking process when an answer is not immediately available.

- Reformulation

Speakers in real speech are under time constraints to structure and formulate their ideas. Discourse markers are therefore used to allow sufficient for speakers to reformulate, self-correct or repair their utterance.

One common discourse marker used to mark this purpose is *I mean*. It marks the speakers' reformulation or modification of his/her prior ideas or intentions (Schiffrin, 1987).

- Elaboration

Similarly, the discourse markers *like* and *I mean* are used to elaborate and modify the existing propositional meaning to make clear the intention of the speaker. Schiffrin (1987) claims that *I mean* is used to modify the speakers' own ideas and intentions.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects

A total of 100 male and female Iranian EFL learners aged between 18 and 30, with Persian as their mother tongue, were chosen in this study from several language institutes in Esfahan. A Nelson Proficiency Test was administered to homogenize the students. Those students whose scores were in the range of one SD (standard deviation) above and below the mean (\bar{X}) will be chosen for the experimental and control groups.

TABLE 1.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR NELSON PROFICIENCY TEST

Statistics Nelson Test for Homogenizing		
N	Valid	100
	Missing	0
Mean		55.61
Std. Error of Mean		1.553
Median		57.00
Mode		57 ^a
Std. Deviation		15.529
Variance		241.149
Minimum		26
Maximum		88
Sum		5561

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

B. Instruments

The researchers applied Preliminary English listening Test (PET) for both groups to determine whether there would be any statistically significant difference in the listening abilities of the experimental and control groups before the treatment.

To minimize the necessity for written answers, the test format consisted of marking right answers in the multiple-choice questions.

The result of the subjects gave an indication of their listening comprehension proficiency before starting the treatment.

To establish whether the experimental group had improved significantly from the ten-week treatment, both groups of students were tested at the end of the experiment using the same PET listening test as in the pre-test. The results were statistically analyzed and compared with the previous test.

C. Treatment

The treatment consisted of a ten-week program starting directly after the pre-test was administered. The subjects in the experimental group were trained in the recognition and interpretation of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers used in conversations and lectures.

The treatment program consisted of conversations from *Tactics for listening* and *select readings* audio-tape which involved interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers like *you know, I mean, you see, right, oh,...*

The researchers classified all the interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers into groups for the experimental group and taught each group in each session. The researchers played the audio-taped conversations to both groups in the same venue and at the same time of day but on different days. The researchers, however, tried to keep all the environmental variables as similar as possible. The listening texts of treatment played for the students, after each part, the researchers allowed the students 5 minutes to take notes and answer the questions.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

With regard to the objectives of the present investigation, the research null hypotheses addressed in this study are as follows:

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant difference between listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students who learned discourse markers explicitly and those who didn't learn discourse markers.

H₀₂: There is no statistically significant relationship between Iranian intermediate EFL students' command of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers and their listening comprehension ability.

With regard to the null hypotheses posed for this research, an attempt was made to reject them at .05 probability level. To do so, the results of the subjects' performance on the two sets of tests (pre-test and post-test) had to be compared. If the comparison indicated that their performance differed significantly, the researchers would be able to claim that there is an impact of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers on listening comprehension ability. Therefore, the results of the performance of the subjects on the two tests were compared by using the t-test.

The results of the pre-test for the performance of 60 subjects are displayed in table 2.

TABLE 2.
THE RESULTS OF THE PRE-TEST FOR THE SUBJECTS IN BOTH GROUPS

Pre-test for the Control Group				Pre-test for the Experimental Group			
		Frequency	Percent			Frequency	Percent
Valid	5	2	6.7	Valid	3	1	3.3
	7	1	3.3		5	1	3.3
	9	2	6.7		9	2	6.7
	10	4	13.3		11	2	6.7
	11	2	6.7		13	1	3.3
	12	4	13.3		15	3	10.0
	13	3	10.0		16	3	10.0
	14	3	10.0		17	4	13.3
	15	2	6.7		18	2	6.7
	16	2	6.7		19	1	3.3
	17	3	10.0		20	3	10.0
	19	2	6.7		21	1	3.3
Total		30	100.0	22	2	6.7	
				23	1	3.3	
				25	1	3.3	
				26	2	6.7	
				Total		30	100.0

Table 2 shows that the performance of all the 60 students (in both groups) have been considered to see if the students' listening comprehension ability is the same or not. Table 3 presents the other results of two randomly selected groups.

TABLE 3.
THE FURTHER RESULTS OF THE PRE-TEST FOR THE SUBJECTS IN BOTH GROUPS

Statistics			Statistics		
Pre-test for the Control Group			Pre-test for the Experimental Group		
N	Valid	30	N	Valid	30
	Missing	0		Missing	0
Mean		12.57	Mean		11.70
Std. Error of Mean		.667	Std. Error of Mean		.711
Median		12.50	Median		12.00
Mode		10 ^a	Mode		12
Std. Deviation		3.655	Std. Deviation		3.897
Variance		13.357	Variance		15.183
Range		14	Range		15
Minimum		5	Minimum		4
Maximum		19	Maximum		19
Sum		377	Sum		351

Table 2 shows that the performance of subjects in two groups (experimental and control group) did not differ significantly. This means that the two means(x) obtained for each group are approximately equal.

The difference between the two groups was not statistically significant and the two groups were almost the same.

In Table 4 we will have the primary results gained from the performance of the two groups (experimental and control) on the post-test of the listening comprehension.

TABLE 4.
THE RESULTS OF THE POST-TEST FOR THE SUBJECTS IN BOTH GROUPS

Post-test for the Control Group				Post-test for the Experimental Group			
		Frequency	Percent			Frequency	Percent
Valid	4	1	3.3	Valid	3	1	3.3
	5	1	3.3		5	1	3.3
	8	3	10.0		9	2	6.7
	9	2	6.7		11	2	6.7
	10	4	13.3		13	1	3.3
	12	3	10.0		15	3	10.0
	13	3	10.0		16	3	10.0
	14	5	16.7		17	4	13.3
	16	2	6.7		18	2	6.7
	17	2	6.7		19	1	3.3
	18	1	3.3		20	3	10.0
	19	2	6.7		21	1	3.3
21	1	3.3	22	2	6.7		
Total		30	100.0	23	1	3.3	
				25	1	3.3	
				26	2	6.7	
				Total		30	100.0

Table5reveals further results gained from comparing the two groups on the post-test of listening comprehension.

TABLE 5.
THE FURTHER RESULTS OF THE POST-TEST FOR THE SUBJECTS IN BOTH GROUPS

Post-test for the Control Group			Post-test for the Experimental Group		
N	Valid	30	N	Valid	30
	Missing	0		Missing	0
Mean		12.63	Mean		16.73
Std. Error of Mean		.760	Std. Error of Mean		1.034
Median		13.00	Median		17.00
Mode		14	Mode		17
Std. Deviation		4.165	Std. Deviation		5.663
Variance		17.344	Variance		32.064
Range		17	Range		23
Minimum		4	Minimum		3
Maximum		21	Maximum		26
Sum		379	Sum		502

Table 5 indicates that the performance of the subjects (experimental group and control group) on the post-test of listening comprehension differed significantly, especially the students in the experimental group gained better scores than students in the control group.

The evidence presented in the Table 5 leads us to the next part of the study, to determine whether or not teaching interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers has any statistically significant effect on EFL learners' listening comprehension.

TABLE 6.
THE RESULTS OF THE T-TEST FOR THE CONTROL GROUP

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Scores for Pre-test and Post-test in Control Group	Equal variances assumed	.511	.477	-.066	58	.948	-.067	1.012	-2.092	1.958
	Equal variances not assumed			-.066	57.038	.948	-.067	1.012	-2.092	1.959

Table 6 is the results of T-test for comparing the listening scores of the students who weren't taught interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers (pre-test for the control group) and (post-test for the control group).

Independent sample T-test

P> .05 =It does not shows significant difference. (sig.2-tailed)

This table provides enough criteria for the rejection of the null hypothesis of this study. Therefore, we can safely claim that there is no statistically significant difference between the subjects' performance in pre – and post-test in control group who were not taught interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers.

Table 7 depicts the results of T-test for comparing the listening scores of the students who were taught interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers (post-test for the experimental group)and those who weren't(pre-test for experimental group).

TABLE 7.
THE RESULTS OF THE T-TEST FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Independent sample test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.142	.149	-4.011	58	.000	-5.033	1.255	-7.545	-2.521
Equal variances not assumed			-4.011	51.434	.000	-5.033	1.255	-7.552	-2.514

P< .05 =It shows significant difference. (sig.2-tailed)

Table 7 provides enough criteria for the rejection of the null hypothesis of this study. Therefore, we can safely claim that teaching interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers explicitly has improved the subjects' listening comprehension.

The last part of study is comparing the results of the subjects' performance on the post-test of listening comprehension between two groups.

TABLE 8.
THE RESULTS OF THE POST-TEST FOR BOTH GROUPS

Group Statistics					
	Post-test for Control and Experimental Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Post-test for Control Group	30	12.63	4.165	.760
	Post-test for Experimental Group	30	16.73	5.663	1.034

Table 9 shows the results of the T-test for comparing the listening scores of the students who were not taught interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers (post-test for control group) and who were taught (post-test for experimental group)

TABLE 9.
THE RESULTS OF THE T-TEST FOR THE POST-TEST BETWEEN TWO GROUPS

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Scores	Equal variances assumed	1.283	.262	-3.195	58	.002	-4.100	1.283	-6.669	-1.531
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.195	53.271	.002	-4.100	1.283	-6.674	-1.526

P < .05 = It shows significant difference. (sig. 2-tailed)

As Table 9 tells us, we can conclude that the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, the subjects in the experimental group who were made aware of the role of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers in spoken discourse and conversations performed better than the subjects in the control group. Moreover, the difference is statistically significant. This is a good reason for the claim that command over discourse markers can promote listening comprehension ability of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

The most crucial findings of this study are as follows:

First, the results of the groups differed significantly in the post-test, showing that the explicit teaching had had a constructive utility on the listening comprehension ability of the subjects in the experimental group.

Second, the post-test – pre-test improvement showed a significant difference between the scores of the two groups as the experimental groups' scores indicated significant improvement but the control group's not.

Last but not least, the experimental group improved significantly in the post-test. The results in both the pre- and post-test of the control group remained very similar.

The findings of this study reject the theories proposed by Chaudron and Richards (1986) and Dunkle and Davis (1994) who claimed that discourse markers had no positive effect on listening comprehension.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of the study suggested that students could benefit from language training programs. It seemed clear that the subjects in the treatment program had learned how to listen, instead of just listened to learn.

In this study, it appeared that the ability to interpret interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers employed by the speaker, enabled the EFL learners to form a global impression of the text as well as determine different stages of transition and emphasis, as was reflected by discourse markers.

There was a treatment in which the researchers raised the EFL learners' awareness of the role of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers in the structuring of conversations.

In the pre-test, the researchers tested the existing listening comprehension of both the experimental and control groups before any kind of treatment.

The final results showed that there is a significant relationship between the subjects' listening ability and their knowledge of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers. So, the null hypotheses were rejected. The findings of this paper also have wider implications within the content of listening in English to other speakers of other languages.

Practical implications of this paper propose that our findings may be used to determine instructional actions to be undertaken in different teaching contexts.

EFL learners should be made aware of the presence, importance, and facilitating impacts of interpersonal and cognitive discourse markers for listening comprehension. From the textual viewpoint, EFL learners can be asked to identify examples of frame markers previews and then predict content. Attention to logical connectives will help students analyze the writer's/speaker's line of reasoning and rhetorical strategies.

On the interpersonal level, EFL learners can look for hedges, boosters, and first person pronouns and reflect on why the speaker has chosen to use these features.

Pedagogically speaking, the language teachers can deal with authentic units of language by focusing on the organization of the materials used for the teaching of this skill. Furthermore, discourse markers can be viewed as a component of language along with sounds, words, structure, and meaning.

Although the main function of language is seen to be communicating ideas, it is through language that interpersonal convergence (and, although more rarely, divergence) is achieved. Discourse markers, which constitute an aspect of pragmatic competence that underlies one's ability to use language in culturally, socially, and situationally appropriate

ways, are useful conversational devices, not just for maintaining discourse cohesiveness and communicative effectiveness, but also for interpersonal interaction (Wierzbicka, 1991)

This study proposes a need to strengthen learners' pragmatic competence in spoken language by creating space to enhance their use of discourse markers. (as cited in Fung & Carter, 2007)

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