

Academic Writing of EFL Students' Undergraduate Theses: A Discourse Marker Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Writing the background is obligatory in undergraduate theses, and discourse markers are essential to creating cohesion and coherence in academic writing. Thus, this paper aimed to investigate discourse markers used by the undergraduate students in writing their thesis backgrounds and the extent of accuracy of the use of DMs in the students' thesis backgrounds. Data were collected from 28 undergraduate thesis backgrounds written by the students of the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta batch 2016, who graduated between May 2020 and January 2021. Descriptive research was employed, and the data were examined using document analysis. Results showed that elaborative markers were used 763 times (74.58%) and followed by reason markers 95 times (9.29%), inferential markers 85 times (8.31%), and contrastive markers 80 times (7.82%). In general, the EFL students used DMs accurately in their thesis backgrounds. Some DMs were, however, used inappropriately. It is essential that the EFL students better understand how to use DMs appropriately when writing their thesis backgrounds.

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Academic Writing, Discourse Markers, Thesis Background

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1. Introduction

Writing skills can be used in various social contexts to demonstrate intellectual activities. Moreover, it is needed for teachers to simplify the ideas and concepts to make the students understand the materials. (Al-khazraji, 2019; Chow, 2017; Sanford, 2012; Yunus & Haris, 2014). Specifically, academic writing skills are essential for undergraduate students. It is challenging for non-native English-speaking students to write academically where the language of instruction may require written linguistic capabilities (Mallia, 2017). The academic expectation may be challenging for EFL students as the writing acquires them to reach the academic skills needed for higher education. Coherence and cohesion are two factors to master good writing skills (Al-khazraji, 2019; An, 2019; Jalilifar, 2008).

To accomplish academic writing effectively, EFL students need to use discourse markers (DMs) appropriately. DMs, in academic writing, are an essential point to be used in writing as can be seen as an error among EFL writers – when misused. (Al-khazraji, 2019; Kamah & Noori, 2015; Karaata, Cepik, & Cetin, 2012). The EFL undergraduate students may need, for example, to write theses to graduate. The challenges they have while writing their undergraduate theses require academic writing skills, and they need to use discourse markers as a linguistic strategy to develop writing coherence and cohesion (Kamah & Noori, 2015; Karaata et al., 2012). DMs function to achieve coherence between the ideas expressed in the discourse, such as cause-result and temporal order (Larasati, 2018). Moreover, DMs increase the aptitude to develop the language in an adaptable style of writing (Tannen, Hamilton, & Schiffrin, 2015).

The term *discourse marker* (DM) is defined as “a growth market in linguistics” (Fraser, 1998) so that it is a class of linguistic aspects which function in Social, Expressive, Textual, and Cognitive Domains. DMs are also known as phrases to connect the previous sentences to the next section of sentences (Al-khazraji, 2019). Fraser (1998, p.29) also stated that “lexical expressions which are syntactically independent of the basic sentence structure and have a general core meaning which signals the relationship of the current utterance to the prior utterance”. DMs have a crucial function in writing. They connect the ideas to be united. Understanding DMs is obligatory so that the writers can use them to enhance their expertise (Al-khazraji, 2019). Discourse markers are a must for ESL learners to understand how to use them in their writing. The writers can use DMs by linking the ideas and make the paragraph more efficient (Ali, Kalajahi, & Abdullah, 2012). To

conclude, understanding the functions of DMs can affect the quality of writing. Furthermore, DMs are an essential element of communicative proficiency, which helps students to create profound and assured sentences (Rahimi, 2011).

Based on the previous studies and explanations, it is urgent for the researchers to conduct a study on discourse markers and solve the following two questions. First, what discourse markers are used by the undergraduate students of the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University in writing the thesis backgrounds? Second, to what extent of quality is the use of DMs in the students' thesis backgrounds?

In this paper, DMs in students' academic writings were analyzed using Fraser's (1999) taxonomy. The DMs were in the forms of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. The meaning of DMs, as Fraser (1999) stated, is pragmatic rather than conceptual. They indicate the relationship between the interpretation of the second segment, S2, to the previous segment, S1 (Fraser, 1999; see also Martínez, 2004; Povolná, 2012). Fraser divided DMs into four classes, namely contrastive markers, which are used to interpret the contrasts of the S2 to the S1; elaborative markers, which explain the parallel interpretation of S1 and S2, inferential markers, which conclude S2 in a signal to conclude the S1, and reason markers in which the S2 provides a reason for the S1' content presented. The group will be informed in Table 1.

Table 1. Fraser's taxonomy of discourse markers (1999)

Markers	Examples
Contrastive	"but, however, although, though, in contrast (with/ to this/ that), whereas, in comparison (with/ to this/ that), on the contrary, contrary to this/that, conversely, instead (of (doing) this/that), rather (than (doing) this/that), on the other hand, despite (doing) this/that, in spite of (doing) this/that, nevertheless, nonetheless, still"
Elaborative	"and, above all, also, besides, better yet, for another thing, furthermore, in addition, moreover, more to the point, on top of it all, to cap it all off, what is more, (Subject) mean, in particular, namely, parenthetically, that is (to say), analogously, by the same token, correspondingly, equally, likewise, similarly, be that as it may, otherwise, that said, well"
Inferential	"so, of course, accordingly, as a consequence, as a logical conclusion, as a result, because of this/that, consequently, for this/that reason, hence, it can be concluded that, therefore, thus, in this/that, under these/those conditions, then, all things considered"
Reason	"after all, because, for this/that reason, since"

The following are some studies on DMs. Martínez (2004) investigated the DMs of Spanish undergraduate students in their expository writings. The researcher collected 78 first-year expository essays of English students at the Chemistry Faculty, University of Oviedo. The study found that elaborative markers were frequently used by the students. The more the students used DMs, the higher the score students got. Since they were expository writings, elaborative markers were used because they were related to the compositions' quality closely. Jalilifar (2008) explored the descriptive essays written by 90 Iranian students. The researcher collected 598 data written by the students for eight weeks. Students using DMs had different degrees of occurrences. Elaborative markers were frequently used by the students. Moreover, the quality of the writing was well-functioned since there was a direct and positive relationship. The students were also assumed to have a sound understanding of the English language if they used DMs frequently (the amount of practice, reading, and language experience level).

Povolná (2012) examined a corpus of fifteen Master's theses written by the final year students of the English Language Department, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno. The students needed to choose three topic areas provided of the theses, namely linguistics, literature and culture, and methodology. The findings showed that some students used DMs incorrectly. L2 speakers tended to use limited repertoires that caused the overuse of particular DMs. The study also found that although the participants were Master's degree students, their academic writings were not advanced yet of language-learning at the university level.

Next, Adewibowo, Imranuddin, and Azwandi (2018) analyzed the DMs in the background chapters of undergraduate theses of 30 students in the English Language Program, Bengkulu University. In the study, the researchers analyzed ten thesis backgrounds. The findings of the study showed that the students used inferential markers more frequently than the other three DMs proposed by Fraser (1999). The study also found that the accuracy percentage in the data was temporal markers with 78.57% out of 100%.

2. Methodology

This study was descriptive research and was based on a corpus of 28 undergraduate thesis backgrounds written by students of the final year of study (semester eight) at the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teachers Training and Education, Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta in. For their writing theses, they needed to choose one of three fields or tracks, namely education, linguistics, or literature.

The researchers grouped the participants' data by sorting the names of the participants. Since this study only focused on the thesis background, the researcher concentrated on the first chapter and separated it into new files. The researcher split each sentence and gave several sentences to identify the DMs. A sentence is considered a unit of a sentence if the full stop (.) existed as Aarts (2014, as alleged in Yin, 2016) stated that "a sentence is defined as the main clause with all its associated dependent clauses, and for all the purposes of analysis, is identified by orthographical cues (i.e., begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop). After that, the researchers analyzed the data by categorizing the DMs into four based on the primary work of Fraser (1999), namely CM for Contrastive Markers, EM for Elaborative Markers, IM for Inferential Markers, and RM for Reason Markers. Next, the researchers calculated the DMs by finding the DMs manually using Microsoft Excel. Next, the data were examined to group the types and occurrences of DMs used by the students. The quantity of DMs was then presented in a table. Lastly, the writer described the excerpt using the number of data and the students' nickname initials to make it easier to be analyzed descriptively.

3. Result

This study found that the undergraduate students used all types of DMs in their background chapter of an undergraduate thesis. The analysis of all kinds of DMs used is written in the first part of the result. Furthermore, there are several appropriate and inappropriate use of DMs. The students' writings' quality of accuracy was discussed in the second part.

3.1 Types of Discourse Markers

The following are the results of this study as the answer to the first research question, namely to what DMs were used by the undergraduate students in writing their thesis backgrounds. The DMs were contrastive, elaborative, inferential, and reason markers, based on Fraser's (1999) taxonomy.

Table 2. Types and occurrences of DMs

No	Types of DMs	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
1.	Contrastive Markers	80	7,82
2.	Elaborative Markers	763	74,58
3.	Inferential Markers	85	8,31
4.	Reason Markers	95	9,29
	Total	1023	100

Table 2 showed that the most frequent DM used by the students of the English Language Education Study Programme (ELES) of Sanata Dharma University were Elaborative Markers. This type was used 763 times (74.58%) and followed by Reason Markers 95 times (9.29%), Inferential Markers 85 times (8.31%), and last Contrastive Markers 80 times (7.82%).

Nine elaborative markers appeared in the thesis backgrounds, namely 'and', 'also', 'besides', 'furthermore', 'in addition', 'moreover', 'in particular', 'well', and 'namely'. The most commonly used Elaborative Markers were 'and', 'also', and 'namely'; 'and' was used 620 times, 'also' 89 times, 'namely' 18 times. The other six Elaborative Markers were used less than 15 times. 'Moreover' was used 12 times, 'besides' 9 times, 'furthermore' nine times, 'in addition' two twice, 'in particular' twice, and 'well' also twice. Only two reason markers were used in the thesis backgrounds, namely 'because', which was used 74 times, and 'since' 21 times. Eight inferential markers appeared in this study, namely 'so', 'of course', 'because of this', 'consequently', 'therefore', 'thus', 'then', and 'all things considered'. The participants used inferential markers 'therefore' and 'so' more frequently than the other six inferential markers. 'Therefore' was used 24 times and 'so' 22 times. The other six inferential markers were used less than 15 times. They were 'because of this', which was used 13 times, 'then' 12 times, 'thus' 11 times, 'of course' once, 'consequently' once, and 'all things considered' also once.

Nine contrastive markers that appeared in the thesis backgrounds were 'but', 'however', 'although', 'though', 'rather than', 'on the other hand', 'despite', 'instead of', and 'still'. The most common elaborative markers used in this study were 'but' 44 times. The other eight contrastive markers are used less than 20 times. They are 'however' which is used 17

times, 'despites' which is used four times, 'although' which is used three times, 'rather than' which is used two times, 'on the other hand' which is used two times, and 'instead of' which is used once.

3.2. The Quality of DM Uses

The researchers support distinguishing results based on Fraser's (1999) theory about DMs used in the thesis backgrounds. The use of DMs demonstrated the students' understanding of the composition of academic writing, and the students misused some DMs between clauses and sentences.

a. Contrastive Markers

Excerpt 1:

*"Kumara (2016) said that vocabulary is not only about remembering or memorizing the word, **but** as a student, they should be able to understand the meaning of the word, remember the word, know how to pronounce and spell, and also how to use the word in the context correctly."* (24T)

The "but" word in this excerpt did not explain the contrastive markers. On the contrary, it means a correlative conjunction to connect both S1 and S2 with equal value. Meanwhile, the writer wrote incorrectly due to the forms of a correlative conjunction. Since the S1 stated as "but also", the following sentence should be followed by "but also". Likewise, the sentence parallelism did not apply well in this excerpt. The writer used V-ing in the S1 and should be followed by the same pattern in S2. In fact, the writer wrote different patterns like "as a student, they should be able ...". The interpretation in this excerpt is inappropriate due to the meaning of contrastive markers itself. The writer also did not put the comma (,) after the word 'but' and 'student', which can make the message of the writing unexplainable well.

b. Elaborative Markers

Excerpt 2:

*"Just like other human beings, Sam, as the main character of 'Before I Fall' movie, spends her adulthood to be a better human, for herself and her surroundings. At the very beginning of the movie, just like many teenagers, Sam does not really care about her surroundings **besides** her inner circle, which is her close friends. She got her lesson about how important her actions impact other people and vice versa. Sam also realizes how meaningful her presence towards her family member is. Based on that, the researcher is interested in how Sam, as a human being, develops her personality".* (24T)

In excerpt 2, the use of 'besides' was not to elaborate between S1 and S2 but more in explaining the exception of the topic discussed in the thesis background. It was considered as a misused discourse marker. 'Besides', in elaborative markers, was used to add more information to strengthen the ideas. And, the use of 'besides' of elaborating S1 and S2 can be seen in excerpt three below.

Excerpt 3:

*"Those six ways are women are supposed to use deeper voices, taboo languages, prosodic features, more assertive style for group interaction, swearing, and speak nonstandard accents. For example, women are supposed to speak non-standard accents while speaking to make the interaction more relax. **Besides**, women could use taboo language like bloody hell or shit to express a feeling of surprise to show that they have a close personal relation with others".* (16K)

c. Inferential Markers

Excerpt 4:

*"By doing this research, the teacher can find out the students limit of vocabulary size and level, **So**, the teacher can design the best course for the students on increasing their English"* (24T)

The meaning of this except is correct because the S2 is the conclusion of S1 in the form of a solution that to increase students' vocabulary level, the teacher needed to create the course to reinforce their English skills. However, the word "so" cannot be placed initially in the sentence. This excerpt is inappropriate due to the word structure.

d. Reason Markers

Excerpt 5:

*"If they teach the student with violence and cruelty, the students wouldn't want to go to school. Love is the most enjoyable matter for the readers **because** they have ever felt love in their daily life. People love to read or to know something about love because it has some mystery and miracle". (4A)*

In excerpt 5, the use of 'because' was inappropriate since the students put the DMs after "coma". 'Because' is used to provide a reason for S1 in S2. The use of 'because' should not be put "coma" before the word since the "coma" was unnecessary.

Excerpt 6:

*"**Because** the newspaper headline uses another style of English, this research was done in order to find out whether English as Foreign Language (EFL) students were aware of the lexical item in the newspaper headline". (10E)*

As shown in excerpt 6, the student put 'because' in S1 to give a reason in S2. Meanwhile, the students did not provide more information in S2, and it made the information be not delivered deeply or in detail.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate DMs used in thesis backgrounds. The interpretation of DMs' accuracy was also investigated. The larger number of elaborative markers is considered good writings because the students could compose and describe the research background effectively (Jalilifar, 2008; Povolná, 2012). Drawing from the analysis, the students perceived an excellent understanding of using the DMs since the researchers found few inappropriate uses of DMs. DMs are not only a way for students to connect clauses and paragraphs (Al-khazraji, 2019; Al Kohlani, 2010; Ali et al., 2012), but also construct the understanding and knowledge (Kamah & Noori, 2015; Yunus & Haris, 2014). The use of DMs also created a better understanding of why the students conducted the research. DMs help the flow of the first idea, second idea, and the rest of the ideas (Jalilifar, 2008).

DMs affected writing coherence and cohesion (Al-khazraji, 2019; Karaata et al., 2012). The more frequent DMs the students used, the more collaborative paragraphs and ideas the writer produced (An, 2018; An, 2019; Martínez, 2004). Thus, since the students are EFL speakers, the varieties DMs used by them as not as native speakers used in a different function even though their understanding of describing the background was satisfying (Min, 2011). Moreover, the use of DMs could be ambiguous in some contexts.

5. Conclusion

The study found four DMs used by the students, namely inferential markers, elaborative markers, contrastive markers, and reason markers. The frequent markers discovered in this study were elaborative markers which were used 74.58%, followed by reason markers (9.29%), inferential markers (8.31%), and contrastive markers (7.82%). There was also a strong connection between the use of DMs and the writing quality. The students were considered good writers since their use of elaborative markers was the highest among other markers. However, some DMs were misused. When the DMs were misused, they may affect the delivery and ideas in writing. Moreover, discourse markers are consequential in academic writing. DMs build coherence and cohesion and create the understanding of topic explanations to readers.

The limitations of this study are the causes of the high and low occurrences of each DM received no thorough explanations. Future studies are, therefore, encouraged to explore such causes. DMs are essential for EFL undergraduate students, especially in their final year of study, which may require them to write theses. Thus, they need to have a better understanding of the use of DMs. As student writers, they are also encouraged to understand that cohesion and coherence are crucial aspects in their undergraduate thesis academic writing.

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