An Analysis of Discourse Marker Use in Informal Conversations among Non-Native English-Speaking Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of discourse markers (DMs) in male and female students' speech, focusing on their frequency, function, and gender-based variation. It explores how DMs support coherence and fluency in spoken discourse within an educational context. Through a sociolinguistic lens, the study identifies patterns of DM usage and potential linguistic differences between genders in spontaneous speech. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to transcribe and analyse audio-recorded student conversations. Discourse analysis was used to classify the types and functions of DMs. Findings show that both male and female students used DMs to structure discourse, manage turn-taking, and signal speaker stance. However, female students tended to use a wider range of DMs, particularly those expressing agreement, politeness, and elaboration. In contrast, male students more frequently used DMs associated with hesitation and topic shifts. These results underscore the influence of sociolinguistic factors in DM selection and highlight how gender can shape spoken language patterns.

Keywords : sociolinguistic, discourse markers, spoken discourse, student speech

Introduction

Discourse markers play a crucial role in spoken interaction by maintaining conversational flow, indicating relationships between ideas, and assisting listeners in comprehending the speaker's intent. Common discourse markers such as "you know," "I mean," and "actually" are widely used across different communicative contexts, from casual conversations to academic discourse. Fraser (2022) states that discourse markers serve as pragmatic signals that help organize information and express communicative intent. Similarly, Modhish (2012) found that students use discourse markers in academic contexts to enhance coherence in their writing, highlighting their broader applicability in educational settings. However, while much research has examined discourse markers in formal contexts, studies on their use in informal conversations by non-native speakers remain limited.

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In English language education, understanding discourse markers has significant implications for second-language acquisition. They not only help learners construct more natural and coherent discourse but also enhance communicative competence. According to Marmorstein and Maschler (2020), discourse markers function as conversational strategies that separate discourse interpretation from metalinguistic frameworks, emphasizing their critical role in verbal interactions. Additionally, Zufferey and Degand (2017) highlight the importance of identifying discourse marker meanings in multilingual corpora to facilitate language learning. By examining how non-native students use discourse markers in informal interactions, this study provides insights into their language development and communicative strategies. Language classrooms can benefit from exploring discourse marker usage, as effective use can serve as an indicator of fluency and pragmatic competence. Rahimi (2017) further asserts that discourse markers enable speakers to construct social identity and interpersonal relationships, which are essential in educational settings where rich linguistic interactions enhance learning experiences.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, discourse markers function beyond cohesion tools, reflecting speakers' social and cultural identities. Research indicates that their usage varies depending on factors such as age, cultural background, and linguistic community (Leuckert & Rüdiger, 2021). In cross-cultural interactions, non-native speakers often face challenges adapting to target language communication norms, affecting their use of discourse markers (Yang & Xie, 2014). Pragmatically, discourse markers regulate conversation flow, signal agreement, and fill pauses to ensure smooth interaction (Tonio, 2021). They also convey implicit meanings and manage politeness strategies in intercultural discussions, crucial for non-native speakers unfamiliar with communicative rules in their first and second languages (Li, 2024). Studies show that understanding discourse marker use allows educators to develop more effective language instruction strategies (Azeez et al., 2023). Consequently, analyzing how non-native students employ discourse markers can aid language instructors in designing better teaching approaches, particularly in enhancing students' communicative competence.

Several prior studies have examined the functions and distribution of discourse markers in different communicative settings. Farahani & Ghane (2022) analyzed discourse markers in academic spoken English using data from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. Their research focused on "I mean," "I think," "you see," and "you know," revealing that "you know" was the most frequently used marker, often signaling hesitation, clarification, elaboration, and

seeking agreement. "I mean" was primarily used for clarification and elaboration, while "I think" expressed opinions and evaluations. Their findings emphasized that discourse markers serve multiple functions depending on discourse context and communication mode.

Another study by Gao (2023) at Xiamen University Malaysia examined discourse marker functions in naturally occurring conversations and planned speeches. This study compared spontaneous discourse, where markers sustain conversational flow and manage interruptions, with prepared speeches, where markers enhance coherence and indicate topic transitions. The research underscored the influence of context on discourse marker distribution and function. Additionally, Fu (2024) conducted a socio-pragmatic analysis of "but" in British televised political interviews, categorizing interviewees based on cultural background, native versus non-native English proficiency, and gender. The study found no statistically significant differences in "but" usage frequency across these groups but identified its primary function as contrast marking. Western and native English speakers used "but" for broader functions, while female interviewees exhibited higher frequency in topic-related uses.

Despite extensive research on discourse markers in academic and formal settings, there is still a gap in understanding how non-native students use them in informal conversations. Previous studies primarily focused on formal discourse, leaving a lack of studies on their role in everyday interactions among second-language learners. This study aims to bridge that gap by analyzing the use of discourse markers in informal conversations among non-native English speakers. It explores the frequency, function, and usage patterns of discourse markers while considering how second-language influence affects spontaneous interactions. By doing so, this research contributes to understanding non-native speakers' communication strategies and offers valuable insights for language educators to enhance English teaching approaches. Effective discourse marker usage can improve learners' fluency, naturalness, and appropriateness in real-life communication, ultimately strengthening their overall language competence.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the use of discourse markers. The primary objective is to identify and classify the types and functions of discourse markers in informal conversations among students learning English as a foreign language.

All participants are native Indonesian speakers who demonstrate fluency in English and are accustomed to using English in informal conversations. They were selected based on their regular use of English as the language of instruction within their school environment.

The data were collected through audio recordings of informal conversations. The participants were placed in a shared discussion setting and provided with a specific topic to discuss. Their conversation was recorded for 10 minutes, ensuring a natural and spontaneous interaction. The recorded data were then transcribed for further analysis

After transcription, the analysis involved identifying discourse markers present in the conversation. The identified discourse markers were then categorized based on their functional roles. The frequency of each discourse marker was calculated using AntConc software, followed by coding and classification based on the Schiffrin (1987) framework.

Findings

Frequency Use of Discourse Markers

This section presents the frequency of discourse markers used by non-native English students during informal conversations. The data were analyzed to determine the most commonly used discourse markers and their respective functions in communication. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the discourse markers identified in the study, along with their frequency of occurrence and functional categorization.

Table 1. Frequency Use of Discourse Markers

No	Discourse Makers	Frequency	Category
1	Like	10	Filler/emphasis
2	You know	6	Clarification/filler
3	Yeah	5	agreement
4	But	5	Contrast
5	Uhm	4	Filler
6	oh	4	Agreement/realization
7	So	3	Conclusion/transition
8	Really	3	Emphasis
9	Wait	2	Clarification
10	Though	2	Contrast
11	Honestly	1	emphasis
12	Exactly	1	Agreement
13	Alright	1	Conclusion
14	I mean	1	Clarification

In the recorded conversation, student male 1 is seen using discourse markers more often, totaling 20 discourse makers. The most frequently used discourse makers are "uhm", "you know" and "like". Then Female Student 1 also dominated the use of discourse markers during the conversation, which amounted to 19 times discourse markers, with the most frequently used discourse markers being "like", "yeah", and "really". Then Female Student 2 used discourse markers 12 times, with the focus of discourse markers used were "so" really" and 'but'. Finally, Male Student 2 was seen using discourse markers the least 8 times during the conversation, which was dominated by the discourse makers "though", "but" and "I mean".

To further analyze the use of discourse markers, the data were categorized based on gender to determine whether there were differences in frequency between male and female students. Table 2 summarizes the total number of discourse markers used by each participant during the conversation.

Table. 2 Summary of frequencies by gender

No	Character	Total discourse makers
1	Male Student 1	20
2	Male Student 2	8
3	Female Student 1	19
4	Female Student 2	12

From the table, it can be observed that Male Student 1 produced the highest number of discourse markers (20), followed closely by Female Student 1 (19). Meanwhile, Male Student 2 used the least number of discourse markers (8), indicating a variation in discourse marker usage among the participants. This suggests that individual speaking styles and communication strategies may influence the frequency of discourse markers used in informal conversations.

The function of using discourse markers

The functions of discourse markers in this analysis are categorized based on Schiffrin (1987) classification such as Information Management, Connectivity, and Interactional Functions. Information Management includes fillers, which help maintain speech fluency, clarification markers, which ensure the speaker's message is understood, and realization markers, which indicate awareness or comprehension in conversation. Connectivity consists of contrast markers, which highlight differences or opposing ideas, and conclusion/transition markers, which signal the end of a discussion or shift to a new topic. Interactional Functions cover agreement markers, which

express approval or affirmation, and emphasis markers, which reinforce the speaker's statement.

Table 3. Functions of Discourse Markers Used by Non-Native Students

No	Category	Function	Discourse markers	Speaker	Utterance
1	Filler	Provides time to think, expresses hesitation, or creates a natural pause.	uhm	Male Student 1	"Uhm, yes, I have watched Naruto, but it was like ten years ago."
2			like	Female Student 1	"I really like the movie, like any sort of action movie or series as well."
3	Agreement	Shows approval, support, or reinforcement in a conversation.	yeah	Female Student 1	"Yeah, it's amazing. Have you ever watched Naruto?"
4			exactly	Female Student 2	"Exactly, the plot twists are insane."
5	Contrast	Indicates differences, exceptions, or contradictions.	but	Male Student 1	"Naruto sounds fun, but the only anime I have watched is, you know, Kimi no Na Wa?"
6			but	Male Student 2	"But for me, the sequences are too long."
7	Clarification	Ensures the message is understood or seeks further explanation.	you know	Male Student 1	"I don't remember any single thing because, uhm, you know, I'm not really into it."
8			wait	Female Student 1	"Wait, you went to Japan because your dad had a job there or what?"
9	Emphasis	Highlights significant points or expresses intensity.	really	Female Student 1	"I don't blame you, but the action is really great."
10			really	Male Student 1	"I'm not really into Japanese things."
11	Conclusion	Signals the end of a topic or transitions to a new one.	so	Female Student 1	"So if it's more than sixteen, I wouldn't watch it, no matter how good the movie is."
12			alright	Male Student 1	"Alright, I will add those to my watchlist. Thanks for the recommendations."
13	Realization	Shows sudden understanding or acknowledgment.	oh	Female Student 2	"Oh, Mulan is a classic. I love Frozen too."
14			ah	Male Student 1	"Ah, okay."

Table 3 presents the classification of discourse markers identified in informal conversations among non-native students. The discourse markers are categorized based on their communicative functions, including fillers, agreement, contrast, clarification, emphasis, conclusion, and realization. These categories help illustrate how discourse markers contribute to the structure and flow of spontaneous speech in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Each function is supported by utterances from both male and female participants, showing real instances of discourse marker usage. The utterances demonstrate how students employ discourse markers to manage their speech, indicate agreement or disagreement, emphasize important points, seek clarification, or transition between ideas.

Discussion

Dominance of the use of discourse

The dominance of discourse usage can be examined based on the frequency of use and the types of discourse markers that appear most frequently in each research subject. Discourse markers play a crucial role in structuring spoken discourse, influencing the flow of conversation, and reflecting a speaker's cognitive and social strategies in communication.

For Male Student 1, the use of discourse markers is characterized by a high frequency of fillers, which serve as pauses that likely indicate he is searching for the right words. This suggests that he may need extra time to process his thoughts before verbalizing them. Additionally, contrast markers, such as the word "but," appear frequently in his speech. The dominance of contrast markers indicates that he often presents different perspectives from his conversation partner, which may suggest a tendency toward critical thinking or a preference for engaging in debate. This pattern of discourse marker usage could reflect his communicative style, where he actively negotiates meaning rather than simply agreeing with others.

For Female Student 1, the frequent use of agreement markers suggests a conversational style that prioritizes engagement and collaboration. Agreement markers help maintain the flow of interaction by signaling attentiveness and encouraging the speaker. Her use of expressions such as "exactly" or "yeah" demonstrates that she actively supports and aligns with the speaker's points. Furthermore, her use of emphasis markers like "really" indicates a desire to highlight certain ideas or add emotional intensity to the discussion. Previous research has shown that agreement markers contribute to conversational involvement and help strengthen social bonds between speakers (Farahani, M. V., &

Ghane, Z., 2022). This suggests that her conversational approach fosters rapport and positive interaction dynamics.

For Male Student 2, a pattern similar to Male Student 1 emerges, where contrast markers play a dominant role in structuring his speech. This is evident in utterances like "but for me, the sequences are too long," where he introduces an opposing view. The frequent use of contrast markers suggests that he actively engages in discussions by presenting alternative perspectives rather than simply acknowledging or agreeing with others. Additionally, he uses fillers such as "I mean," which serve as cognitive processing tools that allow him to clarify or elaborate on his thoughts. This indicates that he is attempting to refine his message for better understanding, which can be especially useful in complex discussions.

For Female Student 2, the predominant discourse markers in her speech are agreement markers, such as "exactly," which serve to affirm and support the conversation partner's statements. This suggests that she is an engaged listener who expresses enthusiasm and agreement during discussions, contributing to a cooperative and interactive conversational environment. Additionally, she frequently uses transition markers, such as "so," which help to smoothly shift topics and maintain coherence in conversation. The presence of transition markers suggests that she is conscious of structuring the conversation logically, facilitating a natural and organized flow of ideas.

Gender differences in the use of discourse markers

Gender differences in discourse marker usage can be observed in the preferences of male (Male Student 1 and Male Student 2) and female (Female Student 1 and Female Student 2) participants. These differences are in line with previous research, which suggests that men and women often adopt distinct communicative strategies due to social and cognitive factors (Tannen, 1990).

In this study, male participants—particularly Male Student 1—tend to use a higher frequency of fillers, such as "uhm," "you know," and "like." According to Tottie (2011), fillers serve as cognitive pauses, allowing speakers additional time to process their thoughts before verbalizing them. The frequent use of fillers among male participants suggests that they may require more time to structure their ideas, or they may use these markers as a strategy to hold the floor while they formulate their response.

Additionally, males exhibit a strong preference for contrast markers, such as "but" and "though," which are used to introduce opposing viewpoints or disagreement with the conversation partner. Holmes (1995) found that men are more likely to use contrast markers in discussions, as they often engage in

conversations that reflect competitive rather than cooperative interaction styles. This aligns with the findings in this study, where Male Student 1 and Male Student 2 frequently use contrast markers to assert alternative perspectives and challenge statements made by others.

Another notable pattern among male participants is their frequent use of clarification markers, such as "you know" and "I mean." These markers indicate an effort to rephrase or elaborate on their statements to ensure clarity (Fung & Carter, 2007). The use of clarification markers suggests that male speakers prioritize explicit meaning-making, ensuring that their thoughts are well understood by their listeners. This is particularly important in discussions where opinions and arguments are presented, as speakers may feel the need to reinforce their statements to avoid misinterpretation.

Conversely, female participants—particularly Female Student 1 and Female Student 2—demonstrate a higher frequency of agreement markers, such as "yeah," "oh," and "exactly." These markers function as signals of engagement and support, reinforcing social cohesion within the conversation (Coates, 2004). Women's use of agreement markers suggests a collaborative approach to conversation, where they prioritize interpersonal harmony over contradiction. This aligns with previous research indicating that women are more likely to use linguistic features that promote solidarity and positive interaction (Lakoff, 1975).

Female participants also use emphasis markers, such as "really," to highlight key points in the conversation. The use of these markers reflects an intention to underscore important information or express emotional intensity. Emphasis markers help speakers convey conviction and enthusiasm, making their statements more engaging and persuasive. Lakoff (1975) suggests that women tend to employ such markers as part of a more expressive communication style, which is evident in this study.

Additionally, Female Student 2 frequently employs transition markers, such as "so," to smoothly shift topics or organize the flow of conversation. Transition markers play a crucial role in ensuring coherence and logical progression within discourse (Schiffrin, 1987). The ability to use transition markers effectively suggests that female participants are particularly attentive to the structural organization of conversation, ensuring that discussions remain fluid and comprehensible.

The differences in discourse marker usage between male and female participants reflect distinct interactional tendencies. The male participants' frequent use of contrast and clarification markers suggests a conversational style focused on asserting viewpoints and maintaining clarity. In contrast, the female participants'

reliance on agreement, emphasis, and transition markers suggests a more collaborative and expressive approach to conversation.

These findings align with Tannen's (1990) theory on gendered communication styles, which posits that men are more likely to engage in report talk (focused on information exchange and argumentation), whereas women tend to engage in rapport talk (focused on relationship-building and social harmony). This study reinforces the idea that men may prioritize clarity and debate through the use of discourse markers that signal contrast and explanation, while women tend to use markers that foster engagement, express agreement, and support conversational fluency, reflecting broader gender-based communication patterns.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of discourse markers (DMs) in informal conversations among non-native English-speaking students, with particular attention to their frequency, functions, and potential gender-based variation. The findings reveal that DMs play a significant role in maintaining coherence, managing conversational flow, and conveying pragmatic meaning. The most frequently used markers included "like," "you know," "yeah," and "but," reflecting their function in signaling hesitation, agreement, contrast, and emphasis.

Notably, individual speaking styles influenced the use of discourse markers. Some participants tended to rely more on fillers and clarification markers, while others more frequently used markers associated with agreement and emphasis. Gender-based patterns also emerged: male students showed a preference for contrastive and explanatory markers, often adopting a more assertive communicative style. In contrast, female students more frequently employed agreement and emphasis markers, suggesting a style oriented toward cooperation and engagement.

These findings contribute to the sociolinguistic understanding of DM usage in second-language contexts and offer pedagogical insights for language instruction. By integrating the use of discourse markers into language teaching, educators can support the development of learners' fluency, coherence, and pragmatic competence. Future research involving larger and more diverse participant groups could further illuminate patterns of DM use in second-language acquisition.

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