

# The Discourse Markers Used by Chinese English Majors in Guangxi Normal University

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## 1 Introduction

In this study I will elaborate on the application of discourse markers to English examination papers produced by Chinese English majors. There have been a lot of terms used to refer to discourse markers. Among them are discourse marker (Schiffrin 1987), pragmatic marker (Fraser 1996), discourse particle (Schourup 1985), pragmatic particle (Ostman 1981), pragmatic expression (Erman 1987) or connectives (Blakemore 1987). Every definition about terms of discourse markers reflects different attitudes to the question of the uniformity or fuzziness of the class of discourse markers.

My conclusion about discourse markers, discussed in detail below, is a wide one. It encompasses over 83 types of discourse markers commonly used by three grades of English majors in Guangxi Normal University.

## 2 Literature review

Hölker (1991) lists four basic features that characterize discourse markers (or pragmatic markers, as he calls them). (1) They do not affect the truth conditions of an utterance; (2) they do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance; (3) they are related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about; (4) they have an emotive, expressive function rather than a referential, denotative, or cognitive function. The first two of these features are semantic in nature, the third is pragmatic and the fourth is functional.

(Swan 1980) divided the discourse markers into the following categories.

- 1 Linking: talking about, with reference to
- 2 Focusing: regarding, as regards, as far as
- 3 Structuring:
  - a Divisions: first, second, third, finally, first of all, to begin with, to start with, in the first place, for one thing, for another thing, another thing is, moreover, in addition, similarly, as well as that, on top of that, besides
  - b Contrast with what came before: all the same, yet, and yet, still, on the other hand, however
  - c Logical consequence: thus, therefore, so
  - d Exemplifying and excepting: for instance, for example, such as, including, in particular, apart from, excepting, with the exception of, and so on, and so forth
  - e Generalizing: on the whole, in general, as a rule, in most cases, in many cases, broadly speaking, to some extent, mostly
  - f Clarifying: I mean, that is to say, in other words
- 4 Dismissal of previous discourse: at any rate, anyway, anyhow
- 5 Change of subject: by the way, incidentally, I say
- 6 Showing our attitude to what we are saying: frankly, honestly, I think, I feel, I suppose, I mean
- 7 Showing one's attitude to the other person: after all, no doubt, I'm afraid
- 8 Referring to the other person's expectations: actually, in fact, as a matter of fact, to tell the truth

## 3. The present study

In this study, the priority will not be put on how to explain the semantic, pragmatic and functional meaning of the discourse markers as many studies have done. The question I address in this study is trying to find the characteristics of English majors of different grades in Guangxi Normal University with regard to the use of the discourse markers in their timed English examination papers. The study will be focused mainly on the following features:

What are common discourse markers used by the first, second and third grade English major university students in their timed examination essays in English?

What are discourse markers seldom used by different grades of Chinese English major university students?

What are the differences and similarities of discourse markers used by different grades of Chinese English major university students?

What is the correlation coefficient among the first, second and the third graders with regard to the use of discourse markers?

#### 4 Method

45 English major university students recruited in Guangxi Normal University are selected to be subjects of this study at random with 15 students each in first, second and third grades respectively. (The reason why I did not choose the fourth graders to be my research subjects is that English compositions classes are mainly given to the students from the first grade to the third grade.)

Requirement of timed English essays

The composition must be finished in 40 minutes. The numbers of letters and characters are restricted to at least 120. There is no upper limit to the numbers of letters and characters.

The title of the English essay is "Marriage on Campus: Pros and Cons"

#### 5 Data Analysis and Conclusion

It is easy to note that the first grade English majors seldom use some types of discourse markers such as: *however, considering, in my point of view, no doubt, besides, moreover, therefore, fourth, in fact, fifth, sixth, in conclusion, I do not think, in another word, normally, not...but, here, as, furthermore, as a result, in my mind, on the contrary, after all.*

It is to be noticed that the second grade English majors rarely use the following discourse markers: *to begin with, actually, in all, what's more, above all, conversely, naturally, to some degree, as long as, to some extent, so that, that is to say, in addition, if so, in conclusion, then, in fact, hence, now, as for, no doubt, as we know, in short, only if, once, also.*

We realize that the following discourse markers are not familiar to the third grade English majors: *besides, finally, to sum up, it is certain, as far as I am concerned, meanwhile, furthermore, in contrast, in fact, thus, yet, the last, but not the least, all in all, that is to say, once, in some cases, in other words, generally speaking, as long as, no matter, also, personally, in my point of view, what is more, at the same time, in sum, fourth.* As stated above, it is accountable for English writing teachers to pay attention to the weak points of discourse markers usage by three grades of English majors and hence to spend much more time to explain how to correctly use discourse markers mentioned above in their future writing teaching activities.

We come to a conclusion that 20 types of discourse markers are often used in timed English essays composed by three grades of English majors. Because the 20 types of discourse markers are most frequently used in textbooks of junior and senior high school, it is natural to deduce the reason why three grades of English majors can use them excellently in their English essays.

It is easy to find that 83 types of discourse markers are used in 45 timed English essays made by three grades of English majors and all three graders on average only use the following discourse markers once in their English essays: *considering, sixth normally, not...but, here, to sum up, that is to say, it is certain, as far as I am concerned, meanwhile, in contrast, thus, yet, the last, but not the least, in some cases, generally speaking, no matter, personally, actually, above all, conversely, naturally, to some degree, as long as, to some extent, so that, that is to say, if so, hence, as for, in short, only if.*

Through the analysis of data collected, we are driven to the following conclusion. According to the correlation coefficient test taken by SPSS 12.0J for windows, there are significant relations among the three

grades of English majors regarding the use of 83 kinds of discourse markers in their English examination papers. It means the correlation between the first and the second graders is the strongest, with the correlation coefficient of 0.757 and the significant rate being 0.000. The correlation between the second and third graders is the second strongest, with the correlation coefficient of 0.727 and the significant rate being 0.000. Finally the correlation between the first and third graders is the weakest, with the Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.484 and the significant rate being 0.008, however, concerning the use of 20 kinds of discourse markers used by all three graders, I recognized that there is a strong correlation between the first and second graders, and the second and third graders at 1% significant difference while the correlation between the first and third graders appears at 5% significant difference.

The correlation coefficient between the first graders and second graders in using discourse markers is shown in table 1 (\*\* means the correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 1%.)

Table 1

	The first graders	The second graders
The first graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	1	.757 **
Significant rate (two sides)		.000
N	42	26
The second graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	.757 **	1
Significant rate (two sides)	.000	
N	26	48

The correlation coefficient between the second graders and third graders in using discourse markers is shown in table 2. (\*\* means the correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 1%.)

Table 2

	The second graders	The third graders
The second graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	1	.727 **
Significant rate (two sides)		.000
N	48	29
The third graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	.727 **	1
Significant rate (two sides)	.000	
N	29	55

The correlation coefficient between the first graders and third graders in using discourse markers is shown in table 3. (\*\* means the correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 1%.)

Table 3

	The first graders	The third graders
The first graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	1	.484 **
Significant rate (two sides)		.008
N	42	29
The third graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	.484 **	1
Significant rate (two sides)	.008	
N	29	55

The correlation coefficient between the first graders and second graders in using 20 common kinds of discourse markers is shown in table 4. (\* \* means the correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 1%.)

Table 4

	The first graders	The second graders
The first graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	1	.835 * *
Significant rate (two sides)		.000
N	20	20
The second graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	.835 * *	1
Significant rate (two sides)	.000	
N	20	20

The correlation coefficient between the second graders and third graders in using 20 common kinds of discourse markers is shown in table 5. (\* \* means the correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 1%.)

Table 5

	The second graders	The third graders
The second graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	1	.761 * *
Significant rate (two sides)		.000
N	20	20
The third graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	.761 * *	1
Significant rate (two sides)	.000	
N	20	20

The correlation coefficient between the first graders and third graders in using 20 common kinds of discourse markers is shown in table 6. (\* \* means the correlation coefficient is significant at the level of 5%.)

Table 6

	The first graders	The third graders
The first graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	1	.499 *
Significant rate (two sides)		.025
N	20	20
The third graders (Pearson's correlation coefficient)	.499 *	1
Significant rate (two sides)	.025	
N	20	20

**Reference** Erman, Britt ( 1987 ) *Pragmatic Expressions in English: A study of you know, you see and I mean in Face-to-face Conversation*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.

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