



DISCOURSE MARKERS IN MEANING-MAKING: A FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR USE IN EFL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines discourse markers from a functional perspective, emphasizing their role in constructing meaning and ensuring coherence in spoken and written communication. Drawing on insights from discourse analysis and constructivist-oriented pedagogy, it argues that discourse markers function as organizational tools guiding interpretation rather than merely linking sentences. The paper also outlines teaching strategies—including analysis of authentic texts, discourse-based tasks, interactive practice, and reflective comparison—to raise learners' awareness and enhance discourse competence in EFL contexts..

In contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, increasing emphasis is placed on developing learners' communicative competence rather than solely their knowledge of grammatical structures. While many students achieve a satisfactory level of grammatical accuracy, their spoken and written production often lacks coherence, natural flow, and pragmatic appropriateness. Utterances may be structurally correct yet appear fragmented or disconnected, which can hinder effective communication. One important reason for this difficulty is the limited use and understanding of discourse markers—linguistic elements that organize ideas, signal relationships between utterances, and guide interpretation in communication.

Discourse markers such as however, therefore, well, actually, and in other words function not at the level of sentence grammar but at the level of discourse, helping speakers and writers structure meaning and maintain interaction. These elements serve as organizational devices that connect segments of discourse and reflect how speakers manage information and relationships within communication (Schiffrin,1987). Despite their functional significance, discourse markers are often underrepresented in language teaching materials, where greater attention is traditionally given to morphology and syntax rather than discourse-level features.

In the context of Uzbek higher education, scholars have similarly emphasized the need to move beyond form-focused instruction toward developing learners' ability to **use language meaningfully in communication**. For instance, effective foreign language teaching should foster practical communicative skills and the ability to structure speech appropriately in real

contexts (Jalolov, 2012). Likewise, highlights interactive and functional approaches as essential for activating learners' participation and enabling them to construct coherent expression rather than reproduce isolated language forms (Ishmukhamedov, 2008).

Against this background, **examining discourse markers from a functional perspective** becomes particularly relevant for understanding how meaning is constructed and interpreted in EFL discourse. Greater awareness of these elements can contribute to improving learners' discourse competence, enabling them to produce language that is not only grammatically accurate but also logically connected and communicatively effective.

The aim of this article is to analyze discourse markers as functional devices in meaning-making and to consider their significance for the development of coherent and effective communication in EFL contexts.

Understanding Discourse Markers: Definitions and Characteristics

Discourse markers have been widely discussed in discourse analysis and pragmatics, yet they remain difficult to define within traditional grammatical categories. Unlike conjunctions or adverbials, discourse markers do not primarily **contribute to the propositional content** of an utterance; rather, they function as signals that guide the listener or reader in interpreting how one segment of discourse relates to another. Schiffrin (1987) describes discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements that organize discourse by connecting ideas, managing topics, and indicating the speaker's orientation to what is being said.

Similarly, discourse markers are defined as **pragmatic expressions** that indicate the relationship between the current utterance and the preceding discourse (Fraser, 1999). From this perspective, their role is not syntactic but functional: they provide interpretive instructions that help interlocutors understand whether a statement introduces *contrast*, *elaboration*, *conclusion*, *clarification*, or a *shift in perspective*. For example, the marker ***however*** signals contrast, while ***therefore*** indicates a logical result, and well may signal a transition or a response framed within interaction.

A notable characteristic of discourse markers is their **procedural rather than conceptual meaning**. These elements do not add new information but help structure how information should be processed within communication (Brinton, 1996). This feature distinguishes discourse markers from lexical items, whose primary role is to convey semantic content. Because of this procedural nature, discourse markers are highly context-dependent and may perform multiple functions depending on the communicative situation.

Another important feature is **their prevalence in authentic spoken and written discourse**, where they contribute to coherence, fluency, and interactional management. However, precisely because they operate beyond sentence-level grammar, they are often overlooked in traditional language descriptions and teaching practices. As a result, learners may acquire grammatical accuracy without developing awareness of how ideas are linked across larger stretches of discourse.

From a functional viewpoint, therefore, discourse markers can be understood as **organizational tools** that help speakers and writers *construct meaning*, *maintain textual cohesion*, and *facilitate interpretation*. Recognizing these characteristics is essential for understanding their role in discourse and their relevance for language learning and use.

Functional Roles of Discourse Markers in Meaning-Making

Discourse markers play a central role in **organizing communication** by signaling how ideas are connected and how utterances should be interpreted within a broader context. Their primary function is not grammatical but relational: they establish links between segments of discourse and help speakers and listeners construct coherent meaning. Discourse markers operate as organizing devices that structure conversation and shape the progression of ideas (Schiffrin, 1987).

One of their **key roles** is to indicate **logical relationships between propositions**. Markers, such as *however*, *therefore*, *moreover*, and *for example* clarify whether the speaker intends to express *contrast*, *result*, *addition*, or *illustration*. By explicitly signaling these relationships, discourse markers reduce ambiguity and make discourse easier to follow. Such markers function as interpretive cues, guiding the listener toward understanding how the current message relates to prior discourse (Fraser, 1999).

Discourse markers also serve **important interactional functions**, particularly in spoken communication. Expressions like *well*, *you know*, *actually*, and *I mean* help manage *turn-taking*, *introduce responses*, *signal hesitation*, or *adjust the speaker's stance*. These markers contribute to the natural flow of conversation and reflect the dynamic process of meaning negotiation between interlocutors. Without them, speech may sound abrupt or overly formal, lacking the pragmatic features typical of authentic interaction.

Another significant function is the expression of the **speaker's attitude or perspective toward the message**. Certain markers signal evaluation, clarification, or reformulation, enabling speakers to modify how information is presented. For instance, *in other words* indicates restatement, while *frankly* signals a personal stance. Through such markers, discourse becomes not only logically connected but also pragmatically nuanced.

Importantly, these functions operate **across stretches of discourse** rather than within isolated sentences. Discourse markers help create coherence by linking ideas at the textual level, ensuring that communication is interpreted as a unified whole rather than a series of disconnected statements. This discourse-organizing role explains their frequency in natural language use despite their minimal grammatical status (Brinton, 1996).

Understanding these functional roles highlights that discourse markers are essential tools for structuring meaning and maintaining communicative continuity. Their contribution lies in guiding interpretation, managing interaction, and shaping the overall organization of discourse.

Discourse Markers and Discourse Competence in EFL Learners

The ability to use discourse markers appropriately is closely connected to the development of discourse competence, which involves organizing ideas coherently and interpreting meaning within extended communication. In EFL contexts, learners often **demonstrate adequate grammatical knowledge** but **encounter difficulties** when **producing connected speech** or **writing**. Their discourse may rely heavily on a limited set of basic connectors such as *and*, *but*, and *because*, resulting in repetitive and sometimes unclear expression. This challenge reflects not a lack of vocabulary or grammar, but insufficient awareness of how discourse is structured in the target language.

Research in applied linguistics has shown that discourse competence requires sensitivity to pragmatic and textual relationships that extend beyond sentence-level accuracy (Hyland, 2005). Without familiarity with discourse markers, learners may struggle to signal *contrast*, *emphasis*, *reformulation*, or *logical progression*, which can affect both clarity and communicative

effectiveness. Consequently, communication may appear grammatically correct yet pragmatically incomplete.

In the Uzbek educational context, similar observations have been made regarding the need to develop learners' ability to construct meaningful and logically organized speech. Foreign language instruction should not be confined to formal structures but must also cultivate the ability to express ideas coherently in real communicative situations (Jalolov, 2012). Likewise, pedagogical approaches are important to activate learners' participation and encourage the functional use of language elements in discourse rather than their isolated study (Ishmukhamedov, 2008).

These perspectives suggest that discourse markers should be viewed as an integral component of communicative development rather than as optional stylistic additions. Raising learners' awareness of how such markers function can help them produce more natural, cohesive language and better understand authentic texts and conversations. Thus, incorporating discourse-level features into language instruction contributes to bridging the gap between grammatical knowledge and effective communication.

Methodological Considerations for Teaching Discourse Markers

Given their functional and context-dependent nature, discourse markers cannot be effectively taught through memorization or isolated lists. Instead, instruction should focus on raising learners' awareness of how these elements operate within authentic discourse and how they contribute to coherence and interaction. From a cognitive and constructivist perspective, learners develop understanding by actively analyzing relationships between ideas and constructing meaning through use rather than receiving rules passively (Zakirova, 2022). Therefore, a functional approach emphasizes noticing, contextual analysis, and meaningful application in communication.

One effective strategy is the **use of authentic textual and conversational samples**, where learners identify discourse markers and analyze their role in connecting ideas. This helps students recognize that such markers signal relationships such as contrast, elaboration, or reformulation rather than simply serving as optional vocabulary items (Fraser, 1999). Guided analysis encourages learners to interpret how meaning is structured across stretches of discourse.

Another useful approach involves **discourse-based tasks**, in which students reconstruct or complete texts by selecting appropriate markers. These activities promote sensitivity to logical progression and coherence, enabling learners to see how different markers shape interpretation. Such tasks reflect constructivist principles, as learners actively test hypotheses about meaning relations and refine their understanding through guided use rather than through direct explanation. Explicit attention to discourse features enhances learners' ability to organize their own communication more effectively (Hyland, 2005).

Interactive speaking and writing activities also play an important role. When learners engage in discussions, presentations, or collaborative writing tasks, they can be encouraged to employ discourse markers to clarify arguments, manage turns, and signal attitudes. Such practice aligns with communicative methodologies that integrate form and meaning through purposeful language use (Zakirova, 2025; Jalolov, 2012).

Finally, **reflective comparison** between learners' first language and English usage may help prevent overgeneralization or misuse of markers. By examining similarities and

differences, students develop pragmatic awareness and learn to apply markers appropriately in context.

Through these strategies, discourse markers are introduced not as isolated linguistic items but as functional resources that support coherent and effective communication.

Conclusion

Discourse markers constitute an essential yet often underestimated component of language use, functioning as devices that organize ideas, signal relationships between utterances, and guide interpretation in communication. Unlike grammatical structures that operate at the sentence level, discourse markers contribute to the coherence and continuity of extended discourse, enabling speakers and writers to construct meaning in a way that is clear, logical, and pragmatically appropriate.

The analysis presented in this article has shown that discourse markers play multiple functional roles: they *establish logical connections*, *manage interaction*, *express speaker stance*, and *ensure the overall organization of discourse*. Their procedural nature allows interlocutors to interpret how messages relate to one another, thereby facilitating comprehension and maintaining communicative flow. Despite their prevalence in authentic language use, these elements have traditionally received limited attention in EFL instruction, where emphasis has often been placed on grammatical accuracy rather than discourse-level competence.

For EFL learners, particularly in higher education contexts, developing awareness of discourse markers is crucial for achieving effective communication. Integrating attention to such features can help learners move beyond isolated sentence production toward constructing coherent spoken and written texts. As highlighted by both international research and Uzbek methodological scholarship, fostering the ability to structure meaning in discourse aligns with broader educational goals of developing communicative competence and functional language proficiency.

In sum, recognizing discourse markers as functional tools of meaning-making provides valuable insight into how language operates beyond grammar and underscores their importance in supporting learners' ability to communicate effectively in academic and professional settings.

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