

**The effect of discourse markers on listening comprehension of EFL Iranian high and low proficiency Learners**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research was designed to investigate the effects of discourse markers on EFL Iranian learners' listening comprehension. Fifty eight male and female students took a pre-test as a proficiency test first, 39 students out of 58 are needed. To gain this aim, a language proficiency test, i.e., Nelson test will be given to the total participants. After calculating Mean and Standard Deviation, each person with +1SD above the mean will be assigned to high level of language proficiency and each one with -1SD below the mean will be assigned to low level of language proficiency. Then they were assigned to two experimental groups and a control group, twenty students for high level proficiency of DMs group, nineteen students for low level proficiency of DMs group and nineteen students for control group were selected. During four sessions of the treatment, each experimental group worked on four listening passages taken from IELTS sample. The participants in two experimental groups were encouraged to think and notice meaningfully to the DMs and their functions how concepts are linked in listening passages by DMs. Along with the experimental groups, the participants in the control group also worked on the different four listening passages. At the end, three post tests were performed in one session. Finally One-way ANOVA was used to analyze the results of the control and the two experimental groups' post- tests, and a significant difference was observed in the high proficiency experimental group of DMs and control groups, but there was not observed any remarkable difference between the low proficiency group and control group.

**Key words:** Discourse, Discourse markers, listening comprehension, language proficiency, high and low proficiency.

**1. Introduction**

Communication in a second or foreign language has a key role because by this way, ideas, beliefs, and point of views are revised and transferred from one person to the other. Communication is carried out when the speaker and listener pay considerable attention to all factors that may affect comprehension and interpretation pragmatically. These factors are characteristics of situation of conversation, discourse markers, cohesive links, transactional and interactional views, and so on. Widdowson (2007) recognizes three umbrella words in communication; the first is "context" that is the common information and knowledge of two people dealt which is established in their previous conversation and is an abstract representation of a statement of task. The second is "discourse" which refers to both what a text creator means by a text and what a text means to the receiver and it relates to broader issues of what social and ideological values they undertake to text. The third is the "text" as a purposeful use of language without necessarily being able to predict just what is meant by it. One of the factors which has a

significant role in the context is the discourse marker. Sometimes the speaker does not require to apply a complete sentence in order to make the listener to comprehend what he said but he can apply incomplete phrases or words in starting, maintaining, and finishing his dialogue; these key terms are Discourse Markers (DMs).

According to Aijmer (2007) for a newcomer to the area, it is often very difficult to figure out the bits and parts of conversations that include an original model of the meanings and functions of discourse particles. Schiffrin (2009) characterizes discourse markers as deictic and offers that they have significant functions. What discourse markers or pragmatic markers generally do is to significantly point to traits of the context.

Discourse, as a general term, is the consequences of the act of communication (Brown & Yule, 1983). Crismore (1989) states that discourse has two steps: primary and secondary. She argues that primary step of discourse is the result of propositional content and in fact, it is made of that. Primary step of discourse doesn't have any beliefs by the author but another step of discourse has this factor and this is why other authors have called it discourse level. In fact, discourse increases another proposition to the propositional subject matter (Crismore, 1985).

Vande Kopple (1985) offers that discourse conveys two types of meaning: interpersonal and textual. Interpersonal discourse contributes the authors to talk about their personalities and also roles which they want to select. "Textual discourse contributes authors to relate ideational material within a text and contributes the text make sense in a especial situation for readers and listeners"(Crismore & Abdollehzadeh, 2010). As a matter of fact, discourse markers are so crucial and practical in understanding and facilitating the process of communication because they help the writers and speakers to close the audiences and make the texts more understandable in the field of discourse (Crismore & Abdollehzadeh, 2010). To draw with conclusion, this study will examine the impact of discourse markers on listening comprehension to determine the extent to which discourse markers have impact on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students.

### **1.1. Statement of the problem**

In order to comprehending the message and the implied purpose of speaker and writer, the presence of some textual clues is necessary. One of the most noticeable classification of textual clues is discourse markers. Learning discourse markers (DMs) are almost ignored in language process. Some teachers notice to the DMs less in their teaching procedure. They are supposed to consider the high role of discourse markers as organizers, generalizers, predictors, and so forth. Some researchers have considered the crucial function of DMs, for example, Vande Kopple (1985) remained that good writers and speakers use some words or phrases (discourse markers) in order to help the readers and listeners predict, organize, generalize, and answer to propositions. Some language learners do not realize discourse markers and their wide roles, if they identify the functions they will understand more written and spoken texts. According to Crismore (1988), discourse is an authors and speakers' explicit and implicit presence in the discourse and this leads readers and listeners but not informs them. Many

researchers have pointed to the problem of understanding lectures comes back to the discourse level (Carroll, 1986, cited in Jung, 2003). Meanwhile, Krashen (1982, cited in Crismore, 1989) has identified that adding discourse markers to the text makes the text more accessible to the audiences. So, this research aims to investigate and express the remarkable but ignored roles of discourse markers which help the listeners to get the message or purpose of the speaker.

### **1.2. Significance of the study**

In the past decades, there have been a number of studies regarding discourse markers in different fields. The importance of DMs were also found in four skills. Listening is one the most critical skills which learners usually confront with comprehension difficulty. Significance of listening comprehension and finding a solution to better comprehension are not implicit. Discourse markers are the signal cues to get the messages in listening texts. Learning and examining new and efficient strategies in order to develop listening comprehension proficiency level is principal for most researchers, but unluckily a few about how it is actually done. As mentioned, since listening text is one of the most important and difficult part of language learning and it plays a key role in language learning and teaching. This research attempts to understand how various signal cues that are applied in "listening texts" are effective on EFL learners' listening comprehension. Due to the importance of discourse signaling cues (discourse markers); this research will investigate the impact of these cues in the Iranian context to know how much discourse markers impact on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this research is generally to explore and examine the effects of discourse markers on listening comprehension of EFL Iranian learners, and to get the most effective parts in the study, and also if the discourse markers are beneficial for listening comprehension of student in representing their purposes. Is there any significant difference in the performance of high and low-level learners in their comprehension of high discourse and low discourse listening comprehension tasks or not? The present research intends to find out helpful methods and strategies for improving learners' listening comprehension. Therefore, this paper attempts to offer the rational and beneficial materials in English language teaching and learning field. The results of the research are intended to create beneficial information for teachers, designers, and students by encouraging them to notice to discourse markers more and also to arise their awareness of the importance of being more thoughtful and more careful on their around.

### **1.4. Research question**

This investigation will be conducted to answer the following question:

Is there any significant difference in the performance of high and low-level learners in their comprehension of high discourse and low discourse listening comprehension tasks?

### 1.5. Research Hypothesis

The following hypothesis are expressed in this study:

There isn't any significant difference in the performance of high and low-level learners in their comprehension of high discourse and low discourse listening comprehension tasks.

### 1.6. Definition of the key terms

**Discourse:** the linguistics material in texts whether spoken or written, that dose not add anything to the propositional content but is intended to help the listeners or readers organize, interpret, and evaluate the given information (Crismore, 1993, P. 21).

**Discourse markers:** they are signaling cues and used in order to make a text coherent or guide readers to react to the propositional content. For example, *therefore, I think, in fact,* and so on (Jung, 2003).

**Listening comprehension:** from viewpoints of Richards & Schmidt (2002), listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech in a first or second language (P. 313). Rubin (1995) conceived listening as "an active process in which a listener selects and interprets information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express (p. 151)".

**Language proficiency:** Richards & Schmidt (2002) pointed out that the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, for example, how well a person can speak, read, write or understand language (p. 292).

**High and low proficiency:** high level students who have a beneficial and practical language knowledge in four skills. Low level learners are who have weak or low language knowledge in four language skill.

### 1.7. Delimitations of the Study

Access to a large number of participants and their treatment for a long period of time were impractical for the researcher and the factor of gender was not considered in this study. The results of the study cannot be generalized to second language learning context because the study was run in EFL context. Because of time limitations, the training was given in short time. Therefore, it will be desirable to run similar experiments in longitudinal studies.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Procedure**

So as to do this research, 39 students out of 58 are needed. To gain this aim, a language proficiency test, i.e., Nelson's test will be given to the total participants. After calculating Mean and Standard Deviation(SD), each person with +1SD above the mean will be assigned to high level of language proficiency and each one with -1SD below the mean will be assigned to low level of language proficiency.

In the second step and in order to test the impact of discourse markers (MDs) on listening comprehension, 8 listening texts from well-known test i. e., TOEFL or IELTS will be selected (4 texts for low level of language proficiency and 4 ones for high level of language proficiency). The criterion for selecting these listening texts is based on the numbers of their discourse markers. Having this point in mind, they will be classified into two parts: listening texts with high discourse markers and listening texts with low discourse markers. Next, 4 listening texts (2 texts with high discourse markers and 2 with low discourse markers) will be selected for each level.

In the next step, selected listening texts for each level of language proficiency will be given to 20 participants similar to those in the study to test their validity and their reliability. If their reliability and their validity will be proven, they will be given to the final participants. Finally, participants in each level will be assigned the prepared tests. Both high and low-level learners will take the MD-high and MD-low listening tasks and their performance on each task type will be described and compared.

### **2.2. Participants**

The total number of participants in this study will be 58 including both males and females. All participants are Iranian EFL learners at BA level and will be selected from Islamic Azad University. 39 out of 58 students will be determined as final participants through the use of language proficiency test (20 for high level of language proficiency and 19 for low level of language proficiency, and 19 participants will be engaged in control group ). Persian is their first language and English is a foreign language for them.

### **2.3. Study material**

There are two instruments which will be used in this study:

First of all, in order to select 58 homogeneous participants (20 for high level of language proficiency and 19 for low level) whom we need to answer the research questions, a language proficiency test of TOEFL will be given to the total participants.

Then eight listening texts from well-known tests, i. e., pre-TOEFL or pre- IELTS will be selected to test the impact of discourse markers on listening comprehension (4 texts for high level of language proficiency and 4 ones for low level of language proficiency). The criterion for selecting these texts will be based on the number of their discourse markers and based on

this point they will be divided into two parts: listening texts with high discourse markers and listening texts with low discourse markers.

#### **2.4. Data analysis**

To analyze the data in order to answer the research questions, a paired sample ANOVA will be run on the data obtained from the administration of the pre-tests and post-tests to the participants of both experimental and control groups. Our hypotheses were concerned with the effectiveness and examination of discourse markers on listening comprehension of EFL Iranian learners. Finally, descriptive analysis will be performed and the results in experimental group will be indicated a significant difference or not. In order to reach this purpose, this paper will administrate ANOVA data analysis. It compares the results of experimental and control groups and shows whether applied strategies in discourse markers are effective or not. When data are collected, they will be analyzed using SPSS software and to test the research questions, statistical test of ANOVA will be used.

### **3. Discussion and results**

Result of the present research illustrated that if students acquire more discourse markers and apply them in learning language proficiency. The findings indicated a significant difference between high proficiency and low proficiency group. Participant in high proficiency group were more successful on post-test listening comprehension.

#### **3.1. Discussion**

According to Benjamin Bloom (1988) & Benson (1989), in order to develop students' listening comprehension skills teachers should work on higher levels of word knowledge skills, that is to say, analysis, synthesis, make result, and evaluation through discourse markers. In this research we tried to develop participants' word knowledge specially discourse markers skills and investigate its result on their listening comprehension.

Research question number one attempted to answer the question of whether discourse markers have any significant impact on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students or not. During the period of the treatment, the participants in the experimental group were encouraged to learn more about discourse markers and their wonderful roles such as starting, finishing, adding, resulting, evaluating, analyzing, critical thinking in all texts, in particular, for the listening texts that they listen and the participants in the control group were thought the conventional techniques of listening to improve their listening comprehension ability. After comparing the results of the post-tests of both groups we came to the conclusion that there was a difference between the experimental group and the control group at the end of the study.

The second research question of this research tried to examine whether there is any significant difference in the performance of high and low-level learners in their comprehension of high discourse and low discourse listening comprehension tasks. By comparing the results of the post- tests, it was found out that there was statistically significant difference between the

experimental group and the control group. By studying the gain scores of both groups it was learned that although there was remarkable difference between the gain scores of two groups, there was a considerable improvement inside of the experimental groups. In order to study the questions it was found out that if the suitable instruction and environment are presented for participants, the results will be more desirable. At the end, One-way ANOVA was used to answer the research questions of the study. So teachers have an important role to guide and show discourse markers and their remarkable role, and warn students to pay more attention the magic signals. It is necessary to mention that designers and writers must write and design more about discourse markers and their significant functions in written and spoken texts through interesting and real topics. Hyland (2009) holds the view according this new perspective that discourse markers play a key role as a phenomenon, which is different from propositional meaning and point out to the aspects of the text that are involved writer-reader interactions and their relations, which are interior phenomena to the discourse. So the findings of the present research is accord with Hyland's study.

The importance of discourse signals has recently been attracted much attention as a pivotal feature in communication. Several researchers have carried out on the impacts of discourse markers and received different results, but most of them gained the highly impacts of discourse markers on listening and reading comprehension. However most studies have investigated the effects of discourse markers on reading comprehension and less done on listening but there are beneficial results in the line of listening comprehension. The attention of some scholars are attracted by the prominence of discourse markers in listening comprehension (Chaudron and Richards, 1986; Flowerdew and Tauroza, 1995; Perez and Macia, 2002). Regarding to the above studies realizing discourse markers and their roles has a prominent effect on listening comprehension. Therefore, the research confirms studies of Chaudron and Richards, 1986; Flowerdew and Tauroza, 1995; Perez and Macia, 2002.

Pereze (2002) believes that despite these attempts to determine the key role of discourse markers in written discourse, there has been less attention paid to the crucial role of discourse signals in listening comprehension. So he tries to study partially the few studies conducted recently and is hopeful to highlight the key role of discourse markers in EFL students listening comprehension. The results of Pereze' study is accord with the present study because both came to the conclusion discourse markers influence listening comprehension ability.

These days EFL listening have been increasingly examined by language researchers because it presents input for language students and is considered as a pre-requisite for learning other language skills which being careful in discourse markers can be beneficial in much better listening comprehension (Abdi, 2012; Field, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Nation & Newton, 2009). According to Zarei and Mahmoodi (2012) active listeners continuously interpret messages depend on the basis of their background knowledge, including content and form schemata which is concluded discourse signals. With respect to the studies, the present research's second hypothesis findings generally agree with Zarei and Mahmoodi's study. They believe that the learners are needed to increase their vocabulary knowledge, specially, discourse signals.

Bachman (1990) holds on the view that to understand the connection among utterances in conversation, listeners must have prior knowledge of text organization, which is indicated by discourse markers. Discourse signals or content organization which are precisely connected to listening comprehension (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Haig, 2008; Syam, 2013; Li, 2010) and lead listeners in predicting and analyzing incoming information, assessing the connected significance of ideas and behaviors, and identifying relationships among the beliefs. According to the findings, the present research proves the mentioned studies by Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Haig, 2008; Syam, 2013; Li, 2010.

As seen in this part, discourse markers (DM) play a significant role in listening comprehension. Many researchers have investigated in this field and concluded valuable and helpful results. Luckily, our research figured out the similar results with the studies. But the necessity for more studies in this field is still required.

### **3.2. Conclusion**

The main focus of this research was improving listening comprehension ability through developing discourse markers knowledge. Listening comprehension is what that allows a listener to interact with a spoken text in a meaningful way. It's the bridge from a passive listening to an active listening, from the smallest phonemes, letters, and words to the wider characters and contexts. Listening comprehension is a strong element in our educational and professional lives. For many people listening comprehension is a difficult task and it also unlocks the door to a lifetime of listening recreation and enjoyment. The main purpose of the research is a critical look on discourse markers and its impacts on listening comprehension in order to seek and find a helpful method to help listening comprehension improvement.

With all these sayings, we can conclude that training students with suitable training of umbrella terms like DMs and encouraging them to pay attention to DMs' different roles is a life time process that should be considered from the very beginning of every academic year and in every course both explicitly and implicitly. As this study illustrated us it is found out that discourse markers roles not only are really significant and helpful in the field of EFL Iranian learners' listening comprehension but also it helps teachers in training of listening comprehension and how they encourage learners to pay attention all aspects in listening, in particular, discourse markers (DMs).

### **3.3. Pedagogical Implications**

Listening comprehension skill like other language skills depends on different factors and conditions. The knowledge of DMs is one of the most influential factor in listening comprehension. Other factors such as interest, background knowledge, and the ability to make connection between the ideas and the sentences in a listening text are crucial for listening comprehension .

Before trying to improve students' listening comprehension skills through increasing their knowledge of discourse markers, maybe teachers should focus on more preliminary factors that



is said to have noticeable influence on listening comprehension. Although we cannot claim that factors such as good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and complete concentration have the final say, their vital role in listening comprehension cannot be ignored. Apart from the above mentioned factors, factors such as having an interest and motivation in what is listened are two elements that should not be forsaken by teachers.

It is not reasonable to expect that students listen critically and realize and find the interrelated concepts and utterances meaningfully while they do not have the slightest interest and background knowledge about what they listen. Perhaps some interest and background knowledge about the listening text trigger students' critical listening and concept recognizing more effectively. Therefore, teachers should bear in mind that two factors of background knowledge, in particular, about discourse markers and interest not only help students have better listening experience, but also help them listen more carefully, meaningfully, and critically.

It is suggested that teachers must be aware that different degrees of failure in listening comprehension is because of listeners' lack of necessary background knowledge which is taken for granted by authors. The findings of these studies add weight to the premise which claims that the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, interest, and background knowledge can have crucial roles in reading and listening comprehension. Therefore teachers should consider these factors while they are teaching, testing, and providing teaching materials for listening comprehension classes and after providing these factors, teachers can expect critical and conceptual listening from the students. In order to improve students' listening comprehension successfully, teachers themselves should be familiar with listening skills and the activities that can increase these skills. They should know that critical looking at the impacts of discourse markers and other prominent keys in spoken text should not be limited to one or two courses. It should be focused on at all ages and subjects.

### **3.4. Suggestions for further studies**

The first limitation of this research was the length of the treatment for three groups, particularly for the two experimental groups. The period of the treatment was near two months. During these two months participants in all groups received four sessions of treatment and they worked on different listening comprehension passages. Maybe this length of time is not long enough to improve participants' recognizing DMs in a beneficial way and consequently their listening comprehension abilities. Future studies can allocate more time to the treatment period and deal with more listening passages.

Another limitation of this research was the number of the participants. By increasing the number of participants and the period of treatment, the reliability of the finding can be enhanced.

The majority of the participants in the research were men and the factor of gender was not taken into account, so hereafter researches can raise this question; if there is a relationship between gender and their knowledge of recognizing of DMs and their effects on meaning and goal of spoken text.

As it was mentioned before critical and vital knowledge of DMs has different components and some of them are shown the listener the start, adding, finishing, evaluation, analysis, synthesis, deductive, and inductive reasoning. Future studies can focus on these different components one by one and find out how good men and women can be at these different components .

During the study we found that there are some people who have mental intelligence, they can create mentally relation between concepts easily .They also can recognize meaningful relations and answer to listening tests. We also found out that a majority of the mentally intelligent people are in early 20 years old, so we suggest to further studies to investigate on younger people in the field of listening comprehension cognitively. Meanwhile, we suggest to further studies that increase the number of mental intelligent people in order to achieve more desirable results in the field of listening comprehension strategy.

In general, in order to improve and make texts more interesting for learners, the research proposes to writers and designers present more reality and attractive topics in written and spoken texts.

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