



# **BRINGING THEORY TO LIFE: COLLABORATIVE DISCOURSE MARKER ACTIVITIES IN ELT (ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING) CLASSROOMS**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, the possibility of teaching discourse analysis practically rather than relying only on theoretical lessons is analytically presented using the theme of discourse markers as an example. It emphasizes the improvement of lesson quality and student engagement through the use of various classroom activities.

**Keywords:** Discourse markers, practical learning, theoretical instruction, traditional learning, coherence, cohesion, discourse analysis, ESL, pre-written materials, modes of communication.

## **Introduction**

For learners of English as a second language, constructing sentences that are logically connected and easy to follow is one of the most persistent challenges. When coherence is weak, recipients of a message - whether they are reading a text, an email, any other form of written communication, or even spoken language - often struggle to understand what the writer or speaker intends to convey. This lack of clarity usually stems from discourse that is not sufficiently coherent (<sup>1</sup>coherence is a state or situation in which all the parts or ideas fit together well so that they form a united whole). To ensure smooth flow and clarity, learners need to rely on discourse markers, which guide readers through the development of ideas, indicate logical relationships, and signal how each part of the text relates

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<sup>1</sup> Collins-COBUILD English Dictionary-1995, page 305



to the next. Discourse markers are small words or phrases we use to connect ideas or organize our speech or writing, and they are similar to road signs in language that guide the reader through a text and signal what the author intends to do next.<sup>2</sup>They indicate various functions such as managing information (Oh, I mean), marking responses (Well), connecting ideas (And, but, or), or showing relationships like cause and result (So, because), contrast (However, nevertheless), elaboration (Indeed, in fact), or the addition of new information (Additionally, besides). Although discourse markers have been widely studied, most previous research has approached them from a theoretical perspective, especially when teaching young learners. This theory-heavy focus has not translated well into practical use, leaving many students unable to apply discourse markers smoothly and naturally in real communication. Traditional, form-focused approaches to teaching language often lead students to simply memorize discourse markers, but this memorization alone does not help them use the markers effectively in real context. For this reason, the present article seeks to introduce practical, context-based strategies that help young learners use discourse markers confidently and effortlessly during authentic language use.<sup>3</sup>As discussed in *Discourse Markers*, coherence depends on how well the units of discourse - such as terms, ideas, actions, and propositions - are linked together in ways that readers or listeners can easily interpret. To achieve this level of clarity and connectedness, writers and speakers must rely on discourse markers, which play a central role in guiding interpretation and maintaining the smooth flow of ideas. To examine this more closely, Nilufar Yuldashova, Associate Professor, PhD, introduced two complementary approaches-one theoretical and one practical-focused on the theme of discourse markers and their real-world application. These methods were implemented to help students move beyond traditional rule-based learning and instead develop an intuitive, natural use of discourse markers through active tasks and communicative activities. This section of the article discusses how these approaches were applied and how students responded to them in practice. During the examination several questions were raised about the role of discourse markers in communication.

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<sup>2</sup> Uta Lenk. *Marking Discourse Coherence*, Tübingen- 1998, page 49

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Schiffrin. *Discourse Markers*, Cambridge University Press-1996, page 49



- Why do we need discourse markers, and how can they be taught effectively through practice-based tasks?
- What are the limitations of relying solely on theoretical instruction in the teaching of discourse markers?

### **Methodology. Practical framework**

To investigate the use of discourse markers in everyday use, a practical method was conducted in a classroom setting at Journalism and Mass Communication University of Uzbekistan (JMCU). The study conducted sophomore students of English philology and language teaching, group 35-24, aged 18 to 20, with English proficiency levels ranging from B2 to C1. This methodology was implemented in 6-credit discourse analysis classes to examine students' practical application of discourse markers in authentic real-life contexts, bridging theoretical knowledge with practical usage. The students were divided into 5 groups with each group consisting of 4 members, overall 24 participants. The activity included 4 main stages ranging from individual work to group based.

In the first stage, each student was asked to individually draw a picture based on the topic "A Planet You Want to Live On." This task was completed without discussing ideas with other group members, allowing for original ideas beyond conventional boundaries. 5 minutes were given to complete this task. Once the drawing time ended, the instructor checked each picture and noticed the uniqueness of every illustration, such as the Bermuda Triangle, the Jurassic era with dinosaurs, planets, sakura trees, swans, stunning landscapes, breathtaking views from castle, ocean, a simple house in the middle of the forest and many other imaginative settings. In the second stage, students were asked to share their drawings within their assigned groups and write one coherent story. The details from all members' individual drawings should be combined and for this task 1 hour was given. This part of the activity aimed to develop teamwork, communication, and storytelling skills. The third stage involved exchanging the written stories between groups and analyzing it using specific evaluation criteria provided by the teacher.

Given criteria:

- a) How does the writer open the piece? Did you like the story? Was it easy to follow? Why?
- a) How does the writer move on to another point?

- b) How does the writer introduce a contradicting idea if there is any?
- c) How is the text concluded?
- d) How is the writer effective in the use of linking words and what might be more effective?

The final, fourth stage involved presenting the stories aloud. One member from each group read their story with proper intonation and pronunciation. After the reading, the group that had analyzed the story shared their report based on the given criteria. This was followed by a class-wide discussion where all groups had the opportunity to share their thoughts and feedback. This stage is crucial because it bridges written and spoken discourse - two distinct but interconnected modes of communication. By reading the story aloud, the students not only practiced expressive speaking but also gained a deeper understanding of how meaning can change through tone, stress, and delivery. <sup>4</sup>As Goldberg (1980) emphasizes that discourse markers serve to display the speaker's awareness of the logical and sequential connection between their present contribution and the previously established information. This helped make certain parts of the text clearer and more engaging. Additionally, the stories varied in form (e.g., dialogues, narrative texts, and mixed), allowing students to explore diverse structures and styles in discourse.

## **Findings**

### **a. Expression oriented drafting**

Traditional classroom instruction typically relies on textbooks and predetermined tasks. However, this activity follows a completely different script. The first stage requires students to draw a picture related to the theme of "A Planet You Want to Live On" which encourages creative and personal expression rather than repetitive or textbook-based responses. Without any formal introduction or reliance on standard instructions, students are invited to think freely and engage with the task in an open, imaginative way. This sense of freedom not only increases student involvement but also stimulates independent thinking. Moreover, the visual prompts generated by the drawings serve as the foundation for original narratives that unfold throughout the activity.

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<sup>4</sup> Julia Goldberg, Discourse particles: An analysis of the role of 'you know', 'I mean', 'well' and 'actually' in conversation-1980

### **b. Logical sequencing through collaboration**

In the next stage, students work in small groups to combine their individual images into a single, meaningful narrative. During this collaborative process, they must negotiate the sequence of events—deciding which picture comes first, what follows next, and how to connect the different stories. This encourages critical thinking, flexibility in communication, and justification of choices, while also fostering character development and the ability to compare and evaluate alternative storylines. By engaging in these activities, students strengthen their higher-order thinking skills and create narratives that are both original and engaging, capturing the interest of participants and enhancing overall involvement in the task. Also, the process of visually representing ideas and then articulating them into a shared narrative reinforces memory retention and deep understanding of concepts. It cultivates confidence in public speaking, as students present and defend their collective stories, and nurtures self-reflection, as learners evaluate their contributions and decision-making strategies throughout the activity. Collectively, these benefits contribute to a richer, more holistic learning experience that extends beyond traditional classroom outcomes.

### **c. Natural use of discourse markers**

In the next stage, students independently select their topics based on the pictures they have drawn. At this point, they begin creating the narrative, developing each event in detail and constructing characters cohesively and coherently to form a complete story. During this process, learners naturally apply discourse markers to connect ideas, express contrasts, and build overall cohesion, allowing the narrative to flow smoothly. This approach not only facilitates the natural use of discourse markers without relying on textbook rules but also encourages deeper engagement, creativity, and critical thinking. By allowing learners to express their creativity, collaborate with peers, and construct their own narratives, the activity transforms the classroom into an interactive and dynamic environment.

### **d. Multi perspective peer analysis**

Once students have shaped their stories, the narratives are shuffled, and the instructor distributes them to different groups, allowing each group to work on a story created by others. After receiving the new story, groups are given time to analyze it carefully, considering elements such as clarity, coherence, and the



effectiveness of idea development. Following this analysis, each group reads their own story aloud in front of the class, paying attention to intonation and pronunciation, while the group that received their copy analyzes the story. They consider how clearly the story conveys ideas, and provide suggestions for evaluating its content, interpretation, and underlying morals. Following this, a full-class discussion is opened, allowing all students - not just the immediate group - to participate. During this discussion, students identify strengths, weaknesses, and alternative strategies to enhance coherence, interest, and logical flow. They reflect on traditional functions of discourse markers, such as connecting ideas, showing contrast, addition, and sequencing, while also recognizing their extended use in enriching narrative style, emphasizing key ideas, and supporting creativity and cohesion.<sup>5</sup> Discourse markers have a variable scope within the discourse of which they form a part. For example, students might note how the use of “however” highlights a turning point in the story, or how “moreover” and “in addition” help link character actions and events smoothly. Finally, students compare the original and revised versions of their narratives, applying the feedback received to produce a more polished and coherent final story. This process not only strengthens their writing and storytelling skills but also demonstrates how discourse markers function not merely as structural tools, but as instruments for expressive, creative, and cohesive communication.

**Traditional learning (Theoretical).** <sup>6</sup>Traditional learning, also known as theoretical-based teaching, is an approach in which instruction primarily focuses on rules, explanations, and textbook exercises rather than practical application. In this method, the learning process usually begins with the teacher introducing a topic, the same process happened with us, following by a lecture on theme-discourse markers, their types, functions, and categories. Then, we, students are provided with clear examples to illustrate how each type functions in context. For instance, the teacher showed a sentence like: <sup>7</sup>“You could fly via Singapore; however, it’s not the only way,” where “however” is used as a contrastive discourse marker. Another example was: <sup>8</sup>“He studied hard; therefore, he passed

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<sup>5</sup> Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen and Jacqueline Visconti, *Manual of Discourse Markers in Romance*- 2024, page 7

<sup>6</sup> M.J.B Paredes and E.A.V Currillo, *La Pedagogia Tradicional en Latinoamerica: Impacto y Desafios en la Educacion Actual*- Apr.2025

<sup>7</sup> Martin Hewings, *Advanced Grammar in Use*, third edition-2013, page 174

<sup>8</sup> Betty Schrampher Azar, *Understanding and Using English Grammar*, third edition-2002, page 387



the exam,” with “therefore” indicating a result. During the lesson, which we experienced firsthand, students are asked to identify and classify discourse markers after the lecture. We were given handouts containing pre-written texts and instructed to highlight all discourse markers, specifying their functions in each sentence - for example, whether a marker indicated cause, result, addition, or contrast. In the next step, we were asked to rewrite sentences using alternative discourse markers to make them smoother and more varied.<sup>9</sup> Discourse markers depends on the discourse where it is embedded. For example, a sentence with “therefore” might be rewritten using “as a result” to convey the same meaning. After completing our revisions, the original texts were presented again, and we compared our versions with the teacher’s examples. The teacher guided us through corrections, explanations, and discussion, reinforcing the rules and functions of each marker.

While this theoretical approach helps students understand the rules, categories, and basic functions of discourse markers, it has limitations. Learners follow guidance and rely on examples, leaving little room to experiment or internalize discourse markers independently. Creativity, natural use, and intuitive application are restricted because activities are confined to pre-written texts and controlled exercises. From that experience, although this method is useful for grasping foundational knowledge, it does not foster the ability to apply discourse markers spontaneously in authentic writing or speaking. Text books and pre-written materials allow students to identify errors and compare them with corrected or enhanced versions, still observing the use and function of discourse markers in context, theory-only learning often emphasize memorization and abstract understanding, with limited opportunities for students to apply discourse markers in meaningful communications. While this approach supports recognition and understanding, it does not provide opportunities for learners to generate their own sentences or employ discourse markers independently. Consequently, students engage in passive observation rather than active construction of language, making this method less interactive and less conducive to creative application compared to collaborative, practical activities.

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<sup>9</sup> Shanru Yang, Investigating Discourse Markers in Chinese college EFL Teacher Talk: A Multi-layered Analytical Approach- 2014, page 29



## **Discussion**

The findings of this classroom project demonstrate that practical, activity-based learning offers clear advantages over traditional theoretical instruction when teaching discourse markers. The study was conducted among undergraduate learners, and the results clearly show that while theoretical instruction helped them understand the basic definitions, categories, and rules of discourse markers, it did not lead to confident or natural use in real communication. Undergraduate students tended to rely heavily on memorized explanations during theoretical lessons, and their engagement remained largely passive. However, when placed in practical, activity-based tasks - such as drawing, storytelling, sequencing events, and group analysis - they demonstrated significantly greater creativity, autonomy, and communicative competence. Students who engaged in drawing, collaborative storytelling, and peer analysis showed stronger understanding and more flexible use of discourse markers than those who relied only on textbook explanations. This suggests that practical activities create a meaningful environment where students can apply theoretical knowledge in real communication. These practical tasks required learners to apply discourse markers spontaneously to connect ideas, express contrast, highlight cause and effect, and maintain coherence. As a result, practical lessons supported deeper learning and helped them internalize discourse markers far more effectively than traditional, theory-centered instruction. The practical approach proved more effective primarily because it placed students in situations where discourse markers were needed to create coherence and logical sequencing. When students combined the diverse elements from their drawings and worked together to construct a single narrative, they naturally negotiated meaning, decided on story order, and selected appropriate connectors. This active decision-making allowed students to understand not only the basic functions of discourse markers, but also their extended uses in real contexts. In contrast, theoretical exercises, such as filling gaps or analyzing pre-written texts, helped students recognize discourse markers but did not push them to produce them independently. Moreover, the practical tasks generated higher engagement and motivation. Students were interested in their peers' drawings, curious about the story they would produce, and eager to compare their narrative with other groups during the peer-review stage. This level of involvement was not observed in theoretical activities, which tended to focus on identifying rules rather than using language creatively. Peer-



group interaction also provided multiple perspectives, which helped students understand how different discourse markers can change the flow and rhythm of a text. This collaborative environment enabled deeper learning than the individual, rule-focused approach found in theoretical methods.

However, it is important to recognize that theoretical instruction still has value. It provides students with foundational definitions, common patterns, and structural explanations that support correct usage. Yet, the findings of our experience show that theory alone is not sufficient for achieving productive mastery. When theoretical input is combined with practical tasks, students can transfer their knowledge into meaningful communication. Therefore, the practical approach should not replace theory, but rather be prioritized as the main driver of active learning.

Overall, the patterns observed in this project strongly suggest that practical, hands-on activities allow students to internalize discourse markers more naturally and effectively than purely theoretical tasks.

## **Conclusion**

<sup>10</sup>This project explored how practical, collaborative activities can enhance students' understanding and use of discourse markers and help the listener in the process of decoding these information use. By drawing individually, creating stories in groups, analyzing peers' narratives, and presenting final versions with intonation, students moved beyond memorizing rules and instead used discourse markers purposefully and creatively. The comparison between theoretical and practical methods demonstrated that while theoretical explanations provide essential background knowledge, they remain limited in developing productive skills.

The practical approach proved more engaging, more motivating, and more effective in helping students apply discourse markers accurately in both written and spoken discourse. Students became active participants in meaning-making, used discourse markers to connect ideas logically, and learned from one another through peer feedback. These outcomes highlight the value of integrating practical, student-centered activities in teaching discourse markers. In conclusion, the evidence from this classroom experience supports the idea that

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<sup>10</sup> Erman, B, Pragmatic expressions in English: A study of you know, you see and I mean in face to face conversation- 1987

practical learning should play a central role in discourse-marker instruction. When students work collaboratively, use visual prompts, and construct narratives themselves, they deepen their understanding and gain confidence in using discourse markers in authentic communication. Future studies may explore similar activities with larger groups or different proficiency levels, but the findings of this project clearly show that practical, hands-on methods are highly effective for promoting meaningful language learning.

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