



## North-American and Iranian EFL lecturers' use of discourse markers

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### ABSTRACT

Lectures are inevitable in university classes and are used as a way of imparting knowledge to students. They must be comprehensible and salient especially for students of other languages who need help in understanding the content and in appropriating the language. Appropriate use of discourse markers (DMs) are believed to play an important role in producing a meaningful and coherent message. In the literature of second language acquisition, the field of discourse markers has been largely omitted so far and most of the studies on DMs have focused on native (or bilingual) speakers of English, who acquire this pragmatic competence in their childhood. This paper is an attempt to compare English (native) and Iranian (non-native) EFL lecturers in the frequency and use of various discourse markers to identify the possible differences and related implications. For this purpose, a corpus of ten spoken lectures (5 North-American English lectures (NAC) taken from MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English), and 5 Iranian EFL lectures (IC) recorded at Najafabad Azad University) were analyzed. The results of the study revealed that DMs were used more in the IC than in the NAC.

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### Introduction

In academic settings, teachers involve different instructional materials and activities such as seminars, tutorials, videos, and writing assignments but lecture “remains the central instructional activity” (Flowerdew, 1994). Benson (1994) defines lecture as “the central ritual of the culture of learning”. All over the world, lecturing is considered as an effective practice in higher education (Dunkel & Davy 1989). Understanding and comprehending lecture content, therefore, seems to be necessary for students' success.

Discourse markers, on the other hand, (words like ‘however’, ‘although’, ‘nevertheless’) are referred to more commonly as linking words and linking phrases, or sentence connectors. They may be described as the glue that binds together a piece of writing, making different parts of the text stick together. Without sufficient discourse markers in a piece of writing, a text would not seem logically constructed and the connections between different sentences and paragraphs would not be obvious, and its coherence is, therefore, at risk. Schifffrin (1987) describes the contribution of discourse to coherence as “Discourse markers provide contextual coordinates for utterances: they index an utterance to the local contexts in which utterances are produced and in which they are to be interpreted” (P.326). Lenk (1995:341) uses a more “everyday notion of coherence” as defined in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary: “If something is coherent, its parts fit together well so that it is clear and easy to understand”. According to Lenk, discourse markers tend to be used when “the speaker feels a need to verbally express how it(his speech) fits together well”. Schifffrin (1987:318) also suggests that the interpretation process of the hearer is guided by the use of markers because “markers select a meaning relation from whatever potential meanings are provided through the content of talk, and display that relation”.

Research projects conducted on the effects and use of DMs within academic discourse (Flowerdew, 2003; Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Thompson, 1994) also suggest that discourse markers contribute to the pragmatic meaning of utterances and thus play an important role in the pragmatic competence of the speaker. They also facilitate the hearer's task of understanding the speaker's utterances and are, consequently, considered as an important part of lectures and spoken discourse.

### Corpus Studies on DMs

Very few studies have been done on the use and functions of DMs in lecture discourse. However, researchers have, recently, become interested in academic genres (seminar, conference presentations, etc) specially the genre of lecture. These studies suggest that DMs are essential for the understanding of written texts and they also play a significant role in creating a meaningful and coherent message in the communication process of oral discourse.

Bellés-Fortuño (2006), for example, concluded from his study that the difference between spoken and written discourse affects the use and functions of DMs. Those DMs which are more frequent in written texts are less frequently used in spoken discourse (on the contrary/ to sum up, etc). Speakers have access to a richer context in spoken discourse, i.e., “they have prosody and phonology as well as non-verbal communication or interaction with external physical objects” (p: 112) which leads to use different kinds and amounts of DMs.

Del Saz (2003, 2005) focused on the notion of reformulation and the lexical units that explicitly convey reformulation. She called them Discourse Markers of Reformulation (DMs of RF). She claimed that what has been called a reformulator can be considered as a DM. She analyzed naturally occurring instances of language collected in the British National Corpus (BNC) and considered reformulators as DMs

because according to Fraser (1999) they have connectivity and non-truth conditionality which are features of DMs.

Swales and Malczewski (2001) worked on spoken academic discourse and emphasized on what they called "a cluster of features that constellate around discourse management across a wide range of university speech events" (p: 146). They described speech events as 'activity types' (Levinson, 1979) in which language is used to get things done. They pointed out a difference between academic speech that is monologic (often lectures, conference presentations, etc) and dialogic talk (telephone workshops, interviews, etc). They examined MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) and studied the use of footing changes they called New Episode Flags (NEFs).

They focused on the linguistic resources (or NEFs) which participants used in different university events to move from lecture format to discussion (or the reverse), or change the direction of the lecture or discussion. They analyzed linguistic resources such as group vocatives (folks, gang, friends, guys), directive or vocative verbs (say, listen, look) and exhortative or jussive imperative let, all these not with a large number of occurrences. They found more frequent NEFs in the MICASE such as okay, so and now.

Rendle-Short (2003) is another researcher who studied academic discourse and examined the use of the DM so in seminar talks within the computer science discipline. She illustrated two functions of so in various contexts. Semantically, so connects adjoining clauses to show causal relations. Pragmatically, so marks the potential speaker discourse transitions functioning as a topic-shifter. Rendle-Short (2003) explored these functions of so in a corpus consisted of six videotaped computer sciences seminar talks. The results showed that the DM so plays different functions in seminar talks depending on its position. She also proved that monologic talk is not continuous. It is, however, divided into smaller parts or sections which have a finely organized and well-structured discourse pattern.

### **The purpose of the study**

The present study is an effort to analyze the content of lectures as an academic genre to compare the use and distributions of DMs within lectures made by native versus non-native speakers. It addresses the following questions:

- a) Are there any differences in the use of DMs including micro-markers, macro-markers, and operators between North-American and Iranian EFL monologic lectures in the discourse of Humanities and Social Sciences?
- b) Are there any specific collocational combinations serving as marking devices in North-American and Iranian EFL monologic lectures?

### **Methodology**

#### **Corpus Selection**

To carry out this study, a corpus of ten spoken lectures was collected. Half of the corpus (5 North-American English Lectures) was taken from MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) (Simpson, R. C., Briggs, S. L., Ovens, J. and Swales, J. M., 2002) available on the Internet. MICASE contains a collection of transcripts of academic speech events recorded at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The corpus consists of approximately 1.8 million words transcribed from a variety of speech events that goes from February 1998 up to 2003. The other half (5 Iranian EFL lectures) was recorded at Najafabad Azad University, Esfahan, Iran. These lectures were

selected randomly. The lectures were recorded with an Mp3 recorder. Lectures were recorded with the lecturers' permission. When the final transcript version was ready for the analysis another person was asked (an MA student) to proofread the findings.

All the lectures chosen for this study belonged to the division of Humanities and Social Sciences. In this study, only monologic lectures were selected where one speaker monopolizes the floor, sometimes followed by question and answer periods. In the MICASE corpus speech events are classified according to classroom events and non-class events. This corpus consists of classroom lectures. Based on the number of students in the class, two groups can be distinguished: small lectures (LES) - a lecture class of 40 or fewer students, and large lectures (LEL) - a lecture class of more than 40 students. Since the number of MA students in Iranian universities does not exceed 40, we only had small lectures (Appendix A).

### **Data Analysis**

The frequency of DMs in each lecture was calculated using WordSmith version 4.0, a concordance software program. The variables used for the analysis of DMs were the number of occurrences and the frequency rate of each pre-established marker in the two sub-corpora. The DMs classification model proposed by Bellés-Fortuño (2006) was, however, used. As mentioned before, his previous classification was unsuccessful because categories under micro and macro-markers did not comply with any firm linguistic rule. "... whereas some categories were miscellaneous, others were semantic, morpho-syntactic or even pragmatic" (Bellés-Fortuño, 2006, p: 156). Therefore, Bellés-Fortuño (2006) developed a classification based on the Hallidayan's (1994) functional meanings; ideational, interpersonal and textual, and the relations they can convey along the discourse utterances. His model consists of three categories: micro-markers, macro-markers and operators. "Micro-markers express logico-semantic relations in the discourse. According to this model, these markers have lexical or descriptive meaning" (Bellés-Fortuño, 2006; p: 95). Therefore, categories such as causal, contrastive, consecutive or additional DMs would be placed under this part.

"Macro-markers convey an overall structure of the ongoing discourse and aim at segmenting and structuring utterances. They enhance retention and recall in post-lecture tests" (Chaudron & Richards, 1986; p: 43). They play an essential role in activating content schemata (DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988) and helping listeners to successfully follow the lecture (Khuwaileh, 1999).

"Operators are those DMs which rhetorically signal the speakers' intentions and affect the illocutionary force. These markers are more specifically related to conversational, spoken discourse rather than written discourse" (Lorente, 1996; p: 38). These have been traditionally called in the literature 'pragmatic markers'.

Because of the complexity and variety of DMs, Bellés-Fortuño (2006) narrowed down the scope of his study by choosing a maximum of three DMs for each category. The Classification used in this study is shown in Appendix B.

### **Data analyses and results**

The overall results from the analysis of DMs in the NAC and IC show that DMs were used more in the IC than in the NAC (Fig. 1). The results show that micro-markers with an average occurrence of 58.75 were mostly used in both sub-corpora (Fig.2).

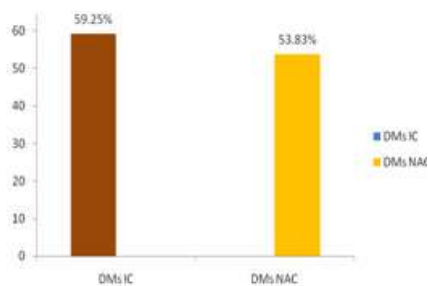


Figure 1. The frequency of DMs in the NAC and IC

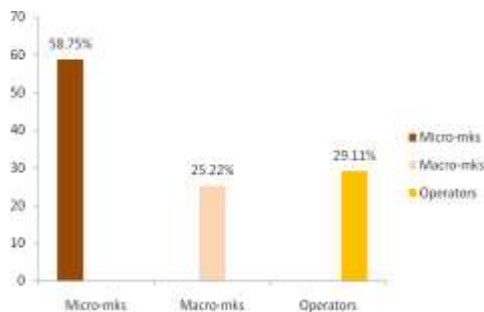


Figure 2. Total Rate of Micro-markers, Macro-markers and Operators in the NAC and IC

Regarding the frequency rate of micro-markers, the two sub-corpora did not differ significantly. The related categories were, however, used differently. As Table. 1 represents the most frequently used categories for micro-markers were additional, contrastive and consecutives in the NAC with an average occurrence of 678, 276 and 189 respectively. For the IC, they were additional, contrastive, temporal and consecutives with average occurrences of 267, 110, 83 and 83 respectively.

The three most recurrent micro-markers in both NAC and IC were *and*, *but* and *so* with a different frequency rate, though. It is worth mentioning that due to the extensive use of micro-marker *and*, the additional category showed the highest frequency rate. The Causal and the Contrastive categories *since* and *however* were not, however, found in the IC.

According to the findings, the total frequency rate of macro-markers in the IC was slightly higher than the NAC. The most frequent category in both sub-corpora was *topic-shifter* due to the large number of occurrences of the macro-marker *so*. The next categories which occurred more frequently in the NAC were *rephraser*, *organizer* and *starter*. The least frequently used category was *conclusion* in both the NAC and the IC with average occurrences of 17 and 0 respectively. The reason for the non-occurrence of this macro-marker was that all the lecturers in the IC code switched at the end of their classes and finished their lectures in their mother tongue. Considering individual macro-markers, it has been found that in both sub-corpora the three most recurrent macro-markers were: *so*, *now* and *actually* in the Topic-shifter (Table 2).

Operators revealed a higher frequency rate in the IC compared with the NAC. The three most recurrent categories in both corpora were *pause-filler*, *confirmation-check* and *acceptance*, although with different frequency rates. In the IC, the most recurrent operators were *well* and *okay* whereas in the NAC they were *and* followed by *okay*.

Categories showing the lowest frequency rate were similar in both sub-corpora, which were: *attitudinal* and *elicitation*. The least used category was *elicitation* in both the NAC and the IC.

Among these operators, the following ones revealed no instance in the IC: *as you know*, *I/we believe* and *anyone?* (Table. 3).

A closer look at the DMs collocations in the NAC and IC revealed that some specific DMs collocate with each others. The most recurrent collocations in both sub-corpora were collected and analyzed. According to the results, collocations were used more in NAC (Tables 4 and 5). It was found that micro-markers tended to cluster with other markers more than macro-markers or operators. The reason could be the fixed and less variable structure of micro-markers in contrast with the unsteady and less permanent structure of macro-markers.

According to the results obtained from the NAC, the DM *and* was found to collocate more than any other DMs. It frequently co-occurred with other markers such as *so*, *then*, *okay* and *finally*. The next marker which represented a high frequency rate regarding the NAC clusters was *okay* that collocated with markers such as *and* and *so*.

The analysis of the collocation examples revealed that in most of the cases when two DMs collocated, the first marker adopted a meaning closer to the next marker. For instance, in the collocation *and so*, the DM *and* conveyed a meaning closer to the consecutive *so*. Other similar instances were: *and then* and *okay so*.

However, in some cases both markers maintained their initial meaning. For example, when the operator *okay?* which functioned as confirmation-check, accompanied by the additional micro-marker *and*, they both kept their initial functions and meanings. The other case was *and finally* in which *and* maintained its additional meaning. The collocation *but then* was another instance in which the marker *then* got both a temporal and a consecutive meaning based on the discourse context.

The results in the IC also illustrated that the markers *and* and *okay* showed the highest collocation among other markers. The identical collocation in both sub-corpora were *and then* and *okay so*. As opposed to the NAC, the IC represented other clusters like *okay now*, *okay and* and *and now*. In the case of *okay now*, both markers functioned as a topic-shifter, in other words both markers maintained their initial meaning. The last cluster in the IC, *Okay and* and *and now*, also showed similar results.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Previous studies have mainly focused on the role of DMs in written discourse, and few studies have focused on the role and function of DMs in spoken academic discourse, especially in an Iranian contrastive EFL context. This study, consequently, aimed at comparing the two sub-corpora, the NAC and the IC, in order to analyze the use and functions of DMs and find the similarities and differences. In addition, this contrastive study looked for those DMs that normally co-occur in both the English and Iranian EFL lectures.

The results showed that, although the average length and word per lecture was higher in the NAC than in the IC, DMs were more often used in the IC than in the NAC. Therefore, it could be mentioned that the use of DMs in general was equivalent to the average length and words per lecture in both sub-corpora. However, it did not mean that both sub-corpora had used DMs entirely identical.

An overall view on individual category showed that micro-markers have got the highest rate in contrast with macro-markers and operators. This represented that lecturers in both sub-corpora tended to express logico-semantic relations in their lectures. As a result, it could be said that in the discourse of

lectures there was a need to convey lexical and descriptive meaning by using micro-markers. Operators came in the second place based on the frequency rate in both the NAC and IC. These markers express the speakers' intentions and affect the illocutionary force.

The last type of markers in this study was macro-markers in both the NAC and IC. This might be due to the peculiarities of spoken academic discourse. Bellés-Fortuño (2006) provided a good explanation for the scarce need for macro-markers. He said: "lecturers and students have a well-developed knowledge of the structure and framing of a lecture and therefore macro-markers are less needed" (Bellés-Fortuño, 2006; p: 286).

The results of this study are found to be beneficial for Iranian EFL lecturers who are interested in the academic education. Iranian lecturers can improve their lectures through developing conscious knowledge of the use and functions of DMs. Teachers and course designers can also use the findings of this corpus study. These findings indicate what linguistic and discourse features should be taught in the classrooms, and more certainly, what should be incorporated into the EFL courses.

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**Table1. The number of Occurrences of micro-markers in the NAC and the IC**

Micro-markers	in the NAC	in the IC
Additional	678	262
Temporal	119	83
Causal	106	55
Contrastive	276	110
Consecutive	189	83
Total	1.368	593



**Table.2. The number of Occurrences of macro-markers in the NAC and the IC**

Macro-markers	in the NAC	in the IC
Starter	30	18
Rephraser	42	24
Organizer	32	11
Topic- shifter	360	235
Conclusion	17	0
Total	488	278

**Table 3. The number of Occurrences of operators in the NAC and the IC**

Operators	in the NAC	in the IC
Attitudinal	43	18
Pause filler	208	184
Elicitation	7	7
Acceptance	84	70
Confirmation	93	106
Total	435	385

**Table 4. DMs Collocations in the NAC**

DMs collocations in the NAC	# DMs	%
and so	57	1.3
and then	56	1.3
okay? and	13	0.3
okay so	9	0.2
but then	6	0.1
and finally	3	0.07
Total	84	3.27

**Table 5. DMs Collocations in the IC**

DMs collocations in the IC	# DMs	%
and then	30	1.5
okay so	11	0.5
okay now	7	0.3
okay and	4	0.2
and now	2	0.1
Total	54	2.6

## Appendix A

### a) American English Lectures

	Title	Primary discourse mode	Speech event	Number of words	Recording duration
LE1	History of the American Family Lecture	Monologic lecture	Large lecture	10,621	81min
LE2	Media Impact in Communication Lecture	Monologic lecture	Large lecture	9,164	72min
LE3	Twentieth Century Arts Lecture	Monologic lecture	Large lecture	5,981	41min
LE4	Intro Psychology Lecture	Monologic lecture	Large lecture	7,266	47min
LE5	Intro to Psychopathology Lecture	Monologic lecture	small lecture	7,938	52min
Total				40,970w	293min
Average words & time				8,19w	58.6min

### b) Iranian EFL Lectures

	Title	Primary discourse mode	Speech event	Number of words	Recording duration
LE1	Operational and theoretical definitions of variables	Monologic lecture	small lecture	3,530	91 min
LE2	Chaos complexity theory	Monologic lecture	Small lecture	3,457	41 min
LE3	Social constrains of speech	Monologic lecture	Small lecture	3,623	65 min
LE4	Rationalists and empiricists	Monologic lecture	Small lecture	5,421	71 min
LE5	Data analysis of discourse	Monologic lecture	Small lecture	3,941	55 min
Total				19,972w	323 min
Average words & time				3,99w	64.6 min

### Appendix B

#### a) Micro markers

Additional	Temporal	Causal	Contrastive	Consecutive
and	then	because	but	so
or	after	since	although/ though/ even though	then
now	before	because of	however	so that

#### b) Macro markers

Starter	Rephraser	Organizer	Topic-shifter	Conclusion
first (of all)	I mean	let's (let us) try, go back/through focus, look	so	finally
to begin (with), we're gonna begin, let's begin	in other words	let me (lemme) go back/through focus, look	now	to end up/ with, to finish/up
I want to/ wanna do today/start with/talk about	that is	I wanna/want to discuss, do, emphasize...	actually	I'll see you

#### c) Operators

Attitudinal	Pause filler	Elicitation	Acceptance	Confirmation
I think/we think	and	any questions(?)	okay	okay?
as you know	well	why is that?	alright	right?
I believe/we believe	okay	anyone?	right	alright?