

## How Does Explicit and Implicit Instruction of Formal Meta-discourse Markers Affect Learners' Oral Proficiency?

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### Abstract

Meta-discourse markers are an inevitable part of oral proficiency which improve both the quality and comprehension of learners' speech. While studies of oral meta-discourse have been conducted since the 1980s in a European or US context, they have remained relatively untouched in Iran. Therefore, this study aimed to seek the impact of both explicit and implicit teaching of formal meta-discourse markers on EFL learners' oral proficiency. To this end, the quantitative data were collected from ninety upper-intermediate students at Shiraz University Language Center. Two groups went through an instruction for an eight-session treatment. However the experimental group 'B' (N=45) were instructed the formal meta-discourse markers implicitly, the target formal meta-discourse markers were taught to the experimental group 'A' (N=45) explicitly. To compare the participants' performances, an SOPI (Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview) posttest was administered. The results revealed that the instruction of meta-discourse markers had a positive effect on the learners' oral outcome. Moreover, the findings showed that learners who received explicit method of teaching formal meta-discourse markers could perform better in speaking than learners who received implicit instruction. The findings can have pedagogical implications for EFL educators and materials developers to enhance learners' oral proficiency. The findings also provide important insight into the effect of teaching discourse markers and raising learners' awareness through explicit instruction to make pupils produce more cohesive and coherent speech.

**Keywords:** Explicit instruction, implicit instruction, Meta-discourse markers, oral proficiency

### Introduction

One of the most significant and essential criteria for having an appropriate use of the English language is using meta-discourse markers that are a group of cohesive ties or connecting items that lead to cohesion and fluency of speech. The omission of meta-discourse markers in one's speech can make learners' speech seem incoherent, impolite, and awkward to talk to. As it is quite evident in native speakers' oral speech patterns, a bulk of various categories of discourse markers with various roles are used. Moreover, it is quite common for native speakers of every language to make use of discourse markers (DMs) in their daily conversations and that is why their speech looks pretty spontaneous and natural. In other words, meta-discourse markers have a pivotal role in smoothing spontaneous communication between speakers as well as facilitating comprehension of the addressees. Hence, if EFL learners wish to have a more natural and native-like speech, they ought to apply meta-discourse makers to their speech properly (Fuller, 2003).

Several definitions for the term ‘Discourse marker’ have been provided by different scholars. For instance, terms such as *discourse marker* (Schiffrin 1987), *pragmatic marker* (Fraser 1996), *discourse particle* (Schourup 1985), *pragmatic particle* (Östman 1981), *pragmatic expression* (Erman 1987), and *connectives* (Blakemore 2001) were used by some authors to refer to the linguistic elements that are applied as connecting devices in any given discourse. Nevertheless, the word “Discourse markers” is the most applied one used by most scholars who made research on English language discourse. While there has always been a controversy on an appropriate term that can best clarify these kinds of cohesive ties, DMs do play a significant role in the organization of native speaker discourse. As an instance, in the same regard, Schiffrin (1987) defined DMs as “sequentially dependent items which bracket units of talk.” DMs can facilitate hearer comprehension and help smooth spontaneous interaction between speakers through conveying different roles. For example, *you know* is usually used to indicate the salience of the data sent by the speaker, *oh* might be used to point to a speaker’s receipt of a piece of new information, and *ok* may be used as moving towards closure of speech.

Furthermore, taking into account the everyday use of meta-discourse markers in the spoken discourse of native speakers and the significant role that DMs play in the appropriateness and naturalness of speech, it can be argued that they should be included in EFL learners’ syllabus as well. But, based on some previous studies such as the one done by Shen Ying (1998) on the application of discourse markers, maintained that these connecting ties are not included in the EFL curricula despite the critical role they play in learners’ everyday oral discourse. As De Klerk (2005) puts it, this might be due to “their lack of clear semantic denotation and syntactic role, which makes formal or explicit commentary on their use fairly difficult”. Further, if a non-native speaker does not use any type of discourse markers, native speakers will not be able to distinguish the possible grammatical mistakes.

Consequently, because of the fact that Discourse markers are not explicitly instructed in classroom settings and EFL pupils can speak grammatically without the use of discourse markers, these cohesive ties are often underused and underestimated for Iranian EFL learners who try to learn English in a formal setting. Overall, it could be stated that there exists a lack of instruction on the employment of formal meta-discourse markers in formal English language classrooms. Also, the use of DMs is of great importance in the native discourse context. Research done on discourse markers so far have ascertained that if an L2 speaker is more accustomed to the L2 culture or wishes to sound more like a native speaker, he might notice how “things are said” and employ those “conventional expressions” (that is, DMs) by the native speakers in the target community (de Klerk, 2005; Hellermann and Vergun, 2007). Further, Sankoff et al. (1997) mentioned that applying DMs is an ideal indicator of the extent to which an L2 learner desires to be acculturated into the local community since DMs are normally not part of the traditional classroom setting curriculum, and L2 speakers generally perceive these cohesive items through interaction with native speakers. To put it in another way, it is believed that in case that an EFL speaker has more contact with the native speakers or tries to be more integrated in their community, he will definitely make use of more discourse markers compared to those who do not.

Concerning the fact that it has been previously proved that meta-discourse markers render a well-organized structure to speech patterns, this research provides the educators with a palpable roadmap about how Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners might benefit from knowing more about the salience and employment of DMs in their speech. Research on the differences between English discourse produced by a native and non-native speaker (Tyler, 1992) has shown that native speakers’ discourse includes a wide range of discourse organizing devices that make their

speech more and more coherent to their listeners. Nonetheless, a lack of discourse use in non-native discourse might result in communication misunderstandings for English native listeners. Moreover, a bulk of studies done on DMs in Iran dealt with the two receptive skills of listening and reading. On the other side of the coin, little work has been done on Iranian EFL learners' oral proficiency.

One of the significant yardsticks of EFL language learners' speaking competence is the ability to produce a coherent speech and possess discourse cohesion (McCarthy, 1993). As a result, In case language learners wish to develop organized, connected, and well-formed speech, they should enhance the skills to use a spectrum of cohesive ties and connectors, consisting of formal meta-discourse markers, to organize their oral outcome cohesively and coherently.

However, it is argued that EFL learners often have various obstacles in organizing their speech into a well-structured meaningful whole (Shen Ying, 1998). This issue might be due to the fact that English language learners have their own specific process of conveying messages through employing oral discourse and because language learners attempt to transfer their mother tongue system into the destination system, they have problems in managing their speech in a natural and coherent way.

On the other side, the lack of sufficient hours of teaching on the appropriate use of meta-discourse markers in EFL formal language learning settings is often observed and as a consequence, EFL learners who are mostly detached from native speaker contexts and their language learning opportunities are limited to classroom environments suffer from this lack of instruction (Shen Ying, 1998).

Thereof, there seems to be an urgent need to deeply explore and distinguish EFL learners' oral discourse patterns to evaluate the way they attempt to convey meaning in English by the use of cohesive items, and also distinguish their problems. So, through the instruction of formal meta-discourse markers, instructors can aid them to have a deeper viewpoint of discourse markers and the way they are applied in order to have a cohesive speech in English.

In order to help Iranian EFL language learners to increase their communicative competence and solve their problems in the complicated process of learning, English instructors have to distinguish learners' ability to maintain discourse cohesion. Therefore, this research, aimed at investigating Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' use of formal cohesive devices (discourse markers) in their English speaking, and exploring if there exists any inappropriate use, underuse, or overuse of these cohesive ties. Furthermore, it is aimed to explore the possible impact of explicit instruction of formal-meta discourse markers on learners' oral proficiency. Moreover, the current study wants to determine the distribution of frequent target formal meta-discourse markers used by learners in speaking and comparing.

Taking into account the goals of the current research, the following research question is proposed:

RQ: Is there any meaningful and significant difference in the oral outcome of those who receive explicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers and those who receive implicit instruction?

### **Literature Review**

Meta-discourse markers, already defined as expressions like *well*, *but*, *oh*, and *you know*, are linguistic elements that function in discourses of different contexts or registers. Concerning this issue, Fraser (1998) attempted to introduce the analysis of meta-discourse marker as an emerging concept in linguistics. Also, since the 1980s meta-discourse markers have been analyzed in a variety of languages and evaluated in a variety of genres and interactive contexts,

although many educators and authors do not agree on how to categorize them, let alone what to call them. Redeker (1991, 1168) preferred to call them discourse operators and defined them as “a word or phrase, for instance, a conjunction, adverbial, comment clause, interjection that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to listener’s attention a particular kind of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context.” Schiffrin proposed “an operational definition” defined discourse markers more theoretically as “constituents of a functional category of verbal and nonverbal elements which provide contextual coordinates for ongoing conversation” (1987, 41).

Discourse markers have a critical role in interactions (Carter and McCarthy 2006), and they have a high frequency of occurrence in spoken English context. So far, a bulk of literature exist on discourse markers (Clark and Fox Tree 2002; Fraser 1990, 1996, 1999; Jucker and Ziv 1998; Schiffrin 1987, 1994; Schourup 1985; Fox Tree and Schrock 2002). However, experts and educators’ viewpoints are not in the same line concerning their taxonomies and categorizations. This challenge has led to applying different terms by many researchers. Furthermore, Fung and Carter (2007:410) have asserted that ‘relatively little work has been done on the distribution and variety of DMs used in spoken English by EFL/ESL language speakers. However, in spite of this disagreement, there are many DMs that can be easily spotted in daily conversations. They are terms like *uh*, *um*, *yeah*, and *you know*.

Discourse markers are primarily defined by Schiffrin (1987, p.31) as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” and they usually make conversations and interactions coherent by connecting the different parts of discourse in a comprehensible way. In the same vine, Akande (2008, p.81) claimed that DMs are “peripheral to the syntax of the sentence or the clause they relate to since they can be omitted without making any special changes to the overall format of the phrase or paragraph”. This means that DMs could be deleted and such omission does not influence the real value of the proposition in the sentence or the text. Meta-discourse markers are performance additions that transfer different interactive intentions without which effective communication in spontaneous talks may be impaired (Levelt, 1989). In addition, Blakemore (2006) argued that the concept of meta-discourse marker is generally used to refer to the set of similar types of expressions that are known by their function in any given discourse and the type of meaning they convey.” The main indicator of all these is that discourse markers are communicative elements through which participants in oral speech can give and take meaning and negotiate with one another cooperatively. From a syntactic point of view, DMs do not have major roles and can be omitted without impairing the real values of the propositions in which they represent (Rouchota, 1998).

Besides, DMs are often employed optionally due to the fact that they do not affect the propositional nature of the sentences in which they occur. This is confirmed by the fact that the grammaticality of an utterance remains intact even after the DM in it is omitted. Accordingly, the constituents of DMs can be a single word, a phrase, or a clause (Gupta, 2006).

Brinton (1996) also mentioned that DMs have been the most common name for “seemingly empty expressions found in oral discourse”, however, she suggested the term pragmatic markers, as pragmatic “better explores the range of functions filled by these items”. Though Brinton argued that the fact that there has been little agreement on the items that can be labeled pragmatic markers, she tried to list an inventory of thirty-three connectors that have received the attention of many scholars and suggested a vast number of features typical of these words. Those characteristics were later used by Jucker & Ziv (1998) who reexplored them to gain features that relate to the same level of linguistic description: phonological and lexical, syntactic, semantic, functional, and sociolinguistic features.

Since 1987, DMs have been the center of attention in the European or American contexts. In this regard, three proposals were developed at nearly the same era; Schiffrin (1987), Blakemore (1987), and Fraser (1988). Schiffrin (1987) introduced a very complete and detailed analysis of DMs as linguistic items; she studied the semantic and grammatical functions of these expressions, their status, and features. She asserted that DMs, as one of the major figures in the coherence of utterances, contribute to the coherence of the text or speech by establishing cohesive and coherent relations among several units of talk (Schiffrin, 1987). Schiffrin, moreover, proposed a detailed analysis of twelve DMs in the English language: *and, but, or, so, well, then, now, because, oh, well, you know, and I mean*. She, then, claimed that DMs can function on different levels of discourse structure (linguistic or non-linguistic). Meanwhile, they can operate on the 'ideational' (informational) structure in the sense that they refer to relations between concepts in discourse. To put it in another way, discourse markers mark the organization of ideas in discourse. For instance, a cohesive item such as *but* can be an indicator of the fact that what follows it is in contrast with what precedes it. That is, they play a major role in controlling the conversational act between speakers and hearers just the same as *oh* and *well*.

### **Discourse Marker Use in Spoken Language**

Considering the increasing interest in discourse markers analysis, in the past decade, a bulk of research on conversation analysis and pragmatics has been dedicated to the related set of expressions mostly referred to as discourse markers, known by a wide variety of other similar terms, such as pragmatic markers, discourse particles or discourse operators. In addition to the mentioned terminology, researchers and educators have no consensus over the other major issues of discourse markers, such as their definitions, taxonomies, and usages. The debate still exists for further explanation (Lee and Jung, 2005).

The characteristics of *well, you know, and I mean* as DMs in learners' speech was explored by Schiffrin's (1987) preliminary study on DMs, which defined DMs as sequentially dependent elements.

### **Explicit vs. Implicit Teaching and Learning**

According to (Lee and Jung, 2005), almost all experts in the realm of EFL instruction and learning agree upon the fact that there exists a challenge over the possible influences of explicit and implicit instruction. In the same line, a group of educators were of the opinion that explicit teaching is more helpful for EFL learners. In contrast, some others believe that implicit instruction methods are more fruitful for EFL language learners. Also, it is interesting to know that some scholars maintain that a combination of these two techniques is the ultimate remedy to put an end to this controversy.

### **Explicit Learning and Teaching**

Poole (2005) held the view that explicit instruction is a kind of instruction that both focus on the significance of the interactive nature of the language teaching tenets such as smooth communication and learner-authority, and also implies the salience of the occasional and overt study of problematic L2 grammatical structures, which is more common in non-communicative teaching. Moreover, Long and Robinson (1998) maintained that second language teaching and learning should direct most of its attention to exposing students to oral discourse that is similar to real-life activities such as job interviews, and engaging in classroom tasks, nevertheless, when it is observed that pupils are having difficulties in the perceiving and or production of particular L2 grammatical structures, teachers and their peers should help them learn and revise their

inappropriate comprehension of these forms and assist them to produce the proper and correct models of them. Further, instructors can help their pupils and learners can help their peers learn the forms that they presently lack or have problems with, yet must notice to enrich their general L2 grammatical development. Explicit method of teaching grammatical principles, particularly simple rules involving form-function relations, proves to be fruitful to adult learners' speaking skill (Alanen, 1995).

Considering explicit instruction from another point of view, it can be observed that it involves directing learners' attention to a particular learning goal in a highly structured form. Hence, each topic is presented to students by the instructor through presentation, explanation, and practice. Explicit learning, then, is a "conscious awareness and attention" to teach (Brown, 2007, p.291). Also, explicit learning include "input processing to realize whether the input information has regularities to convey the ideas and rules with which these regularities can be captured" (Brown, 2007, p. 291). As a result, explicit learning is a dynamic process by which learners try to comprehend and perceive the structure of related information they are provided with.

### **Implicit Learning and Teaching**

Implicit learning can be defined as "learning with no conscious attention or awareness" (Brown, 2007, p.291). Hence, implicit learning is a passive procedure through which students are exposed to the required information, and obtain knowledge of that information simply through that exposure.

Implicit teaching involves teaching a particular set of topics in a suggestive or implied way; the objective is not directly expressed. Implicit teaching is closely tied to inductive teaching, which means that rules are implied from examples given first. It makes students create their own schemas for learning rules instead of merely memorizing certain rules which allows long-term retention of them in the memory.

The main goals of implicit instruction could be twofold. Firstly, introducing new concepts in a learner-centered fashion, and secondly, providing students with instruction through making use of a variety of several instances, without teaching any actual grammatical rules (Burns and Mason, 2002).

### **Empirical Studies on Meta-discourse Markers**

Concerning the present issue, Fraser (1999) tried to point out to their challenging and debatable aspect. He argued that meta-discourse markers have been studied by different scholars under different viewpoints. Fraser held the viewpoint that educators have got the same idea over the fact that meta-discourse markers are generally cohesive ties that make discourse parts connected. However, on the other side of the story, they did not agree upon the fact that how they are explained and what sense they transfer.

Through reviewing the related research done in this field, the following works are among the most salient ones. In a study, De La Fuente (2009) who conducted a study with 24 learners in the fifth semester found out that explicit method instruction was more fruitful in the comprehension of discourse markers compared to those learners instructed through the input enrichment. As a result, De La Fuente concluded that explicit teaching of these items could be more beneficial.

In the same vein, Rahimi and Riasati (2012) investigated the possible relation between the explicit and implicit teaching of discourse markers and learners' oral outcome. In their study, they provided the experimental group 'A' with four sessions of explicit instruction on discourse markers, about 25 minutes in every session. Also, they used semi-structured interviews to collect

the pertinent data. Finally, the findings of their research the poor performance of those learners in the experimental group 'B' who were instructed the target meta-discourse markers implicitly. On the other side of the coin, the students in the experimental group 'A' who were taught the DMs explicitly were able to use them more appropriately in their conversations which could support the better influence of the explicit instruction method of teaching DMs.

In the same regard, Innajih (2007) tried to work on the impact of explicit method of teaching DMs on the reading comprehension ability of EFL students. In his study, the pupils present in the experimental group 'A' were instructed the discourse items explicitly, and learners in the experimental group 'B' were provided the DMs implicitly. The results of the study revealed that the experimental group 'A' performed quite better than the experimental group 'B' on the use of discourse markers.

In addition, concerning the influence of implicit or explicit method of teaching of meta-discourse markers, Nazari (2013), tried to investigate the possible influences of implicit and explicit instruction on students' potential ability to comprehend and use of some grammatical structures and their correct use in their writing. The findings indicated that the performance of participants taught explicitly outperformed the pupils receiving implicit teaching of the same items.

Last but not the least, in another related study, Sahebkhair and Davatgari Asl (2014) investigated the impact of input enhancement on the writing skills of Iranian EFL learners language instruction. The findings of their study supported the fact that those learners who were given input with regard their writing ability made use of more cohesive times (DMs) in their writing samples, and consequently performed better in comparison to the group pupils who were not provided with any type of input enhancement treatment.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants of the present study were 90 randomly selected Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, including both male and female students with the age range of 20 to 30. Students were preparing themselves for the speaking module of SOPI (Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview) through attending speaking courses held in Shiraz University Language Center, Shiraz, Iran. All participants had studied English as a foreign language for nearly five years before taking part in this course. This could ensure the researcher that all the learners had already provided with almost the same level of instruction in English, and as a consequence, quite a homogeneous sample groups of participants in terms of English proficiency is chosen. Moreover, the sample was randomly divided into two equal groups with 45 members. The experimental group 'B' participating in the speaking class received implicit instruction on the target formal meta-discourse markers, while students in the experimental group 'A' taking part in the same course, received an explicit teaching on the same target formal meta-discourse markers.

### **Materials and Instruments**

In the present research, three main instruments were employed. In the beginning, an Oxford placement test (OPT) was carried out to ensure that learners are homogenous and congruent. Respecting the content of OPT, it is worth noticing that it comprised test items to evaluate test-takers' ability to comprehend a set of grammatical structures and the sense they transfer in a wide range of different contexts. In addition, it takes into account to what extent pupils are able to make use of these linguistic items in order to have better communication in English language contexts.

The target formal meta-discourse markers selected to be taught were based on the classifications presented by Hyland (2005). Therefore, the way DMs categorized was kept with the same format, except for a few changes to match the purpose of DM usage in speaking for the current study. Learners were then asked to have different conversations with each other on a wide range of topics which were later evaluated through the SOPI test of speaking

Furthermore, regarding the oral test, it is worth mentioning that participants were interviewed for about fifteen minutes both before and after the instruction of our target formal meta-discourse markers. Then, it is necessary to point out that the whole process of the oral proficiency test was done on a Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI). Furthermore, regarding the oral test, it is worth mentioning that participants were interviewed for about fifteen minutes both before and after the instruction of our target formal meta-discourse markers. Then, it is necessary to point out that the whole process of the oral proficiency test was done on a Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI).

The SOPI was developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics. The SOPI is a tape-mediated test of speaking proficiency. As with the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), the SOPI is designed to elicit speech samples that are rated according to the ACTFL proficiency scale. As a tape-mediated test, the SOPI uses an audiotape and test booklet to obtain a speech sample from the examinee rather than the face-to-face procedure of the OPI. In a SOPI, the examinee listens to a series of speaking tasks on a master tape and records his or her responses on a second blank cassette. A global rating is then assigned by comparing the examinee's responses with the criteria in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. To be rated at the intermediate and upper-intermediate-level on an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) or a SOPI, the speaker must, therefore, be able to use discourse markers to produce a cohesive and coherent paragraph-length narration.

Further, concerning the reliability of the test scores and the SOPI test itself, it is worth mentioning that primarily, the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) is a reliable and valid means of assessing the level of a person's proficiency in a second language. The accuracy of a SOPI assessment, however, is dependent upon the collection of a large number of samples in order to “calibrate” the test. Further, regarding the reliability of the gathered scores, the SOPI test was applied to the same group of learners after the conduction of the treatment, and the results of the two trials were compared to one another to check the reliability of the scores. For ensuring the reliability of the SOPI test of speaking, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used. Usually, in terms of reliability by Cronbach's coefficient alpha, the estimated coefficient alpha under 60% is considered weak, and consistency estimated to 70% is acceptable, and over 80% is considered good (Danaeifard, Khaef Elahi, & Hosseini, (2011). The instruments used in this study were already reliable by the author; however, after collecting data, the coefficient alpha of the test was calculated. According to Table 1, the obtained coefficient alpha for the SOPI test was over 80%. Consequently, it can be claimed that the SOPI test of the present study was of applicable reliability.

**Table 1.** *Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha for the SOPI test*

The SOPI	Number of	Participants	Cronbach's
	items		coefficient alpha



Simulated	10	90	0.88
Oral Proficiency Test of Learners' speaking performance			

Finally, Learners' performances on the use of correct formal DMs were rated on a scoring scale of 0-10 for each item in their essays in both pre and posttests to ascertain the reliability and validity of various traits.

### Data Collection Procedures

To assess students' use of discourse markers prior to instruction, an Upper-intermediate-Level speaking task from the SOPI was administered as a pretest during the second week of the semester, and learners' speech in the interviews (with a similar topic in both pretest and posttest) were recorded. Then, each of their appropriate use of the 10 target formal meta-discourse marker items was scored from a scale of 1 to 10. The treatment sessions began in the third week after the administration of the pretest speaking task. Instruction of the target formal meta-discourse markers began in the third week of the semester. In the next step, students in both groups received four hours of instruction within two weeks on narrating a past experience.

Moreover, students in the experimental group 'A' received explicit instruction on the function and use of discourse markers on how to narrate an event or experience in the past tense. However, no explicit mention of discourse markers was provided for students in the experimental group 'B'. The instructor spent around 20 minutes each session on explaining clearly the correct use of meta-discourse markers to the experimental group 'A'. However, they did not point out to the function of the target formal meta-discourse markers to the experimental group 'B'.

Also, it is worth noticing that students in both groups received four hours of instruction within two weeks on how to narrate a past event or experience. Students in the experimental groups (n = 45) received explicit instruction on the function and use of discourse markers to narrate an event or experience in the past time frame. Students were then presented with opportunities for communicative practice and corrective feedback. In contrast to the experimental group 'A', students in the experimental group 'B' (n = 45) received implicit instruction on the function and use of formal discourse markers to narrate a past event. No explicit mention of discourse markers was provided.

Students were then presented with opportunities for communicative practice and corrective feedback. Regarding the instruction for the experimental group consisted of several activities including providing learners with a brief review of the forms and uses of the appropriate form of DMs to prepare them for communicative activities requiring them to narrate in the past. Also, in order to assist students in noticing and processing the discourse markers in subsequent input activities, the instructor distributed a handout to students concerning the function and use of discourse markers to narrate an event or experience in the past time. Then, the instructor asked students to complete an oral assignment based on one of the communicative activities. Again, the instructor directed students' attention to discourse markers and the correct use of DMs.

In contrast to the experimental group 'A', students in the experimental group 'B' did not receive explicit instruction on the function and use of discourse markers. They answered questions limited to the content of the passage. Students received corrective feedback on the oral assignment. The focus of the feedback was on students' correct use of the DMs. There was no

mention of discourse markers. As with the experimental group ‘A’, the instructor then provided the students with a handout of the sample response.

### Data Analysis Procedures

The data gathered from the respondents were submitted to the SPSS software for quantitative analysis. The findings of the gathered data are summarized and represented in the following tables in this chapter.

The main research question of the present study aimed at seeking the impact of the explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers on Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners’ oral proficiency. To answer this research question, the experimental group ‘B’ received the implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers, and the pupils in the experimental group ‘A’ were taught the target formal meta-discourse markers explicitly based on Hyland’s (2005) classification of meta-discourse markers.

Therefore, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed on the data in order to determine if there were significant differences between the two groups with regard to their use of discourse markers prior to the treatment. Then, their performances in the pretest and posttest SOPI speaking task were analyzed to determine if these differences were significant.

### Results

The descriptive analysis was provided to show the performances of the students in SOPI tests. The following table reports the learners’ performances in the pre and post-tests. This descriptive table presents the participants’ performances in each group (explicit group and implicit group).

**Table 2.** *Descriptive statistics for Learners’ Performance in Pretest and Posttest*

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	implicit	30	1.9000	.92289	.16850
	explicit	60	2.0000	.92057	.11885
Post-test	implicit	30	3.2667	.69149	.12625
	explicit	60	5.8000	1.65499	.21366

According to the above table, in the pre-test, the mean score of the implicit group was 1.9 and the mean score of the explicit group was equal to 2.0. On the other hand, the mean score of implicit and explicit groups were 3.2 and 5.8 in the post-tests respectively.

An independent samples t-test was run in order to ensure that the explicit and implicit mean scores were different or not. Table 4.2 results are reported in the following table.

**Table 3.** *One-way ANCOVA of the Participants’ Scores on the SOPI Speaking Test*

Skill	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	f	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Implicit Group	166.83	1	166.83	78.83	0.000*	0.66

Explicit Group	184.10	1	184.10	85.95	0.000*	0.68
Speaking (overall)	SOPI927.78	1	927.78	76.15	0.000*	0.65

Table 3 shows statistically significant differences (at  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) between the mean scores of the two groups on the individual skills of speaking fluency and accuracy of the target formal meta-discourse markers regarding the use, appropriacy, and speaking proficiency as a whole, in favor of the experimental group 'A'. According to the above table, through conducting an analysis of variance (ANCOVA), it was observed that there was a statistically significant difference between post-test mean scores of implicit and explicit groups (sig=000).

As can be seen in the above tables, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test mean scores of the implicit group. In other words, the implicit group had an improvement in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Hence, the amount of difference in the pretest and posttest is significant with regard to their mean scores. In other words, the performance of those who were instructed the DMs explicitly was far better from pretest to posttest compared to that of the implicit group.

### Distribution of Meta-discourse Markers

Along with the correctness in the use and application of formal meta-discourse markers, the frequency rate of each single target formal meta-discourse item is calculated at this point. This is to explore which formal meta-discourse markers are used more, and which one is used less by learners through explicit and implicit instruction of the target items. The distribution of discourse markers on the pre- and posttest speaking task is shown in Tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4.** *Distribution of Formal Meta-discourse Markers Used on the SOPI Task for the experimental group 'B'*

Target Formal DM	Pretest	Posttest	Grain
Score			
Moreover	-	3 (13.6%)	3
Finally	1 (6.2%)	3 (13.6%)	2
In general	2 (12.5%)	3 (13.6%)	1
Recently	-	-	-
With regard to	-	-	-
For instance	3 (18.7%)	4 (18.7%)	1
As a result	-	2 (9%)	2
Meanwhile	1 (6.2%)	-	-1
Likewise	3 (18.7%)	1 (4.5%)	-2
However	6 (37.5%)	6 (27.2%)	6
Total	16	22	6

The results of the distribution rate of the target formal DMs of those who were instructed the target items implicitly demonstrated that the learners in the first group (experimental group 'B') did not incorporate a meaningful number of different discourse markers on the posttest SOPI.

**Table 5.** *Distribution of Formal Meta DMS Used on the SOPI for the experimental group ‘A’*

Target Formal DM Score	Pretest	Posttest	Grain
Moreover	1 (5.8%)	4 (7.1%)	3
Finally	2 (12.5%)	5 (8.9%)	3
In general	1 (5.8%)	5 (8.9%)	4
Recently	3 (17.6)	6 (10.7%)	3
With regard to	-	4 (7.1%)	4
For instance	3 (17.6%)	7 (12.5%)	4
As a result	-	7 (12.5%)	7
Meanwhile	1 (5.8%)	4 (7.1%)	3
Likewise	1 (5.8%)	6 (10.7%)	5
However	5 (29.4%)	8 (14.2%)	3
Total	17	56	39

In contrast, students in the experimental group ‘A’ used a broad range of different discourse markers to sequence and organize their responses on the SOPI task. This is further evidence that explicit instruction was more effective than the implicit method of teaching the target formal meta-discourse markers in promoting students’ use of these cohesive ties on the SOPI task.

### Discussion

The main research question which was previously proposed at the beginning of the study is going to be answered in detail here in order to reach helpful solutions to the already mentioned obstacles in the instruction and learning of DMs and consequently filling the existing gaps in this regard.

Firstly, concerning the impact of formal meta-discourse instruction on learners’ oral proficiency, it was observed from the findings of the gathered data that the students in the experimental group ‘B’ who were taught the target formal meta-discourse markers implicitly used less amount of these cohesive elements in their classroom conversation. This was also obvious from their scores in the pretest. In contrast, compared to the experimental group ‘B’, pupils in the experimental group ‘A’ who learned the same set of DMs explicitly, had a better performance after the conduction of the treatment in their posttest. This enhancement in their scores could be clearly observed as they used more meta-discourse items in their classroom conversation.

Furthermore, the results of the performances of learners in the experimental group ‘B’ were in line with the research hypothesis that Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners’ oral outcome was increased by learning meta-discourse markers as a result of the explicit instruction. Further, it was observed that in the experimental group ‘B’, where pupils did not learn formal meta-discourse markers explicitly, were not successful in their posttest after the conduction of the treatment. Therefore, it could be stated that the explicit instruction of the formal meta-discourse markers might be considered as a helpful and effective treatment in this concern.

Regarding the main research question of the present study which wanted to see if there is a meaningful difference in the oral outcome of those who receive explicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers and those who receive implicit instruction, the researcher aimed to explore which group of learners; namely explicit (those who underwent explicit instruction) and the experimental group ‘B’ (those who were taught the target DMs implicitly) performed better

on appropriate use of formal meta-discourse markers. In fact, the researcher was in search of a significant and meaningful in this concern. Hence, as in Alanen (1995), the results of this study support Schmidt's (1990, 1993, 1995, 2001) prediction regarding the importance of explicit information in directing students' attention to certain L2 forms.

Consequently, to find the answer to the above question, it was observed after analyzing the pertinent data that learners who underwent the explicit method of teaching the target formal meta-discourse items in the experimental group 'A' had a drastic positive change in their speaking skill. In contrast, on the other side of the story, those students learned the same set of items implicitly performed poorly in their posttest after taking the SOPI test of speaking.

In addition, These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating the effectiveness of explicit instruction or explicit rule presentation on students' L2 acquisition (Alanen 1995; DeKeyser 1995; Ellis 1993; Robinson 1996, 1997; VanPatten and Cadierno 1993).

In a nutshell, the revealed results lead us to conclude that compared to the implicit instruction, explicit teaching of DMs can be far more fruitful for learners concerning their oral proficiency. In the same line, supporting the findings of the present paper, Trillo (2002) and Muller (2005) maintained that ignoring these pivotal items can result in impairing learners' oral proficiency specifically concerning the cohesion, coherence, and organization of their speech patterns.

### **Conclusion**

The current research was an attempt to see if there exists a difference in the explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers on the one hand, and the possible influence of these items in EFL learners' oral outcome on the other hand.

Results of the SOPI test revealed a positive impact of teaching formal meta-discourse markers in enhancing learners' oral outcome. In addition, the findings indicated that the explicit method of instructing meta-discourse markers has a better influence on learners' speaking ability compared to the implicit method of instruction.

Several insightful implications can be drawn from the findings of the current study. First and foremost, due to the better performances of learners in the experimental group 'A' compared to that of the implicit group, the results can shed light on the effectiveness of explicit instruction of formal DMs in the improvement of learners' writing and speaking skills.

Secondly, this research can be a call to all instructors, practitioners, and researchers in language teaching and learning to focus more on meta-discourse as a pivotal part of the language. Next is that it provides a useful pathway to materials developers by making texts more coherent since cohesion and coherence are factors that should be taken into account while applying the markers effectively. Hence, the syllabus designers should believe that including these important elements in textbooks and materials is an indispensable factor in the EFL learning and teaching domain.

Last but not the least, it was revealed that teaching formal DMs explicitly can be influential in the consciousness-raising of learners and end in their usage of these units in their writings. It can also be implied that not using DMs is not due to underestimating them or not counting on them as essential by learners, but it is owing to not being aware of the usage and role of DMs or not being sure of how to use and what to use DMs for.

Concerning the suggestions for further studies, it could be noted that reading and listening, as the receptive skills can also be tested to find out if DMs can have the same impact on those skills or they just enhance the writing and speaking product of learners. If it can be proved that DMs can enhance all aspects of fluency, accuracy, and complexity of learners' speaking, as

revealed in writing and speaking skills, it can be claimed that DM awareness has a significant effect on receptive skills in general. Based on the same line of argument, we can claim while the present study showed little effect of implicit instruction, it does not rule out the possibility that longer instructional treatments might produce different results given that short-time instruction is inherently biased against implicit learning (Dekeyser, 2009) and this type of learning is a cumulative process.

Therefore, further studies should incorporate longer periods of treatment and more exposure to target features in order to better assess the efficiency of implicit instruction.

Furthermore, the results of the current work were based on limited classes of DMs, without classifying their usage to investigate which types of DMs are used more after instruction and which types less. Therefore, replicating this study while considering different categories of DMs and their usage after intervention can clarify if learners have the tendency to apply some certain types of DMs more than others, or they are used equally. The research was conducted in an EFL atmosphere, considering the fact that the only medium of instruction was English. It can be replicated in an ESL atmosphere to test whether the same results could be obtained or ESL learners show different attitudes towards DMs.

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