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DISCOURSE MARKERS' FOSSILIZATION AMONG IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

*Anis Behzadi[1] and Anita Lashkarian[2]
[1]*Department of English, Sirjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sirjan, Iran*
[2]*Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Yazd, Iran*
*Author for Correspondence

ABSTRACT
Discourse markers, the words or phrases which show the connection between what is being said and what is in the wider context, are very important elements of speech fluency, particularly for non-native speakers. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the use of discourse markers (DMs) by Iranian EFL learners and find out the relationship between English proficiency and the pragmatic fossilization of DMs. In practice, the current study focuses on the use of DMs in speech. The data from the lower-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced English learners are used for the exploration of Iranian EFL learners' DMs use. Some frequently used DMs in oral production have been analyzed; the results revealed that the fossilization of DMs is caused by English learners' lack of acquiring the pragmatic functions of DMs as native speakers do. According to the result of this study, Iranian learners are not aware of the importance of DMs in constructing textual coherence. In this case, both explicit instructions and implicit instructions should be given in class. What is more, teachers should provide learners with accurate and appropriate L2 input and as many chances as possible to make enough L2 output in a proper situation because DMs can ease the hearer's search for the relevance of utterances by providing effective means for constraining the interpretation of utterances in terms of the principles of relevance in discourse.

Keywords: Discourse Markers, Fossilization, EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION
A glance at a sample of English spontaneous conversation is likely to find it peppered with expressions such as *well*, *I mean*, *so*, *after all, in conclusion, still, in fact*, *though*, *of course*, *anyway*, *actually*, *on the other hand*, commonly described as discourse particles or discourse markers. Although they have attracted particular attention from linguists working on the spoken language, these and similar expressions permeate written language too.

In fact, discourse markers (DMs) can be referred to those words, phrases or sentences which can signal the coherent relations among a string of words, indicate pauses, transitions, or other aspect of communication when we are talking. As a matter of fact, DMs can be used to signal either local coherence or global coherence and play an important role in speech communication. So, a good command of employing DMs not only helps us to process our communication smoothly but also helps us to achieve coherence in a discourse. So far the research on DMs has become one focus in the field of pragmatics. Nevertheless, the study of discourse markers can still be completed.

According to (Levinson, 1983; Woods, 2006) there are many words and phrases in English that indicate the relationship between an utterance and the prior discourse. What they seem to do is to indicate how an utterance that contains them is a response to, or a continuation of the prior discourse portion. Though Levinson makes these comments, only by some examples, he doesn't probe into this phenomenon. Since then, three main theoretical approaches have been used to study DMs, based respectively on structural, cognitive and pragmatic approaches. Academically speaking, since they signal how the speaker intends the current basic message that follows to relate to the previous discourse, these language means can foster the establishment of discourse coherence, which is understood here as a context-dependent, hearer-oriented, comprehension-based, and interpretative notion. To be specific, discourse markers have been defined in the following ways from different scholars' perspectives:

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1. DMs are lexical items or phrases (Carter and McCarthy 2006; Redeker, 1991), such as 'right', 'I mean', 'you know' and 'I think'.

2. DMs are often multifunctional. Fung and Carter (2007) give the example of 'so', which can, for instance, both summarize and launch a topic.

3. DMs are optional, the absence of a DM does not affect the semantics or grammar of an utterance. However, the absence will make comprehension at least more difficult (Aijmer, 2002; Eslami and Eslami-Rasekh, 2007).

4. DMs are not drawn from one grammatical class and are not a closed grammatical class. (Aijmer, 2002; Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Fung and Carter 2007), give examples of DMs such as prepositional phrases ('by the way'), response tokens ('right') and interjections ('oh').

5. DMs function at a referential, interpersonal, structural and cognitive level (Aijmer, 2002; Fung and Carter, 2007). They act as signposts for speakers and listeners as they orientate themselves to the ongoing discourse (Aijmer, 2002; Schiffrin, 1987).

6. DMs have a procedural but not propositional meaning. A DM may possess a propositional meaning when used as part of another class. An example of this is the temporal use of 'now'. The meaning of a DM can be defined from the broader context in which it operates.

Background of the Study

It is noted that the first detailed effort is reported in Shiffrin's book *Discourse Markers* (Shiffrin, 1987). Based on an account of the functions and use of 11 English DMs: *oh*, *well*, *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, *because*, *now*, *then*, *I mean*, and *you know*.

Schiffrin (1987) offers an early definition when she suggests that DMs are "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" and which help to make discourse coherent. She suggests that a DM connects directly to the "unit of talk" prior to it and following it.

These units help to determine the choice of DM and the meaning speakers intend and listeners infer. Her analysis, based on native speaker corpus data, suggests that one function of DMs is to coordinate talk, which is defined on five different "planes": information state, participation framework, ideational structure, action structure and exchange structure (Schiffrin, 1987).

Redeker (1991) offers a definition of a DM (in her terms a "discourse operator") which differs slightly from Shiffrin: "A discourse operator is a word or phrase –for instance, a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection – that is uttered with the primary function of bringing the listener's attention to a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context. An utterance in this definition is an "intonationally and structurally bounded, usually clausal unit" (Redeker, 1991).

Fraser (1999) further develops the work of both Redeker (1991) and Schiffrin (1987) with some difference in emphasis. He suggests that DMs have a procedural meaning and relate the "discourse segment" they are part of a previous segment. This means that Fraser differs in terms of what he accepts as being a DM. He suggests, for instance, that adverbials such as 'frankly' are not DMs because they are "commentary markers" and "do not signal a mutual relationship between the adjacent discourse segments" (Fraser, 1999).

He also suggests that "pause markers" such as 'well' and 'um' and interjections such as 'wow!' are not DMs for the same reason. More recently, Aijmer (2002) has produced a corpus-based analysis of a number of DMs (defined here as "discourse particles"). Her work finds common ground with some of the previously discussed research. She agrees with Fraser (1999), for instance, in suggesting that DMs do not have propositional meanings (Aijmer, 2002).

She also accepts that we cannot limit DMs to one part of speech. In addition, Aijmer proposes that DMs can be analyzed on two "macro levels" (Aijmer, 2002) "textual" and "interpersonal". This definition has been developed further by (Fung and Carter, 2007), who have analyzed data from a spoken corpus to suggest four macro levels: structural, referential, interpersonal and cognitive, each subdivided to show what we might term 'micro functions'. Table 1, an excerpt from (Fung and Carter, 2007), provides an illustration of their analysis.

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Table 1: Macro levels and micro functions of DMs

Interpersonal	Referential	Structural	Cognitive
Marking shared knowledge:	Contrast:	Opening and closing of topics:	Denoting thinking process:
See, you see, you know, listen	*But, and, yet, however, nevertheless*	*Now, OK/okay, right/alright, well, let's start, let's discuss, let me conclude the discussion*	*Well, I think, I see*

Selinker (1972) first notes fossilizable linguistic phenomena, which in his proper words, are " linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular native language will tend to keep in their inter-language relative to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the target language"(p.36). Selinker (1972) also points out that the ideal pattern of inter-language system development is a continuum starting from "0" target language competence to native speakers' competence. However, over 95% of L2 learners fail to reach the end of the inter-language continuum. He suggests that there is a psychological mechanism that he calls "fossilization", which underlines the production of fossilized items, including both target and non-target forms.

More recently, the term fossilization has been used by researchers including Selinker to label the undesirable phenomenon in L2 learning that the L2 learner fail to reach the target language competence for that non-target forms become fixed in inter-language. Additionally, it is widely argued that fossilization can be divided into temporary fossilization and permanent fossilization. The temporary fossilization is definitely possible to be destabilized. Temporary fossilization is the "harbinger" of permanent fossilization.

The relationship between them is especially significant for the studies on second language teaching. Since the purpose of this study is to destabilize learners' fossilized forms or competence, this paper will mainly focus on the temporary fossilization, and give some suggestions to destabilization. The hypothesis is that learners of a foreign language follow what is called a "binary track" in their linguistic development: the formal vs. the pragmatic track. The formal track relates to the grammatical and semantic rules that conform to the competent use of a given language; the pragmatic track, on the other hand, relates to the social use of language in different contexts and registers. Native speakers of a language would develop both tracks simultaneously by means of natural language contact, and thus would establish a mutual relationship between both communication tracks. Non-native learners of a language in a non-target language environment, however, would develop the formal and the pragmatic tracks through formal instruction. The difficulty, therefore, is that the pragmatic track, linked to the cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural meanings expressed by language forms, is difficult to implement in educational syllabuses. In fact, the development of pragmatic competence demands a (pseudo)-natural foreign language context that is often almost impossible to produce in formal education.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Methodology
Design of the Study
This study employs a sampling survey design to examine the differences in the use of DMs between Iranian students in three different levels of proficiency; namely, the lower-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced levels. In essence, this is a comparative analysis and discussion. The study is conducted to find out whether there exists pragmatic fossilization of DMs when Iranian students communicate orally in English and to what extent their English level is related to the pragmatic fossilization of DMs. In other words, the main aim of this investigation is to analyze whether English learners' use and command of DMs are different in different levels of proficiency.

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Subjects

The subjects of this investigation were 30 Iranian EFL learners who were in different level of proficiency; namely, the lower-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced level of English mastery from English language institutes. In practice, the study mainly focused on the frequently used DMs: *Well, so, I mean, you know, however, although, but, anyway, actually, after all.*

Material

The corpus used in this study consisted of transcripts of 30 Iranian EFL learners in a free discussion meeting. The learners' level was the lower-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced level of proficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following part the frequency and percentage of discourse markers are clarified in table 2. To be specific, ten discourse markers have been selected to be analyzed among three different levels; namely, lower-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced.

Table 2: The frequency of ten different discourse markers

Discourse Markers	Lower-intermediate		Intermediate		Advanced	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Advanced	%
Well	1	3.33	7	23.33	13	43.31
So	6	20.1	13	43.33	28	93.33
I mean	6	20.1	16	50.33	26	86.67
You know	4	13.3	18	60.00	25	83.33
However	0	0.0	9	30.22	10	33.33
Although	0	0.0	0	0.00	5	16.67
But	10	33.33	18	60.00	14	46.66
Anyway	0	0.0	2	6.67	8	26.67
Actually	1	3.33	6	20.55	21	70.00
After all	0	0.0	0	0.00	1	3.33

As the table revealed, we make statistics of ten DMs; namely, *well, so, I mean, you know, however, although, but, anyway, actually, after all,* from the data and the results are shown in table 2. The number of DMs occurrences in lower-intermediate level students speech is much less than those ones in Intermediate and Advanced learners' speech, so it is clear that the elementary' command of DMs does not reach that of intermediate.

According to table 2, the number of '*well*' occurrences in lower-intermediate English learners is much lower than those of high-level English learners. In fact, among 30 contestants, there are only 1 contestants using '*well*' in lower-intermediate group, 3.33%. It proves that lower intermediate English learners have a poor knowledge about the functions of DMs. On the other hand, regarding advanced group, it is used 13 times, 43.31%.

Oddly enough, the number of '*so*' occurrences in low-level English learners is also less than the one in higher levels. Among 30 contestants, '*so*' is used 6 times in lower-intermediate level, 13 times in intermediate and 28 times in advanced level learners.

As for high-level English learners, the speaking competition belongs to a formal situation and can be taken as the situation among strangers. The frequency of '*you know*' occurrences in high-level English learners' speech is less than the one among native strangers, partly because '*you know*' is a discourse marker threatening others' negative face. It is widely noted that the frequency of discourse markers used among friends is 1.4 times/min, 1.0 times/min among strangers. Anderson (2000) points out that '*you know*' is used mainly in three situations: "the speaker thinks what he states should be accepted by the hearer; or the speaker thinks that the information stated is not a common consensus; or the speaker's information contradicts what the hearer states." In the speaking competition, the social status between

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judges and contestants is quite different, the contestants may reduce the use of '*you know*' consciously, that is to say, negative pragmatic function of *you know* limits the application of '*you know*'.

According to table 2, the use of '*I mean*' has been used 6 times in lower-intermediate and 15 times in intermediate learners, also 25 times in advanced times. It probably proves that '*I mean*' is a difficult discourse marker to use. '*I mean*' is usually used in utterances conveying ideas. The function of '*I mean*' is to modify or limit the content of previous utterances, that is to say, modify the speakers' intention or ideas. What is more, after analyzing '*I mean*' the other functions of it can be named as explaining the speaker's ideas tactfully, or decorating sensitive topic, etc.

Therefore, advanced English learners' partial command of functions of '*I mean*' leads to the low frequency of '*I mean*' used by English learners. This is mainly because they lack the systemic input and training of its functions. Compared with advanced speakers, '*well*' is used more frequently by both high-level English learners and intermediate English learners. It doesn't mean that they have a good command of '*well*'. On the contrary, they may only notice certain function of *well*, but not to understand its usage, which as a result leads to overproduction. In contrast to other DMs, '*well*' is a more flexible and complex discourse marker. Without systemic teaching and practice, non-native speakers' use of DMs is likely to become fossilized.

It is notably offered that four functions signaling discourse coherence: topic shifting, hesitation markers, editing markers, mitigating face. After the analysis of high-level English learners' use of '*well*', we find all the above four functions can be found in their speech. In the high-level English learners' speech, '*well*' signaling hesitation accounts for 53.3%; topic shifting accounts for 33.3%. Thus, the high frequency of '*well*' used by high-level English learners proves their good command of '*well*', in addition, the functions of '*well*' may be suitable for the impromptu speech. This is the reason why '*well*' is used so frequently by high-level English learners. On the contrary, we find many misusing of '*well*' in intermediate English learners' speech. It proves that there exists fossilization of '*well*' among intermediate English learners.

Regarding the frequency of '*however*', it is not used in lower-intermediate level, but it is used 9 times, 30.22% in intermediate level, and 10 times, 33.33 % in advanced level. Concerning '*although*', it isn't used in lower-intermediate and intermediate levels. It is used 5 times, 16.67% in advanced level. Interestingly, 'but' is used 10 times in lower-intermediate level, 33.33%, 18 times in intermediate 60.00%, and 14 times in advanced level, 46.66%. With regard to 'anyway', it isn't used in lower-intermediate level at all. It is used 2 times, 6.67% in intermediate, and 8 times, 26.67 % in advanced level. As for '*actually*', it is used 1 time in lower-intermediate level, 3.33%, 6 times in intermediate, 20.55% and 20 times, 70% in advanced level. As for '*after all*', it isn't used in lower-intermediate and intermediate levels, but it is used 1 time in advanced level, 3.33%.

According to the comparative analysis of frequently used three DMs, it can be clarified that the fossilization of DMs emerges because non-native English learners do not master all the usage of DMs and reach the same language competence as native speakers have, remaining their right or wrong use of DMs. The most fundamental reason of fossilization is that English learners cannot develop both semantic and pragmatic competence simultaneously by means of natural language contact like native speakers. However, we think the English learners' command of DMs in the investigation belongs to temporary pragmatic fossilization. If we can arouse their awareness of pragmatic functions of DMs, teach DMs systematically in class and create real communicative situation for use of DMs, English learners may acquire pragmatic functions of DMs very well.

As far as teaching DMs is concerned, in order to avoid permanent fossilization, we'd better avoid the following points: (1) Input inadequacy. On the one hand, the oral material we use is not from real native speakers' data, learners cannot be exposed to the real situation in which DMs are used; on the other hand, since in the process of teaching spoken English, there lacks the explanation to meta-pragmatics of DMs, learners cannot form conscious perception and make systemic study. (2) Output inadequacy. Learners have less chance to practice oral English in real situation and their oral practice is no more than the practice of vocabulary and grammar, which makes it impossible for learners to develop both semantic and pragmatic knowledge simultaneously by natural language contact like native speakers.

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Conclusion and Pedagogical Implication

DMs play an important role in constructing textual coherence and have become one of the highly explored linguistic phenomena within the current linguistic research, but discourse marker research is far from being homogeneous or unified, and from being complete. The current paper is only a starting of the attempt to explore the pragmatic fossilization of DMs used by Iranian EFL learners and the ways to destabilize the fossilization of DMs in foreign language teaching. The paper follows the explicit and implicit methods in teaching pragmatic competence to destabilize the fossilization of DMs. Since Relevance Theory has a strong explanation to the pragmatic function of DMs. In fact, relevance theoretical framework to instruct the teaching of DMs helps learners acquire the pragmatic function of DMs effectively. To recap, a good command of employment of DMs is helpful to EFL speaking. In terms of the pragmatic fossilization of DMs, it can be noted that they cannot be fully mastered because of insufficient exposure to natural environment. Academically, teachers should pay much attention to supplying sufficient and suitable material for English language learning; secondly, teachers should try to draw the students' awareness to DMs' constraints on the hearer's choice of context assumptions; thirdly, teachers try to offer more chances for learners to practice the pragmatic functions of DMs.

Human communication observes a general principle, that is to say, in order to communicate successfully, the speaker should produce a kind of utterance with the optimal relevance so as to have his/her audience get the optimal contextual effect at the cost of minimum processing effort. In speech communication, as far as the speaker is concerned, communication is a kind of choice, that is to say, to select the way that he considers to be the most appropriate to talk. However, the hearer needs certain effort to understand the utterances produced by the speaker in order to obtain the speaker's informative intention and communicative intention. In utterance production, the speaker will take into consideration what information the hearer can get from the utterance through inference and what information will be taken as explicit information or implicit information. Thus, it needs the speaker to have an evaluation of his/her audience's textual resources, cognitive ability and sensibility before making a choice between explicit and implied information. If the speaker takes it for granted that his audience enjoys rich contextual resources, strong cognitive ability and sensibility, then he may produce more implicit utterances, because in this case the hearer may pay even less effort in choosing the relevant contextual assumption than directly processing an explicit stimulus.

As a matter of fact, since the pragmatic fossilization in English learners' acquisition of DMs attributes to learners' lack of acquiring pragmatic functions, we should provide English learners with accurate input and more output as well as cultivate learners' conscious perception for the textual functions of DMs. In particular, some pedagogical strategies and procedures for destabilization can be helpful in this regard. For instance, providing accurate and appropriate l2 input sounds very important. In essence, L2 input is mainly from the classroom. To choose the right course book is quite important. Since language is developing at any time and any place, new words or expressions appear constantly. Without authentic and up-to-date language input, our language output will be out of date and leads to the failure of communication. Good teaching material should meet at least the following three important criteria: (1) They should be authentic. (2) They should be up-to-date. (3) They should be of the right degree of complexity, i.e. a little bit above the current level of the learners.

Teacher input is also important to the English learners in classroom. Since Persian learners have few chances outside the classroom to use the language communicatively, the teacher may be the only person the students contact with who speaks English in real life. All the students put their attention upon the teacher in class as he or she is the authority on the English language, whether he or she likes it or not. Thus teachers should realize what they say influences the students greatly. They have to notice their expressions in which different functions of DMs are embodied. Otherwise, students will follow teacher talk whether it is right or wrong.

What is more, cultivating the conscious perception of students for the Textual Functions of Discourse Markers can be important as well. Since non-native English learners in a non-target language environment would not develop their pragmatic competence by means of natural language contact like

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native speakers, the difficulties for acquiring pragmatic competence can be aided by instruction, including input exposure to pragmatic realizations, discussions of the meta-pragmatic knowledge underlying communicative action, and engagement in communicative activities where learners can practice using the linguistic knowledge they have acquired. Pragmatic teaching is widely divided into implicit teaching and explicit teaching. By means of implicit teaching, pragmatic functions can be realized by learners in classroom; by explicit teaching, language forms and their pragmatic functions are easily internalized.

Interestingly, discourse markers explicit teaching can be advantageous in this regards. By explaining the pragmatic functions of DMs to learners explicitly, learners can get to know how DMs serve to help the speaker and hearer construct discourse coherence and have a conscious perception for usages of DMs. Therefore, they ultimately have a better command of DMs.

To sum up, relevance theory has a strong explanation to the contextual functions of DMs and has practical implications for foreign language teaching and learning. According to relevance theory, discourse coherence is a consequence of the hearer's searching for optimal relevance. In fact, theory can make students have a better understanding of their usage. DMs are used to not only help the speakers organize information and produce clear utterances but also ease the hearer's search for relevance of utterances and ultimately achieve discourse coherence.

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