

OILING THE WHEELS OF CONVERSATION: TEACHING DISCOURSE MARKERS TO INTERMEDIATE AND UPPER-INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS

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There are a lot of ambiguities regarding discourse markers (their function, use and the term itself), however, teachers should strive to integrate them into their lessons, primarily as discourse markers improve students' fluency in both everyday situations and formal occasions. In addition, they are frequently used by native speakers. The paper presents a short review of discourse marker definitions and functions and a selection of class activities that can assist teachers in teaching discourse markers, and therefore improve students' speaking skills.

Key words: discourse markers, activities, speaking, fluency, intermediate and upper-intermediate students

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1 INTRODUCTION – DEFINITIONS, TERMS AND FUNCTIONS

Most authors agree that discourse markers relate different parts of discourse, however, there is no agreement on how to define them, what their functions are or which items belong to this category. Therefore in the introductory part of this essay various definitions and terms will be presented and discussed.

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1992:162), discourse markers can be defined as "expressions that typically connect two segments of discourse but do not contribute to the meaning of either." Similarly, Schourup (1999) states that discourse markers are syntactically optional in the sense that their removal does not change the semantic relation between elements they connect, but it can influence the explicitness and the interpretations of the elements. The *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* (1996:323) describes discourse markers as "linguistic devices that help structure discourse" serving other overlapping functions such as managing turn-taking, topic exchange and indicating a speaker's attitude. Schiffrin (1987:31) emphasises discourse markers' relatedness to spoken language by defining them as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk.

Redeker (1991:1168) in Fraser (1999) suggests that we need a clearer definition of discourse markers and describes them as words or phrases whose primary function is to bring to a "listener's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context." Cowan (2008:615) also lists the functions of discourse markers in a conversation such as "repairing an utterance, shifting to a different topic, or pausing to consider what to say next." Swan (2005) and Thornbury (2005) add that discourse markers clarify the structure of what is being said, i.e. they act as placeholders in conversational turn-taking and mark boundaries in talk, as well as indicating a speaker's attitude towards what they are saying and what others have said.

Fraser (1999:931) lists various labels under which discourse markers have been studied, such as "discourse connectives, discourse operators, pragmatic connectives, sentence connectives, and cue phrases." Other labels offered by Bygate (1987:15) include "fillers" and "hesitation devices," whereas Leech and Svartvik (2002:13) list terms

such as "interactional signals, discourse particles, backchannels and inserts." In relevant research papers such as Vickov (2010), it is stated that the term 'discourse markers' is that which is most extensively used, so in this paper and in our class activities we also adhere to this term. Biber (1999) emphasises the ambiguity of words and phrases which are discourse markers since they often share their discourse function with an adverbial function, while Schourup (1999) adds other categories such as conjunctions, , interjections and clauses.

2 WHY TEACH DISCOURSE MARKERS?

Leech and Svartvik (2002) stress that discourse markers are abundantly used by native speakers and perform a significant role in native speaker communication (Muller, 2005). Metaphorically speaking, discourse markers "oil the wheels of conversation" (Carter et al. 1998:69) and can be seen as the "glue" which binds together pieces of discourse. For this reason, one can assume that it is essential for non-native speakers to be familiar with them as well. McCarthy (1991) claims that language teachers tend to pay more attention to the vocabulary of topics, which makes sense, but he also suggests teaching and practising the interactive features of topics such as the use of markers (opening, closing and summarising). Cowan (2008) advocates including at least a limited number of discourse markers in teaching since they help students improve their oral comprehension and enable them to express themselves more naturally, eliminating awkward pauses.

Discourse markers contribute to language richness and expressiveness; therefore they should be taught as an integral part of a language system. Once they are well-acquired in a foreign language, their use becomes automatic and subconscious (Pintarić 2002:102 in Vickov (2010)). Another argument for the importance of teaching discourse markers is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in the part describing coherence which says that a learner at the B2 level "can use a **limited number of cohesive devices** to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse."

3 REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

In this paper we rely on Swan's (2005) classification as it is the most extensive and well-organised, as well as having more details about

discourse markers (such as frequency of use, register, example sentences, etc.) than the other sources provide. Due to the extensiveness of Swan's categories of discourse markers, we have included only a limited number of them (appendix 5.7) when designing exercises and activities. The selection has been based upon several criteria: Swan's references on frequency of use, tasks and sample sentences concerning discourse markers from the textbooks we use in our classes and our experience as both teachers and assessors of oral exams. Seven activities have been created, each as a part of one lesson, starting with the simple ones (raising awareness) and moving on to the more demanding (discussion). These activities have been designed with the aim of exposing students to a variety of discourse markers, yet teachers should ensure that students can use discourse markers in a variety of situations. The textbook activities that we use in our classes also cover a mixed register of discourse markers: therefore we have followed the same principle in our activities. The handouts for the activities are provided in the Appendices (5.1-5.6).

Sayings and quotes; Film quotes

Aim: Introducing discourse markers (further in activity descriptions: DMs), becoming familiar with them and recognising their function
DMs used: *after all, by and large, therefore, as far as I'm concerned, however, of course, I suppose, you know, well, whereas, on the one hand-on the other hand*
Description of activity: Students are given a handout with quotes by famous people (each quote split into two columns) and are asked to match them. They must recognise DMs and classify them into the right column according to a DM's function (appendix 5.1.1). Additionally, the teacher provides more examples for each group. The second option is a handout with film quotes: students are given a list of film quotes and guess the title of the film (appendix 5.1.2).

Famous names (people and fictional characters)

Aim: using appropriate DMs in given sentences and while retelling biographies

DMs used: eventually, also, above all, to begin with, however, in spite of that, then, finally, what is more, despite, so, in general, therefore; well, frankly, after all, I guess, besides, look, you know, moreover, I suppose, actually, I mean

Description of activity: There are a few versions of this activity, depending on the students' levels of English and their familiarity with DMs. Students are assigned different texts (with the DMs missing) about famous people/fictional characters (appendix 5.2). They cannot uncover their identities from the texts. Students work in groups/pairs and complete the assigned texts with the appropriate DMs (DMs can be listed in the margin in the same order of as they appear in the sentence, or randomized in a box). After completing the texts, students retell the text to the group/their partner, who then guess(es) the identity of the described person/character. As a follow-up activity they can prepare a description of a person of their own choice (mini-project; a short presentation). More advanced students can be provided only with a list of notes about a person/character and a list of DMs.

Historic events

Aim: using appropriate DMs with the notes given while retelling historic events

DMs used: as a result, in addition to that, in general, what is more, however, quite the opposite, so, except for, therefore, also, finally, consequently

Description of the activity: This is a variety of the previous activity so there are more options as well. Students are provided with notes about historic events and a set of DMs (appendix 5.3). They describe the assigned event using appropriate DMs and the others guess the event. Additionally, this activity can be used when revising narrative tenses. As a follow-up activity, a class debate can be organised – historic events can be used as a starting point, e.g. the Columbine Massacre (Gun control laws, The influence of violent films and PC games, ...) A written follow-up activity can be writing an essay – emphasising the difference between written and spoken DMs, as well as formal vs. informal usage.

One –minute monologues

Aim: practising DMs (introducing, adding, contradicting, summing up) in short monologues

DMs used: on the whole, in most cases, as well as that, another thing is, first of all; to begin with, on the one hand-on the other hand, still, in spite of this, let me see, well, in conclusion, briefly, talking of/about, as far as...is concerned, for instance, actually, more or less, after all; in general, to some extent, on top of that, what is more, in the first place, to start with, on the contrary, however, whereas, you know, kind of, to sum up, in short, speaking of/about, at any rate, for example, in other words, frankly, in fact

Description of activity: Each student is given a card with a pro-con statement and a set of DMs (appendix 5.4). They must include at least one DM per group. After a short time for preparation, each student expresses their point of view on a given statement. An extra idea – students organise a class debate on an issue.

Pessimist-Optimist

Aim: Practising the use of DMs for contradicting/counter-arguments

DMs used: on the one hand-on the other hand, however, in spite of this, on the contrary, even so, quite the opposite, still, yet, nevertheless

Description of activity: The teacher starts with writing a statement (sentence) on the board/ or providing a worksheet (appendix 5.5). A set of opposing/contrasting DMs is provided. Students work in pairs – one being a pessimist, one an optimist, and they create opposing arguments.

DM Roulette

(a variation of the "Discussion Wheel" in *Keep Talking* by Klippel, 1984)

Aim: Practising the use of DMs (introducing, adding, contradicting, summing up) when giving an opinion

DMs used: firstly, on the whole, in addition, in conclusion; first of all, in general, on top of that, to sum up; to begin with, broadly speaking, another thing is, briefly; in the first place, to a great extent, what is more, in short; for a start, in any case, in most cases, finally; to start with, as well as that, by and large, lastly

Description of activity: Students are divided into groups of 6. Each group gets 2 dice – one for the DMs and one for the statements provided on a worksheet (appendix 5.6). One at a time, one student from each group throws the dice and the numbers determine which statement and

set of DMs they are supposed to use. Each student expresses their point of view on the statement trying to use all the listed DMs.

4. CONCLUSION

Although discourse markers represent a debatable issue both for linguists and teachers, the importance of including them in teaching should not be neglected. Apart from being an integral part when assessing students' speaking proficiency (according to the CEF), discourse markers also help students improve their oral comprehension and enable them to express themselves more naturally and native-like. The aim of the activities presented in the paper is to raise students' awareness and encourage them to use discourse markers in everyday situations as well as in more formal situations such as giving a speech or taking part in a discussion. By gradually introducing different activities, we have tried to make our students more competent and confident speakers of English.

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POUČAVANJE DISKURSNIH OZNAKA U ENGLSKOME JEZIKU NA SREDNJEM I VIŠEM SREDNJEM STUPNJU

Mnogo je nejasnoca vezanih za diskursne oznake (njihovu funkciju, uporabu i sâm naziv), ali nastavnici bi ih ipak trebali nastojati uključiti u redovnu nastavu, ponajprije zato što one govore učenicâ čine boljim, kako u svakodnevnim, tako i u formalnim situacijama. K tomu, izvorni se govornici često služe diskursnim oznakama. Rađ daje kratak pregled definicija i funkcija diskursnih oznaka te zadatke koji mogu biti od pomoći nastavniku pri poučavanju, s ciljem unapređivanja učeničkih govornih sposobnosti.

Ključne riječi: diskursne oznake, aktionosti, govorenje, glatkoća izražavanja, srednji i viši srednji stupanj.

5 APPENDICES

5.1.1 Sayings and quotes (with key)

| | |
|---|--|
| 1. Life is hard. After all , | A. if they get into a position of power, corrupt power. (G.B. Shaw) |
| 2. By and large , language is a tool for | B. I am. (R. Descartes) |
| 3. I think therefore | C. we can open all our own jars. (B. Willis) |
| 4. As far as I'm concerned , I prefer silent vice | D. the secret of tyranny is in keeping them ignorant. (M. Robespierre) |
| 5. Power does not corrupt men; fools, however , | E. you happen to be a bottle of wine. (J. Collins) |
| 6. Age is just a number. It's totally irrelevant unless, of course , | F. But to be out of it is simply a tragedy. (O. Wilde) |
| 7. I suppose society is wonderfully delightful. To be in it is merely a bore. | G. to ostentatious virtue. (A. Einstein) |
| 8. You know , crankiness is at | H. the essence of all comedy. (J. Seinfeld) |
| 9. The secret of freedom lies in educating people, whereas | I. concealing the truth (G. Carlin) |
| 10. On the one hand, men will never experience childbirth. On the other hand , | J. it kills you. (K. Hepburn) |

KEY: 1J; 2I; 3B; 4G; 5A; 6E; 7F; 8H; 9D; 10C

| Counter-argument, contrast | Logical consequence | Softening and correcting | Persuading |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| however, on the one hand-on the other hand, whereas | therefore | I suppose | after all |
| Focusing and linking | Gaining time | Generalising | Concession |
| as far as ... is concerned | you know | by and large | of course |

5.1.2 Film quotes (with key)

1. _____ (*The Silence of the Lambs*)

- **Well**, Clarice – have the lambs stopped screaming?

2. _____ (*Gone with the Wind*)

- Where shall I go? What shall I do? – **Frankly**, my dear, I ...

- **After all**, tomorrow is another day.

3. _____ (*The Wizard of Oz*)

Scarecrow: I haven't got a brain ... only straw.

D: How can you talk if you haven't got a brain?

Scarecrow: I don't know...But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking...don't they?

D: Yes, I **guess** you're right.

4. _____ (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*)

SB: I want you to listen to me very carefully, Harry. You're not a bad person, you are a very good person, who bad things have happened to. **Besides**, the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters. We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are.

5. _____ (*Shrek*)

Donkey: Hey, what's your problem, what you got against the whole world anyway, huh?

S: **Look**, I'm not the one with the problem, okay? It's the world that seems to have a problem with ME! People take one look at me and go "Aargh! Help! Run! A big stupid ugly ogre!" They judge me before they even know me – that's why I'm better off alone ...

Donkey: **You know**, S ... when we first met, I didn't think you were a big, stupid ogre.

6. _____ (*The Hobbit*)

I am Bard, and by my hand was the dragon slain and your treasure delivered. Is that not a matter that concerns you? **Moreover** I am by right descent the heir of Girion of Dale, and in your hoard is mingled much of the wealth of his halls and towns, which old Smaug stole. Further in his last battle Smaug destroyed the dwelling of the men of Esgaroth, and I am yet the servant of their Master.

7. _____ (*Lincoln*)

WS: It's either amendment or this Confederate peace, you cannot have both.

AL: If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, speak then to me.

WS: Oh, disaster. This is a disaster!

AL: Time is a great thickener of things, Willum.

WS: Oh, yes, **I suppose** it is. **Actually**, I have no idea what you mean by that.

AL: Get me thirteen votes.

8. _____ (*Titanic*)

JACK: **I mean**, I got everything I need right here with me. I got air in my lungs, a few blank sheets of paper. **I mean**, I love waking up in the morning not knowing what's gonna happen ... Just the other night I was sleeping under a bridge and now here I am on the grandest ship in the world having champagne with you fine people. I figure life's a gift and I don't intend on wasting it. You don't know what hand you're gonna get dealt next. You learn to take life as it comes at you ... to make each day count.

5.2 Famous names (people and fictional characters)

ARAGORN II, SON OF ARATHORN (adapted from:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aragorn>)

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Eventually | He is a fictional character from J.R.R Tolkien's <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> . |
| Also | He was a Ranger of the North, but the Hobbits called him Strider. |
| Above all | _____, he was discovered to be the heir of Isildur and |
| To begin with | rightful claimant to the thrones of Arnor and Gondor. _____, |
| however | he was confidant of Gandalf and an integral part of the quest to |
| In spite of that | destroy the One Ring. _____, he was the key figure in |
| Then | defeating the Dark Lord Sauron. _____, he joined Frodo |
| Finally | Baggins and three other hobbits to bring the One Ring to |
| What is more | Rivendell. The Fellowship, _____, quickly fell apart. |
| Despite however | _____, he tracked the hobbits Merry and Pippin with the |
| So | help of Legolas and Gimli. _____, he fought in the battle at |
| | Helm's Deep and the Battle of the Pelenor Fields. _____, |
| | after defeating (with the help of southern forces, the armies of |
| | Gondor and Rohan rallied) Sauron's forces in Gondor, he led an |
| | army of Gondor and Rohan against the Black Gate of Mordor and |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>In general however therefore Above all</p> | <p>he was crowned King Elessar Telcontar of Gondor. He married Elrond's daughter Arwen. He had a lot of adventures in his life and took part in numerous battles. _____, his adventures not only aided Frodo in his quest, but also brought him closer to his own kingship. _____ his immediate success and popularity, _____, he decided to lay aside his claim to the throne for the time being. _____, to avoid conflict he left Minas Tirith and symbolically refused to enter it again until he was crowned King. _____, his reign was marked by great harmony and prosperity within Gondor and Arnor. He was wise and strong, _____, he was not immune to self-doubt. He doubted the wisdom of his decisions while leading the Fellowship after the loss of Gandalf in Moria, and _____, blamed himself for many of their subsequent misfortunes. _____, he was a mighty warrior and an unmatched commander.</p> |
|---|--|

* DMs in the same order of appearance

5.3 Historic events – Columbine massacre

(adapted from:

<http://history1900s.about.com/od/famouscrimesscandals/a/columbine.htm>)

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>As a result In addition to that In general What is more However Quite the opposite So However Except for Therefore Also Finally Consequently</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 20, 1999; the small, suburban town of Littleton, Colorado • two high-school seniors, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris • an all-out assault on Columbine High School • 12 students & a teacher killed; 21 people injured; the 2 murderers dead too • Dylan & Eric – both intelligent, from solid homes (2 parents, older brothers) • the boys met while attending Ken Caryl Middle School in 1993 • in high school found it difficult to fit into any of the cliques – frequently picked on by other students • seemed to spend their time doing normal teenager activities • worked together in a local pizza parlour, liked to play PC games and worried about finding a date for the prom • obviously no average / ordinary teenagers • their journals, notes and videos – thoughts about a large massacre and suicide a full year before the actual event • had run into trouble – did a juvenile diversion program |
|---|--|

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for 11 months attended workshops, spoke to counsellors, worked on volunteer projects – convinced everyone they were sorry about the trouble they caused; completed the programme successfully • during the entire time – making plans for a large-scale massacre on Hitler's birthday at their school • angry teenagers – basically hated everyone but a handful of people • used the Internet to find recipes for bombs and other explosives • wanted to kill as many people as possible – planned to plant bombs in the cafeteria when it was most crowded • killing spree – used guns and knives; committed a suicide • the massacre – sparked debates over gun control laws and the influence of violent movies and PC games in American society |
|--|--|

5.4 One-minute monologues

GLOBALISATION HAS MORE NEGATIVE EFFECTS THAN THE GOOD ONES.

| OPTION A | | OPTION B | |
|--------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| GENERAL | on the whole in most cases | GENERAL | in general to some extent |
| ADDING | as well as that another thing is | ADDING | on top of that what is more |
| STRUCTURING | first of all to begin with | STRUCTURING | in the first place to start with |
| CONTRASTING & CONTRADICTING | on the one / other hand still in spite of this | CONTRASTING & CONTRADICTING | on the contrary however whereas |
| GAINING TIME | let me see well | GAINING TIME | you know kind of |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| SUMMING UP | in conclusion briefly | SUMMING UP | to sum up in short |
| OTHER USEFUL DISCOURSE MARKERS | talking of / about as far as...is concerned for instance actually more or less after all | OTHER USEFUL DISCOURSE MARKERS | speaking of / about at any rate for example in other words frankly in fact |

5.5 Pessimist-Optimist

THE INTERNET HAS DONE MORE DAMAGE THAN GOOD.

| PERSON | DISCOURSE MARKER | SENTENCE |
|--------|--------------------|----------|
| P | On the one hand | |
| O | On the other hand | |
| P | However | |
| O | In spite of this | |
| P | On the contrary | |
| O | Even so | |
| P | Quite the opposite | |
| O | Still | |
| P | Yet | |
| O | Nevertheless | |

5.6 DM Roulette

| Nr. | SENTENCES (DIE ONE) |
|-----|---|
| 1. | Students should be expelled from school for cheating on exams. |
| 2. | No mobiles should be allowed in the classroom. |
| 3. | Exam results do not reflect the knowledge and competence acquired. |
| 4. | Academic success guarantees a promising career and a well-paid job. |
| 5. | All levels of education should be free of charge. |
| 6. | Marks entice positive / negative rivalry. |

| Nr. | SENTENCES (DIE TWO) |
|-----|--|
| 1. | firstly – on the whole – in addition – in conclusion |
| 2. | first of all – in general – on top of that – to sum up |
| 3. | to begin with – broadly speaking – another thing is – briefly |
| 4. | in the first place – to a great extent – what is more – in short |
| 5. | for a start – in any case – in most cases – finally |
| 6. | to start with – as well as that – by and large – lastly |

5.7 A SELECTION OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

(Adapted from *Practical English Usage* by Swan, 2005)

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| GENERALISING | on the whole, in general, generally, speaking of/about, in all/most/many cases, except for, apart from, broadly speaking, to a great extent, to some extent |
| ADDING | moreover (very fml), furthermore (fml), in addition, additionally, as well as that, on top of that (infml), another thing is (infml), what is more, also, besides, in any case |
| STRUCTURING (SEQUENCING) | first, firstly (more fml than first), first of all, second(ly), lastly, finally, to begin with, to start with, in the first/second place, for one thing, for another thing, first and foremost |
| CONTRASTING & CONTRADICTING | on the one hand-on the other hand (fml), while, whereas, however, nevertheless (very fml), nonetheless, mind you (infml), still, yet, in spite of this/that, despite this/that, even so, but, all the same, on the contrary, quite the opposite, in comparison |
| GAINING TIME | let me see, let's see, well, you know, I don't know, I mean, kind of, sort of |
| SUMMING UP | in conclusion, to conclude, to sum up, to summarise, briefly, in brief, in short, overall |
| OTHER USEFUL DISCOURSE MARKERS | talking of/about, speaking of/about, with respect/regard to, regarding, as far as...is concerned, as for, anyhow, at any rate, in any case, by the way, all right, to return to the previous point (fml), as I was saying (infml), for instance, for example, such as, in particular, therefore (fml), as a result (fml), so, then, I mean, actually, that is to say, in |

| | |
|--|---|
| | other words, I think/feel/reckon/guess (infml), in my view, in my opinion (infml), apparently, so to speak, more or less, sort of (infml), kind of (infml), well, really, at least, I'm afraid, I suppose, or rather, frankly, honestly, no doubt, after all, look, look here, in fact, as a matter of fact, to tell the truth, well, above all, hence, in the same way (fml), just as (fml), similarly (fml), likewise, right, now, OK |
|--|---|

*fml = formal register; infml = informal register