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Use of Discourse Markers among Senior University Students

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Abstract
The study of discourse markers has attracted the attention of researchers as a facet of linguistics since the 19th century. The focus of research has been based on the theoretical status of discourse markers in relation to how they are used and for what reasons, explored in different contexts and settings; however, few studies have been conducted in the context of Saudi Arabia. This study, therefore, attempted to look at the use of discourse markers by senior university students majoring in English in Saudi Arabia and its functions. Fraser's (2004) semantic perspective, classifying discourse markers into four categories, was adopted, together with Hiilker's (1991) features of discourse markers, consistent with the view that the meaning of discourse markers is related to their function of clarifying the intrinsic value of an utterance. The results revealed that students in their essays employed discourse markers in all four of Fraser's (2004) categories. However, it was evident that the participating students struggled with the appropriate use of discourse markers. This issue should be examined in greater depth and the reasons for this difficulty assessed. One reason lies in students' low exposure to discourse markers in class. It is thus highly recommended that teachers raise EFL students' awareness of discourse markers by providing them with more related tasks and exercises.
Keywords: combining discourse markers, discourse markers, EFL learners, university students, written discourse

Introduction

The study of Discourse Markers (DMs hereafter) has attracted the attention of researchers as an aspect of linguistics since 1977 (Fraser, 1999) due to their importance in contributing to cohesion and coherence in spoken and written discourse. According to Fraser (1999), DMs have been ascribed to different meanings among researchers, resulting in different definitions. Schiffrin (1987), for instance, states that DMs are dependent fundamentals that support elements of talk. In the same token, Redeker (1991) considers DMs to have an important function to attract the listener's attention to a particular connection of the utterance with prior discourse context. In essence, DMs are employed to connect discourse segments.

Historically, the focus of researchers has been on the theoretical status of DMs with how they are used and for what reasons. For instance, Schiffrin (1987) suggested that each DM has its own meaning, while Redeker (1991) argued that the meaning of a DM is dependent on its function of clarifying the intrinsic value of an utterance. Such differences of opinion lead to another issue regarding the benefits of having different definitions of DMs. The status of DMs has been explored in different contexts and settings, but very few studies have yet been conducted in the context of Saudi Arabia. This study, therefore, aims to look at how DMs are employed by senior university students majoring in English in Saudi Arabia. This study could highlight a significant explanation with regard to the awareness of Saudi senior university students towards their use of DMs and their functions.

This study sought to answer two research questions. The first question concerned which DMs were used by Saudi senior university students majoring in English. The second question explored the functions underpinning the use of DMs in students' writing. We considered that by answering these two questions, it would be possible to achieve a holistic understanding of the reasons for the use of certain DMs.

Literature Review

Fraser (1999) defines DMs as "a pragmatic class, lexical expressions drawn from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbials, and prepositional phrases" (p. 950). Various terms and expressions are used for DMs, such as "discourse markers, discourse connectives, discourse operators or cue phrases" (Fraser, 1999, p. 932). This diversity indicates the range of views among researchers regarding the status of DMs and their application in speech and writing as devices that can help achieve cohesion and coherence (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), for example, by connecting sentences. The gradual shift from sentence-based grammar to discourse-based grammar as part of communicative language teaching and learning has attracted increasing attention to DMs from researchers (Fareh, Jarad, & Yagi, 2020). DMs can be used multiple times in a sentence and, while mostly employed at the beginning of the sentence, they can also be used in the middle and at the end of sentences. According to Hiilker (1991), DMs have four characteristics, namely that they:

> Do not affect the truth conditions of an utterance; do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance; are related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about; and have an emotive, expressive function rather than a referential, denotative, or cognitive function. (pp. 78-79).

As pointed out by Collins (1998), coherence and cohesion are important elements of high-quality essays and thus students are frequently taught how to make their writing coherent and cohesive. This has been found, for example, in some studies examining the role of cohesion in comprehending a text (McNamara, Louwerse, McCarthy, & Graesser, 2010). However, there is no evidence that the quality of writing is related to coherence cues among either first language or second language speakers (Crossley & McNamara, 2010). Thus, while coherence remains an important feature of writing quality, it is not evident that it is achieved through the use of cohesive devices (Crossley & McNamara, 2010).

Historically, the primary goal for language teaching was to improve students' linguistic competence, especially for EFL learners. Communicative competence was a secondary consideration, being supposed to eventually develop later. However, linguistic, discoursal, and communicative competence should all be viewed as important. They ought to be taught at the same level and at an appropriate pace. For instance, Fareh (2014) stated that:

> EFL teachers do not often accord adequate attention to developing learners' discourse and pragmatic abilities in writing. Instead, they focus on correct language structures, spelling and punctuation. This tendency might be ascribed to the fact that EFL teachers find it easier to focus on teaching at the micro-linguistic level, i.e., the mechanics of writing, spelling, punctuation and sentence structure, rather than teaching at the discourse and pragmatic levels. (p. 924)

Indeed, students should have the opportunity to be exposed to DMs constructively under the supervision of experienced instructors. Thus, students' overall competence would be improved, especially in terms of reading comprehension (Faghih-Sabet, Khodabandehlou & Jahandar, 2013). Competence should not be confined to the students' ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, although the ability to produce appropriate comprehensible and cohesive sentences in a logical sequence should not be ignored (Fareh et al., 2020).

Discourse Markers in Writing
Writing in English is a productive tool aimed at delivering information to others in a timely manner, but is considered challenging for everyone, including native speakers. For second/foreign language learners, writing is even more complicated. Writers need to ensure their writing is coherent and clear to readers. Writers should therefore have the adequate vocabulary and the ability to use suitable words and phrases in their proper positions. It is especially difficult to achieve coherence and cohesion without a high level of proficiency in the language.

According to Sun (2013), the use of DMs in academic writing boosts comprehension, especially in the introductory and concluding sections. Indeed, employing DMs in writing can provide readers with the tools needed to follow the writer's ideas in a systematic sequence. Although DMs are not an essential part of writing and are not attached to grammatical accuracy, their absence makes writing appear less natural (Brinton, 1996). Moreover, they are very helpful in the construction of functions and meanings (Schiffrin, 1987). It has been found that the use of DMs in writing by ESL/EFL learners can boost communication between writers and readers and improve the interpretation of the written text (Wei Sun, 2013). These are crucial benefits for ESL/EFL learners to attain in their written works.

Combinations of Discourse Markers

Studies of DMs have mostly concentrated on the use of markers individually (e.g., "however", "furthermore", "so"). In contrast, very few studies have focused on combinations of DMs. Fraser (2015), though, conducted a study to explore combinations of contrastive DMs (e.g., "but", "on the other hand") and implicative (I)DMs (e.g., "so", "as a result"). He found no clear reason for such combinations occurring, but suggested that there are some factors such as genre, social dialect and style that would be worthy of further exploration. The marker "but" is considered the primary marker of contrastive (C)DMs. Commenting on the potential combination of CDMs using the example "we ought to leave. On the other hand, however, there's good reason to remain (however)", Fraser (2015) stated that "when but, however, or yet occur in a CDM combination, it signals the relationship of the second CDM" (p. 3). Table one shows Fraser's denotation of acceptable combinations of CDMs.

Table 1. *Combinations of contrastive discourse markers (CDMs)*

	But	However	Yet	Still	Nevertheless	OTOH	Alternatively	OTC/TTC	In contrast	Conversely	Instead	Rather
But	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
However						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yet				?	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Still					?	✓						
Nevertheless						?						
OTOH		✓									✓	
Alternatively		✓										
OTC/TTC		✓										
In contrast		✓										
Conversely		✓										
Instead		✓							?			
Rather		?										

Note 1. Adopted from Fraser, (2015, p. 3)
Notes: OTOH = on the other hand; OTC = on the contrary; TTC = to the contrary.

In the same vein, combinations of IDMs can be expected, but not to the same extent as CDMs. "So" is considered to be the primary marker among IDMs. Fraser (2015) argued that "the Primary IDM, so, signals that S1 should be used by the hearer to justify the content of S2, leaving aside any specific reasons" and that "the Secondary IDMs contribute a further refinement

to the relationship between S1 and S2" (p. 4). Table two presents Fraser's acceptable combinations of IDMs.

Table 2. *Potential combinations of implicative discourse markers (IDMs)*

	So	Therefore	Then	As a result
So		✓	✓	✓
Therefore/thus/hence/consequently			✓	✓
Then/given that				✓
As a result/as a consequence/for that reason				

Note 2. Adopted from Fraser (2015, p. 4)

Previous Research

Several studies have explored the use of DMs among English language learners. However, very few have focused on this issue in the context of Saudi Arabia, leading to the need to conduct a study in an attempt to understand this phenomenon among Saudi EFL learners. Some previous studies have focused on the use of DMs among Arab EFL learners, including those of Al-Khuweileh and Al-Shoumali (2000), Al-Jamhoor (2001), Al-Hazmi (2006), Ezza (2010), Umair (2011), Ali and Mahadin (2016), and Iseni, Almasaeid, and Bani Younes (2016). Most of these studies concur that Arab EFL learners experience difficulties in terms of their writing, including the misuse, overuse, or underuse of DMs. Some Arab EFL learners do not employ DMs sufficiently in their written work as they misunderstand the functions. Other studies have found that the frequency of use of DMs among EFL Arab learners is based on their proficiency level. More proficient students tend to use more DMs than less proficient students (Ali & Mahadin, 2016). Other studies have focused on the benefit of teaching DMs explicitly. For instance, Faghih-Sabet et al. (2013) conducted a study on the value of teaching DMs to students in their usual classes. They found that students' reading comprehension improved. This is clear evidence that discourse competence can be achieved via an explicit teaching strategy.

This study sought to answer two research questions. The first question concerned which DMs were used by Saudi senior university students majoring in English. The second question explored the functions underpinning the use of DMs in students' writing. We considered that by answering these two questions, it would be possible to achieve a holistic understanding of the reasons for the use of certain DMs.

Methods

Theoretically speaking, the study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the use of DMs among Saudi senior university students majoring in English. It stands on the assumption of interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm is adopted due to its natural stance where realities are elicited from the participants' opinions and thoughts. Thus, the content of participants' written essays was under consideration.

Participants

In total, 46 students (21 males and 25 females) participated and were asked to write an essay (1000 words) about the relationship between discourse and pragmatics as part of their usual class. This study adopted Fraser's (2004) semantic perspective, classifying DMs into four categories: contrastive markers (CDMs), elaborative markers (EDMs), implicative markers (IDMs), and temporal markers (TDMs).

Tools and Procedures

As mentioned before, this study sought to address two research questions. The first question concerned which DMs were used by Saudi senior university students majoring in English. The second question explored the functions underpinning the use of DMs in students' writing. To do so, a selected number of essays were analyzed based on Hiilker's (1991) four features of DMs. It began by highlighting the DMs used in the students' writing and the frequency of each. The essays differed in pattern and style of DM use, including cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition, and argument. Having identified the different patterns related to the DMs used, the functions and reasons for their use were linked to each DM. To achieve reliability and validity, respondent validation was followed in which participants were asked to verify their writings (Bryman, 2012).

Results

Based on Fraser's (2004) semantic perspective in classifying DMs, it was found that all four categories were employed by students in their essays. However, it was quite clear that EDMs were predominant, comprising 66% of all DMs used in the students' essays. The second most frequent category was contrastive markers at 16.4%, the third category was temporal markers taking up 15%, and the category least used was IDMs at only 3% (see Figure one).
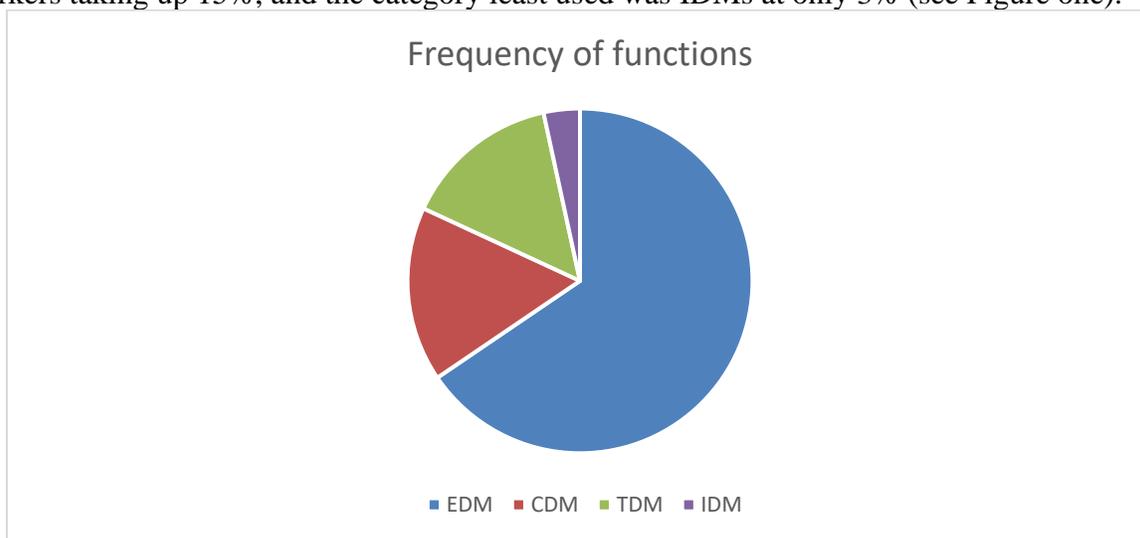

Frequency of functions

EDM   CDM   TDM   IDM

Figure 1. Functions of DMs used

In further detail, the prevalence of EDMs in the students' essays was largely due to use of "and" (see Figure 2). Indeed, excluding this marker, CDMs become the DMs most frequently used. There has been some argument regarding the status of certain DMs, including "and", in terms of whether or not they should be called DMs (Schiffrin, 1987) or discourse connectives (Blakemore, 1987) based on the claim that discourse connectives share some of the

characteristics with DMs but not all of them. However, here it can be argued that discourse connectives should be considered to be the same as DMs as they have similar functions in the discourse. In addition, it is to be expected that EDMs will be used heavily in written academic texts as writers have the greatest need for the elaborative function. Indeed, EDMs have also been found to be the most dominant category in some related studies (Ab Manan & Raslee, 2016; Alahmed, Mohammed, & Kırmızı, 2020). It seems a stretch to say that academic writers primarily need elaborative markers when all they seem to use is "and". It should be noted that the participating students barely used any other EDMs, which might strongly indicate that "and" was being used as a connective. For example, one of the students mentioned "and" four times in order to make one long sentence:

> This essay it will talk **and** discuss about the relationship between pragmatics **and** discourse analysis with more clarification **and** the first paragraph it's gonna to be about pragmatics, **and** the second paragraph it's gonna to be about discourse analysis.

This example clearly indicates the connective function of "and", with students relying heavily on it to prolong their sentences. Thus, it seems that they are not fully aware of the real function of EDMs.

The second most frequent category in this study was CDMs and the most frequent individual marker was "or" (see Figure two). In contrast, the marker "but", which is considered one of the most frequently used CDMs (Fraser, 2013), was not employed heavily in the students' essays, although it did come second. According to Cuenca (2003), "or" is considered "a general marker associated with reformulation" (p. 1075). CDMs could be expected to be the second most frequent category in the students' essays because it is argued that "contrastive relations between adjacent or more distant segments of discourse play an important role in expressing coherence relations in academic discourse including discourse written by university students of English" (Povolná, 2012, p. 131). Therefore, ESL/EFL learners are expected to employ CDMs in their written texts. For instance, one of the participating students wrote a single long sentence using "or" twice:

> …language is used to get things **or** perform actions, and of how words can express things that are different from what they mean and discourse analysis is linguistics, a method of analyze texts **or** utterances longer than one sentence.

The example above suggests that the student was using "or" to provide choices and options with similar meanings in the first DM, but different options in the second. This could be related to the student's level of awareness, which differed among the participating students.

TDMs were third in terms of the frequency of DMs used by the students in their essays. Similar to another study (Povolná, 2012), "as" was most frequently employed. It is argued that "speakers and writers exploit devices like temporal expressions to highlight theme shifts in discourse" (Bestgen & Vonk, 1995, p. 385). TDMs are very helpful in achieving coherence and cohesion. Their functions are based on "time, place, character and theme" (Bestgen & Vonk, 2000).

The category of DMs least employed in the participants' essays was IDMs. The most frequent marker used in this category was "so". Sometimes, this individual marker is seen "as indexing inferential or causal connections", mostly focused on "marking inferential or causal connections between clauses" (Bolden, 2009, p. 974). Despite the frequent use of "so" among ESL/EFL learners, it has not been the subject of holistic systematic investigation, being viewed in the literature as either a referential or resultative marker (Buysse, 2012).

Discourse Markers most frequently used

Examining Figure two, it is apparent that among the four categories of DM functions, few DMs were frequently employed. These were the markers "and", "as" and "or". It is worth noting that due to the students' low proficiency in English, they might tend to misuse or overuse some DMs. Whether or not these markers are called discourse markers or discourse connectives, their heavy usage among the participants in their essays is notable. In this regard, Fraser (1999) argues the following:

> Whether they are called discourse markers, discourse connectives, discourse operators, or cue phrases (I shall use the term "discourse marker"), the expressions under discussion share one common property: they impose a relationship between some aspect of the discourse segment they are a part of, call it S2, and some aspect of a prior discourse segment, call it S1. In other words, they function like a two-place relation, one argument lying in the segment they introduce, the other lying in the prior discourse. (p. 938)

Based on my experience as a lecturer in a Saudi university, Saudi students tend to use long sentences in their writing as their way of imitating the scientific papers they come across. Indeed, scientific papers tend to avoid short sentences due to the belief they decrease readability (Deveci, 2019). Moreover, the use of long sentences is seen as boosting the authors' positions in their writing and providing an authoritative tone (Deveci, 2019). Therefore, the use of "and" among the participants was an attempt to lengthen their sentences, but this could be hindered by their limited proficiency in English. For example, one of the students wrote the following:

> Due to the nature of the organization of text **and** context, **and** thus the implied intentions of the text's initiator, pragmatics refers to specific frames of reality **and** context, **and** specific meanings being assigned to the interpretation of a context **and** its reality by the choice of word, sign, or symbol.

The student used the marker "and" five times in one long sentence in an attempt to extend it as far as possible. The choice of this marker was due to his limited linguistic repertoire and provides a good example of the overuse of a DM by the participants.
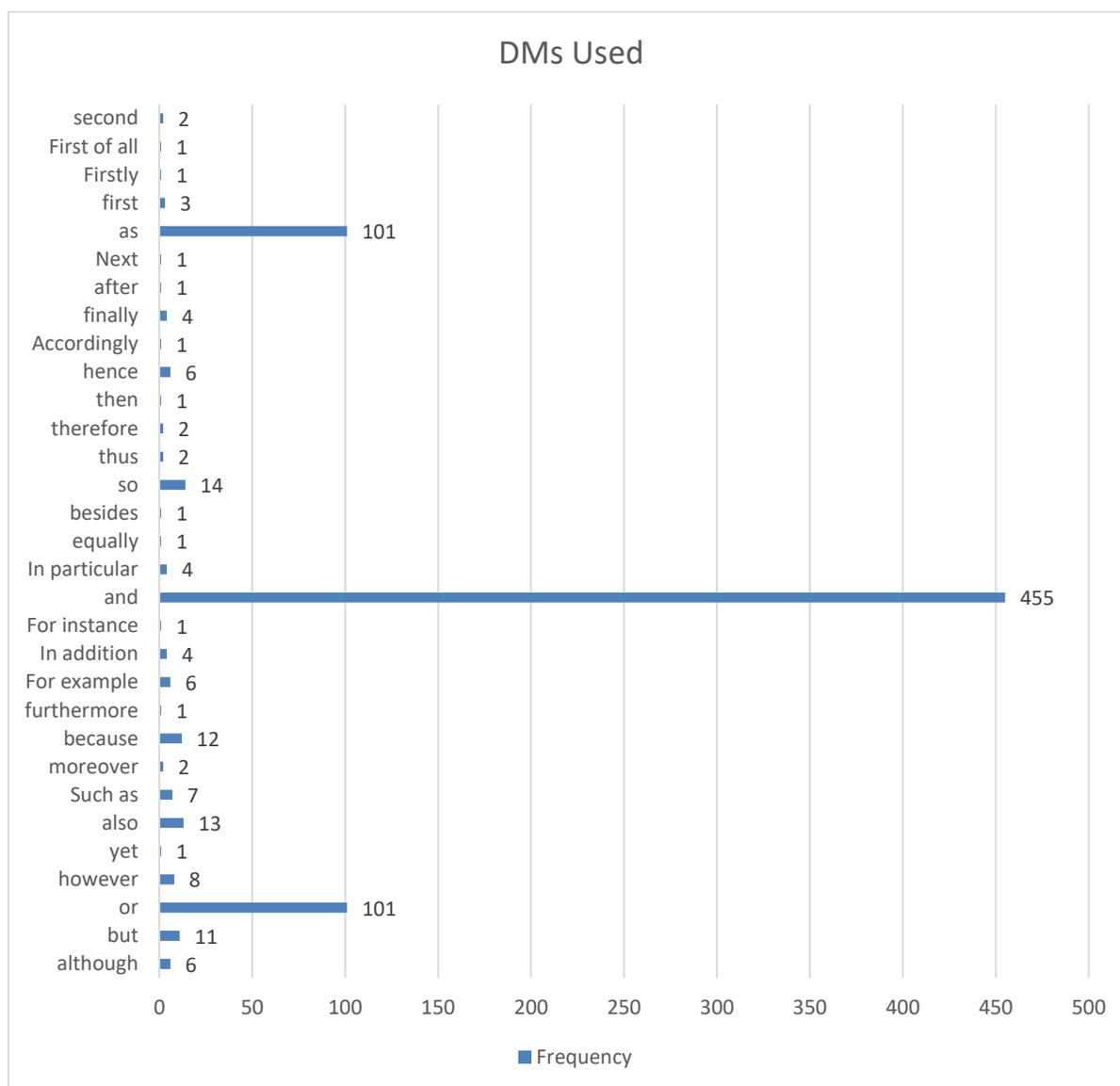
Figure 2. Frequency of use of DMs

The marker "as" was another of the DMs most frequently used by the students in their essays, aiming to give examples and provide additional clarification. For instance, one of the participants wrote the following sentence

> I mean pragmatics **as** the study of how the meaning of spoken and written discourse is related to the context in which that speech and writing occurs.

This example illustrates the student's attempt to provide an explanation of the meaning of pragmatics. However, he misused the marker in the sentence, which provides additional evidence of the students' lack of competence in the use of DMs, as well as their low proficiency in English.

The third most frequently used DM was "or", mostly employed for the purpose of indicating choices or different suggestions. Had the participants been sufficiently proficient in

English and had the ability to apply DMs properly, this marker would not have been used so frequently in their essays.

Combining Discourse Markers

A combination of DMs can occur in written texts, either across categories or in a single category (e.g., CDMs or IDMs). Given the students' inability to use DMs properly, it was not expected that any examples of combining DMs would be found. However, there were a few instances of combinations of two DMs not identified in previous research to the best of our knowledge. For instance, one of the students used "but" in combination with "also":

> Words have a literal meaning that can be analyzed for its truth or falsehood. **But** words **also** can be used to effect change in the word, to perform actions.

In another example, a student combined "however" and "although":
> **However**, **although** both are inscribed by context and the organization of language to produce meaning in specific circumstances, pragmatics might be regarded a sub-system of discourse analysis if they are both understood as systems.

We do not argue that these examples should be linguistically accurate, but they reveal misunderstandings among students concerning the functions of DMs and how they can be employed or combined. For instance, it would be more appropriate to use "however" instead of "but" and to put "also" after "can". Moreover, the underuse of combinations of DMs in the students' writing highlights the need to clarify the potential benefits of combining DMs for the quality and clarity of their work.

Discussion

All in all, the results of this study concerning which DMs were used by Saudi senior university students majoring in English and the reasons behind their use are in line with some previous studies which highlighted that Arab EFL students struggle with the appropriate use of DMs (see Fareh et al., 2020). The obstacles range from the process of recognizing DMs to the ability to produce them. This can be seen from some DMs' misuse, underuse, and overuse, regardless of the linguistic value added to the overall meaning. Even if they were able to recognize the functions of some DMs, their ability to produce them properly is limited. These obstacles are evidently present at the level of employing individual markers.

In addition, it can be argued that the ability to combine DMs is beyond their current understanding based on the examples presented above. It is necessary to evaluate these issues and determine the reasons behind this deficiency. One possible reason is the students' low level of English. Although they were senior university students majoring in English, the use of DMs was far below the expected level. Lack of a teaching focus on the development of strategies is another possible reason for this deficiency as lecturers may not pay adequate attention to the use of DMs in writing. The curriculum and textbooks may be additional factors in educating EFL students how to use DMs. These findings are in line with some previous studies, such as those of Fareh (2014). Indeed, in a recent study, Fareh et al. (2020) concluded that EFL texts are an issue that should be considered since they do not incorporate sufficient activities and tasks concerning DMs, which prompted the methodological deficiency of EFL teaching in schools and

universities. Therefore, it is crucial that instructors pay attention to this issue and include DMs in their teaching practice and use appropriate materials.

Conclusion

This study aimed to highlight the use of DMs among senior university students majoring in English in Saudi Arabia. The outcomes of this research are in line with several studies concerning the use of DMs by EFL students. It was evident that the EFL students' deficiencies in employing DMs in their writing were due to the limited exposure they have to DMs in their courses. More attention needs to be paid to this issue, especially by instructors. In addition, the curriculum should provide opportunities for EFL students to learn how to employ DMs in their writing. For instance, instructors could employ different tasks in their classes to instruct students in the use of DMs. Students would then be likely to reflect this knowledge in their writing. This is particularly important for EFL students, given that if they struggle with the use of markers individually, combining DMs in their writing will still be harder to achieve. The curriculum and textbooks may be additional factors in educating EFL students on how to use DMs. Thus, it is crucial that instructors pay attention to this issue and include DMs in their teaching practice as well as using the appropriate materials.

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